

Gender Policies and Gender Transformation within the African Research Universities Alliance

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Introduction

Globally, gender transformation within organisations is receiving much attention. Universities are prime examples of organisations striving towards gender equality across many fronts. An important focus is on the gender gap in senior academic leadership (e.g. O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019). While the world average for women faculty representation in tertiary education institutions has increased from 33.6% in 1990 to 43.2% in 2020 (THE & UNESCO, 2022), women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. Only around a quarter of the top 200 universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings have a female leader (THE, 2025). Blackmore (2014) described the dearth of female academics in leadership positions at higher education institutions (HEIs) as a global systemic problem, which has stubbornly persisted.

Indeed, HEIs worldwide are still dominated by male academics (Wotipka et al., 2018), with women comprising on average only 40% of academics (Bello et al., 2021). The gender gap that exists at lower academic levels is exacerbated by the intersection with precarity (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019), leading to the term gendered precarity. Gendered precarity refers to gendered differences in job security; women across all academic disciplines are more likely than men to hold fixed-term or contract positions and as a result, women are more likely to end up in insecure career pathways, which ultimately affects their productivity

and career progression (OECD, 2021). Gender gaps also dominate in certain disciplines. Generally, women are underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines (e.g. Casad et al., 2020).

As universities strive for gender equality in terms of numbers, they are also under pressure to transform in other important ways; to change their gendered institutional cultures (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016) and to address formal and informal gendered practices, including conscious and unconscious bias. Gender transformation involves so much more than addressing the unequal representation of men and women in terms of numbers. It involves changing the gender and social norms, such as stereotypes and gender roles, and unequal power relations that disadvantage women and prevent them from being fully integrated. Yallem and Maruza (2020) emphasise that “transforming and creating equitable systems and institutions goes beyond ensuring quantitative representation and demographic parity. Representation is only one dimension of equity and does not, in and of itself, mean much if the underlying norms and rules of engagement remain untransformed.”

In other words, through gender transformative policies, institutions can go beyond increasing the number or visibility of women academics and work towards dismantling gender stereotypes within their systems that make women’s participation difficult. Therefore, by evaluating gender policies, we can gain further understanding of institutional aspirations for gender equality and equity.

We conducted research on gender equality at African research-intensive universities as part of a large mixed-methods project in which the analysis of gender policies and their role in gender transformation was but one objective. While this contribution diverts from the overarching theme of the collection in its lack of STEM focus, we highlight the value of considering research-intensive universities in discussions around gender equality in STEM given the emphasis many research-intensive universities place on STEM (for an alternative approach to examining the relationship between policies and gender equality, see Chapter 8, which takes a field- and country-specific approach).

One of the surprising findings that emerged from the policy analysis was the absence of standalone gender policies at some universities, and yet simultaneously, an acute institutional awareness of the imperative of gender equality. This unexpected finding led us to interrogate the circumstances and to analyse what was driving the aspiration towards gender equality. It raised many questions about the role of policy and whether there were any shortcomings to not having an institutional gender policy in place. We also bring the issue of

intersectionality to bear in our analysis as this emerged as a major theme in our investigation.

African research-intensive universities

The study sample comprised 16 African research-intensive universities across nine African nations, which made up the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) at the time of the study. ARUA was founded in March 2015 with the aim of expanding and enhancing quality research in Africa by Africans. The vision is “to make African researchers and institutions globally competitive while contributing to the generation of knowledge for socio-economic transformation in Africa” (ARUA, n.d., p. 6).

The 16 universities comprising the ARUA network are as follows: Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia; University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa; University Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Senegal; University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Tanzania; University of Ghana (UG), Ghana; University of Ibadan (UI), Nigeria; University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa; University of Lagos (ULAG), Nigeria; Makerere University (MU), Uganda; University of Nairobi (UoN), Kenya; Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Nigeria; University of Pretoria (UP), South Africa; Rhodes University (RU), South Africa; University of Rwanda (UR), Rwanda; Stellenbosch University (SU), South Africa; and University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa.

ARUA is governed by a Board of Directors made up of the Vice-Chancellors (VCs) of member universities, who meet annually to address concerns of policy, oversight of programmes and operations, as well as leading the development of strategic objectives in their respective universities. Of the 16 VCs at the time of the study, six (four of whom represent the sub-regions of ARUA universities) form an Executive Committee that meets quarterly and is responsible for carrying out the Board’s responsibilities on a more regular basis. The daily affairs of ARUA are run by the Secretariat, which is currently located in Accra, Ghana and supported by the Secretariat at Wits in South Africa.

ARUA’s strategic objectives are to:

- Increase Africa’s research contribution from 1% to 5% over a 10-year period;
- Increase the number of African universities in the top 200 from one to at least 10 over a 10-year period;
- Increase the number of faculty members with PhDs from 45% to 75% over a 10-year period;

- Contribute to the development of good quality PhDs for other African universities;
- Develop strong links between research universities and industry;
- Become strong and effective advocates for research funding by national governments and international agencies (ARUA, n.d.).

These objectives, together with the current priority areas – collaborative research, training and support for PhDs, capacity-building for research management and research advocacy – all contribute to the realisation of the vision and mission of ARUA.

For our study on gender transformation at African universities, we reasoned that as some of Africa’s best resourced universities, ARUA institutions would likely be trailblazers when it came to addressing gender equality issues and that some best practice examples could be identified and shared to benefit other institutions across Africa.

Methodology

The methodology was qualitative using quantitative elements, comprising both desktop research and primary data collection. University websites were valuable sources of information on gender-related policies and strategies, as well as relevant gender-related structures. We were able to access information for 15 of the 16 universities. UCAD in Senegal was excluded from the policy analysis because of the lack of information on its website.

We obtained ethical clearance to conduct research at eight of the 16 institutions, viz. AAU, UCT, UG, UKZN, RU, UR, SU and Wits, of which five were in South Africa, one in Ethiopia, one in Ghana and one in Rwanda. Ultimately, we were compelled to exclude the other eight institutions from the primary data collection due to extensive delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

An online survey instrument was distributed to both men and women in senior leadership positions at the eight universities where ethics approval was obtained. A total of 46 responses, 24 men, 21 women and one other from six universities were received. A full analysis of this component of the study is reported by Diab et al. (2023). The questions were wide-ranging but mainly targeted factors that played a role in women’s accession to leadership positions.

Key informant interviews were conducted at the same eight universities using two semi-structured questionnaires (one targeting VCs and a second targeting other senior university leaders from Dean and above). A total of 64 interviews were conducted.

The majority of the chapter will focus specifically on policies; however, in the case of survey responses, where policies were mentioned as relevant in assisting women to achieve leadership positions or to overcome career advancement barriers, the responses are analysed here. In the case of interviews, where we received relevant inputs on gender policies, excerpts from these contributions have been included in our analysis.

Status of gender policies at ARUA institutions

Table 1 summarises the status of policies and structures at 15 ARUA institutions. Eight institutions (53%) are listed as having gender policies; however, we were only able to access information on six of them. UCT's policy is under development and was not made available to us, and the policy at UDSM was under review and hence not accessible at the time of our investigation.

Table 1: Status of gender policies and structures at ARUA institutions

Institution	Country	Relevant policy	Relevant structure(s)
AAU	Ethiopia	Gender Policy	Women's, Children's and Youth Affairs Office
UCT	South Africa	Gender Policy ^a	Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC)
UDSM	Tanzania	Gender Policy ^b	–
UG	Ghana	Gender Policy	Equal Opportunities Board (OEB)
UI	Nigeria	Gender Policy	Gender Mainstreaming Office (GMO)
UKZN	South Africa	–	–
ULAG	Nigeria	–	–
MU	Uganda	Gender Equality Policy	Gender Mainstreaming Division (later becoming a Directorate)
UoN	Kenya	Gender Policy	Gender Mainstreaming Division
OAU	Nigeria	–	Centre for Gender and Social Policy Studies
UP	South Africa	–	Transformation Office (TO)
RU	South Africa	–	Equity and Institutional Culture Office and Harassment and Discrimination Office
UR	Rwanda	Gender Policy	–
SU	South Africa	–	Equality Unit (EqU) and Transformation Office (TO)
Wits	South Africa	–	Gender Equity Office (GEO) and Transformation and Employment Equity Office (TEEO)

Notes

^a UCT has a Gender Policy under development, which was not made available.

^b UDSM's Gender Policy was undergoing revisions and was not accessible.

There is much variation in the gender-related structures that exist. Some have a dedicated 'gender office', which goes by various names, for example Gender Mainstreaming Office (UI), Gender Mainstreaming Directorate (MU) and Gender Equity Office (Wits). AAU had a Gender Office, but in 2019 changed its

name to Women's, Children's and Youth Affairs Office, which could be construed as a retrogressive step for various reasons. First, the term gender is inclusive of both men and women. Second, the broadened responsibility detracts from a gender focus, and third, the linking of women and children entrenches traditional female roles. Many of the South African universities have units/offices that have a broader mandate extending to transformation, inclusivity and institutional culture (e.g. Office for Inclusivity and Change at UCT), which dilutes the focus on gender. Others (e.g. UDSM, OAU) have research centres that take responsibility for gender matters, which may include developing gender-sensitive policies, gender mainstreaming within the university, raising awareness and outreach programmes. The dual functions of research and implementation of university policy are not ideally co-located. A research centre is an academic unit situated in a faculty and reporting to a Dean, whereas implementation of university policy is an administrative function more appropriately reporting to a member of the university executive. Most of the gender offices or equivalent are located in the office of the VC or Deputy VC, signalling the importance attached to the functions of the offices. We turn now to an analysis of the gender policies at each of the six institutions from which we were able to source information.

Addis Ababa University (AAU)

The AAU's Gender Policy¹ is framed within national legislation that promotes gender equality. It acknowledges the gender gaps that exist in academic staff appointments, promotion, leadership, research and publication, as well as gender gaps in student enrolment, performance and retention. The policy aims to address these gaps and to promote gender justice by mainstreaming gender in all aspects of the university's activities. It also refers to a demand for a gender-responsive environment and an institutional culture that promotes gender equality.

It is a comprehensive policy with wide-ranging objectives, including, among other things, the creation of a conducive environment for women/girls, awareness-raising, ensuring women's/girls' access to institutional resources and increasing participation in decision-making bodies. The policy also seeks to integrate gender issues into curricula so that all students at the university understand gender issues. Responsibility for adhering to and implementing the gender policy rests with every person who is part of the university. The university commits to various strategies to achieve its objectives – for example, the

1 <https://www.scribd.com/document/382275495/AAU-Gender-Policy-Edited-Nov-17-2015-pdf>

collection of gender-disaggregated data and gender budgeting – engendering the curriculum and gender-responsive action plans in all departments.

University of Ghana (UG)

UG's Gender Policy² recognises the inequality that exists between men and women in the greater society as well as within the university, and how discrimination constitutes a barrier to progress. It mentions the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, which acknowledges that those who are discriminated against based on sex are disadvantaged.

The policy strives to assist the university in achieving gender equality in “critical spheres of decision-making” and it applies to all members of the university community. It includes mention of, *inter alia*, gender equity, gender mainstreaming, gender gap, gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment, which it acknowledges can occur between individuals of different and same sex. The responsibility for ensuring compliance is placed on the University Council and the VC.

The policy mentions an Equal Opportunities Board (EOB), which is responsible for its full implementation. It consists of 13 members drawn from both internal and external university communities, with a secretariat located at the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA). CEGENSA is expected to play a role in supporting the EOB in its mandate to implement the policy.

There is a commitment in the policy to publish an annual Gender Equality Report, to evaluate the impact of the gender policy every four years and to conduct annual gender audits.

University of Ibadan (UI)

The Gender Policy at UI³ which applies to both staff and students, was developed after a process of sensitisation, advocacy and consensus building. It is referred to as a flagship document that signals the university's commitment to being “a beacon of innovation and transformation in Nigeria and Africa”. Further, it is referred to as “a benchmark for the measurement of institutional and national advancement, and the vanguard for engineering positive societal change and transformation”. The policy commits the university to “[fostering] healthy identities, [and] a community characterised by equity, a sense of self-worth and

2 https://cegensa.ug.edu.gh/sites/default/files/downloads/GENDER_POLICY.pdf

3 <https://gmo.ui.edu.ng/ui-gender-policy>

fulfilment". In addition, it refers to fairness in accessing resources and opportunities and ensuring equal rewards for equal work.

The vision stated in UI's policy is "to be a world-class university where gender equity is institutionalised, and students and staff integrate gender friendly perspectives into personal and professional dealings in achieving the aims and goals of the university". It acknowledges that when the University College Ibadan was established in 1948, it was part of a highly patriarchal society, with no commitment to gender equity. This has changed substantially since the development of the gender policy, which is far-reaching in its objectives. It commits to gender budgeting, engendering the curriculum, ensuring gender equity in decision-making bodies, the incorporation of gender perspectives in research and innovation, and monitoring the effectiveness of the policy.

The UI has had a longstanding focus on gender and is regarded as being at the forefront of gender research and advocacy in Nigeria and Africa. A Women's Research and Documentation Centre was established in 1986 in response to the Beijing Platform of Action as a multidisciplinary centre located in the Institute of African Studies. The Association of African Universities selected UI as the pilot centre for its training modules on gender mainstreaming in African universities.

A Gender Mainstreaming Programme was initiated at UI in 2007 with funding aid from the MacArthur Foundation. This included the development of both the gender policy and the sexual harassment policy, and the Gender Mainstreaming Office.

Makerere University (MU)

The Gender Equality Policy at MU⁴ has a focus on 'gender justice', which sets it apart from other university policies that do not mention the term. It commits the university to ensuring human and financial capacity and resources in its pursuit of gender justice. It also embraces management and prevention of gender violence, discrimination and injustice. The policy is framed within the national and international policy context, emphasising particularly that gender equality is central to sustainable development (SDG 5), where everyone is treated with respect and dignity and given equal opportunity to realise their full potential.

The policy openly acknowledges that many gender gaps still exist within the university. It draws attention to the fact that policy formulation is still gender blind; that despite MU having instituted affirmative action in 1990 in favour of female student applicants (1.5 points scheme, where women seeking admission

4 <https://policies.mak.ac.ug/policy/gender-equality-policy>

are allocated an extra 1.5 points), the enrolment of female students is still below target; gender gaps persist in decision-making positions; and planning units have not embraced gender mainstreaming in their planning, budgeting and implementation processes.

Gender mainstreaming is given prominence through the creation of the Gender Mainstreaming Division (now Directorate) in 2002. The policy states that: “The integration of gender in programme planning and implementation is seen as integral to solving many institutional and societal problems.” The example is given of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has remained a challenge because insufficient attention has been given to the underlying gender dimension. Furthermore, in the 10-year university strategic plan 2020/2030 and those prior, gender mainstreaming was listed as one of four strategic priorities.⁵

MU plans to integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue into all its functions. It acknowledges that there are other issues that intersect with gender and lists specifically, disability, social class and age. It recognises that men and women are not part of homogeneous groups, but does not refer to sexual diversity *per se*. However, this is perhaps the beginning of an awareness around sexual diversity. It acknowledges that the needs and aspirations of both men and women must be considered and that the organisational culture is a critical part of gender equality. It commits to engendering the curriculum and creating a gender-friendly and inclusive secure environment; supporting affirmative action programmes aimed at addressing gender gaps in student enrolment (particularly science-based programmes); investing in infrastructure and resources to improve gender balance in recruitment, promotion, retention and performance of staff; and undertaking gender budgeting, where policies are backed by budgets.

MU has been praised in many quarters (e.g. Kigotho, 2021) as a leader in promoting gender equality and gender empowerment, and universities have been encouraged to emulate it. The university has a long history relating to gender justice, dating to 1945, when the first six female students were admitted. At the time, the university had a male culture with the motto, “Let’s be Men”. The motto was subsequently changed to “We Build for the Future”. This early recognition provided the foundation for a broader gender agenda that was to follow in the 1990s. MU was also singled out as a leader on the continent in promoting gender equality by a key informant from a South African university.

In 1990, the Department of Women and Gender Studies was established as an academic unit, becoming a school in 2010. According to a report published by the Swedish Embassy in 2021, “the School is at the forefront of academic

5 <https://www.mak.ac.ug/about/strategic-plan>

and community initiatives to address gender and development issues from an African perspective” (Kabonesa, 2021). It also offers training programmes up to PhD level and undertakes research.

University of Nairobi (UoN)

The Gender Policy at the UoN⁶ was developed after an extensive consultative process instituted by the then VC in 2005. The goal of the policy is “to sustain a fair and just academic environment where men and women have equal opportunities, voice, rights and access to resources so that they can realise their potential and contribution in a community of scholars characterised by a culture of mutual respect”.

The policy commits the university to gender-responsive management and gender sensitivity in curriculum design, content and delivery. It establishes a Gender Mainstreaming Division in the office of the VC, which is indicative of the value attached to the implementation of the policy. The functions of the Division include, inter alia: awareness-raising; promotion of a gender-sensitive, inclusive and secure environment; promotion of gender equality in student enrolment and staff recruitment, training and promotion; gender research; and monitoring and evaluation. There is a responsibility to reach out to schools, with specific mention of boys and girls from poor backgrounds, rural areas and slums to enable access to university education.

The policy also addresses sexual harassment, with the Gender Mainstreaming Division responsible for receiving and addressing complaints. It acknowledges that sexual harassment occurs against men and women. According to Kameri-Mbote et al. (2018), it lacks a provision prohibiting student–lecturer relationships. They note that universities face problems with respect to sexual harassment because of the power dynamics between lecturers and students.

University of Rwanda (UR)

UR has a comprehensive Gender Policy⁷ that is endorsed personally by the VC. The policy was developed by the Centre for Gender Studies with funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). It was developed in the context of the Rwandan national government’s vision and commitment, in the post-1994 genocide era, to build a society free of gender-based discrimination

6 <https://uonbi.ac.ke/sites/default/files/UONGenderPolicyJune2008.pdf>

7 <https://ur.ac.rw/documents/UR%20Gender%20Policy.compressed.pdf>

and where men and women participate fully and equitably in all developmental processes.

The policy commits the university to taking concrete actions to promote gender equality and equity in all its operations, and to prevent GBV and discrimination, including other forms of injustice, within its community.

The policy openly acknowledges many shortcomings and gender gaps in the university and explicitly states its intentions to mainstream gender in all its operations. Examples of shortcomings include:

- Gender gaps in student enrolment and completion rates and staffing;
- University policies that are gender blind;
- The need for capacity-building to ensure the generation of sex-disaggregated statistics;
- The lack of a gender mainstreaming unit or department;
- The lack of a GBV and sexual harassment policy, as well as the absence of reporting procedures and awareness-raising efforts.

Furthermore, the policy displays an understanding of intersectionality issues and lists vulnerable groups that in some cases are unique to Rwanda. Examples include the very poor, those living with disabilities, orphans and victims of genocide. It is also noted that gender mainstreaming has been undertaken in many research projects, most of which are funded by Sida, and which have consequently responded to Sida's gender-mainstreaming requirements.

The vision of the UR gender policy is “to promote a diverse staff, student and stakeholder community, in which all people are valued, respected and treated equally and equitably in terms of gender”. It commits the university to increase female staff to at least 50% parity, to gender equality in student enrolment, performance and completion, to the production of sex-disaggregated statistics, engendering of the curriculum, to ensuring a secure environment free from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the mainstreaming of gender.

Analysis of gender policies

Gender policy for ARUA

Although our focus was on gender policies at individual ARUA institutions, we note that ARUA does not have a gender policy, nor does it include a statement on its website⁸ about advancing gender equality or consider it in its latest

⁸ <https://arua.org.za>

2022–2027 strategic plan. This is a serious omission that should be addressed to signal ARUA’s role in advancing gender equality on the continent particularly in research and amongst African researchers in line with African Union (AU) strategies and statements, and actions of the Association of African Universities.

The AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) 2018–2028 (AU, 2019), which was launched at the AU Summit in February 2019, is a key and relevant policy document for ARUA. It builds on the earlier 2009 Gender Policy and is a framework document that aims to mitigate or eliminate major constraints that are hampering gender equality and the full participation of women and girls. It supports Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015), which sets out the vision of an Africa that is non-sexist and where girls and boys can reach their full potential, and where men and women can contribute equally to the development of their societies.

The Association of African Universities has also sought to advance gender equality amongst its members. They were involved in a collaborative venture to mainstream gender in higher education institutions across Africa, resulting in a gender-mainstreaming toolkit.⁹ They have also been responsible for focusing attention on the STEM disciplines as key to empowering women.

The absence of a gender focus for ARUA stands in stark contrast to the situation at the League of European Research Universities (LERU), which consists of 23 prominent research-intensive universities across 12 countries in Europe.¹⁰ They have a Policy Group on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), which has produced four policy papers, each one with an explicit gender focus. The group has also published each university’s Gender Equality Plan on the LERU website, and they regularly host conferences with gender as a theme.

It is noted that ARUA has a Centre of Excellence for Inequality Research (ACEIR), one of the 13 Centres of Excellence of ARUA. Configured as a hub-and-spoke model, with the hub and the South African node hosted by UCT and the Ghana and Kenya nodes hosted by UG and UoN, respectively, gender inequality is one of the focus areas of the centre. It is recommended that ACEIR could take responsibility for developing a gender policy for ARUA.

Gender policies vs anti-discrimination policies

Of the eight universities with gender policies, only one is in South Africa (UCT) (Table 1: Status of gender policies and structures at ARUA institutions), despite

⁹ <https://www.aau.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/07/Toolkit-module1.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.leru.org>

South Africa's dominance in terms of ARUA membership. The other seven are spread across seven countries, viz. Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. Of the universities with no gender policy in place, they included two in Nigeria (ULAG and OAU) and five universities (UKZN, UP, RU, SU and Wits) in South Africa. This was a surprising finding, particularly for South African universities, given their considerable awareness of gender issues as evidenced by other gender-related policies such as those on sexual harassment and sexual orientation, structures in place and public statements made by university leaders. It seems that for South African institutions this was not an oversight but a deliberate strategy. All have umbrella anti-discrimination policies, which focus predominantly on race but include gender as a key element.

Probing why South African institutions have opted for anti-discrimination policies rather than standalone gender policies, reasons included the country's unique apartheid history and a consequent deliberate intersectional approach. One key informant stated, "*[it is] because of our fractured past, and the need to focus on grounds in the Constitution, where race is at the forefront*". Another stated,

I can see advantages of having a gender specific policy, but I'm inclined more to the intersectional approach because ... of the complexity [and] especially the history of universities [in South Africa] ... You might find that any measures to promote gender equality, often would benefit white women and not black women ... because of the racial dynamics of that university.

The same respondent noted, "*discrimination doesn't just happen in terms of single attributes like gender, race, sexual orientation, religion or political views*". Another point raised was "*the minute you [have] a gender policy ... [then people would ask] ... where is the standalone race policy?*"

A concern raised with some of the senior South African university leaders about an anti-discrimination policy being focused on the negative or what one must not do, was allayed as it was emphasised that it needed to be viewed in conjunction with the national Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), which explicitly promotes equality in terms of gender, race and disability. Notwithstanding this point, it is critical to note that the focus of the Employment Equity Act is on achieving numerical targets or quotas; gender mainstreaming is not addressed.

Importantly, the lack of a standalone gender policy means that there is no aspirational policy to address elements such as gender mainstreaming, the collection of gender-disaggregated data, gender budgeting, engendering the curriculum and the application of a gender lens in research, etc. Aspirations

to increase women faculty member numbers and the setting of targets are addressed through statutory institutional Employment Equity Plans, but the other gender elements mentioned above are excluded. This is regarded as a major flaw and a missed opportunity to change the gendered attitudes and social norms. However, it should be noted that UKZN, although it does not have a gender policy, introduced a compulsory module for all first-year students titled Critical Social Justice and Citizenship. The module will address “social injustices of gender-based violence (GBV), racism, xenophobia and homophobia” (UKZN, 2024).

The purpose of a gender policy is to advance gender equality by setting out the intent of an organisation and enabling the organisation to set targets, spell out aspirations and put in place strategies to meet the targets. Generally, such a document would identify the status of gender equality, barriers to gender equality and the gender-related challenges faced by the organisation and would articulate how it planned to address these in practical ways. The gender policy hence provides the framework for conceptualising and implementing a gender programme at a particular institution.

Gender policy and gender transformation

Turning to our key question on the relationship between policy and gender transformation, we argue that a gender policy is a prerequisite for gender transformation. The emphasis here is on the term ‘transformation’ as opposed to gender awareness or gender sensitivity. According to the World Health Organization’s Gender Responsiveness Assessment Scale (WHO, 2011), there are five levels of gender responsiveness, ranging from gender-unequal, to gender-blind, gender-sensitive, gender-specific to gender-transformative. Applying this scale to universities, we note that a gender-sensitive organisation is one that is gender aware but does not address the inequality created by unequal gender norms, roles and relations. To be gender-transformative, an organisation is required to commit explicitly to promoting gender equality, to change harmful gender norms, roles and practices, and to introduce strategies to address unequal power relations between men and women. A gender-sensitive organisation displays awareness but does not take any remedial action, whereas a gender-specific organisation intentionally targets men or women to meet their respective group needs (WHO, 2011).

Based on these descriptors of gender responsiveness, we categorise the South African institutions with anti-discrimination policies but not gender policies as gender specific. They have all recognised the need, for example, to

tackle the problem of sexual harassment and have introduced one or more policies to address it. They fall short, however, when it comes to addressing the root causes of unequal power relations between men and women, having no policy in place to address this. In summary, a gender-transformative university needs to be more than just aware of the importance of gender equality and needs to go beyond addressing equality in terms of just numbers but also address equal participation. Our conclusion is that there are many more actions that need to be taken and that a gender policy is a prerequisite to inform transformative actions. Juxtaposed to this, the six ARUA institutions with gender policies as outlined above, have laid the foundations to become gender-transformative institutions. All their gender policies contain important statements about gender mainstreaming, a key element of gender transformation. Further analysis would be necessary to determine the extent to which these institutions have achieved the goal of tackling the root causes of gender inequality.

Conclusion

Our research focused on gender policies and structures at African research-intensive universities, with a view towards investigating the relationship between gender policies and gender transformation. ARUA, a network of 16 at the time of study (now 23 at the time of publication) universities across nine African nations, comprised the sample for the study. University websites were valuable sources of information on gender-related policies and strategies, as well as relevant gender-related structures. Information for 15 of the 16 universities was accessible; UCAD in Senegal was excluded from the policy analysis because of the lack of information on its website.

A key finding was the absence of a gender policy for ARUA itself. ARUA should lead by example; the absence of a gender policy is regarded as a serious omission that should be addressed to signal ARUA's role in advancing gender equality on the continent in line with AU strategies and statements, and actions of the Association of African Universities. We have recommended that the ARUA Centre of Excellence for Inequality in Research take responsibility for developing a gender policy for ARUA.

Of the eight universities with gender policies, only one is in South Africa (UCT). The other seven are spread across seven countries, viz. Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. Of the universities with no gender policy in place, they included two in Nigeria (ULAG and OAU) and five universities (UKZN, UP, RU, SU and Wits) in South Africa. This was a surprising finding given their considerable awareness of gender issues as evidenced by

other gender-related policies such as those on sexual harassment, structures in place and public statements made by university leaders. For South African institutions this was a deliberate strategy. All South African universities have umbrella anti-discrimination policies, which focus predominantly on race but include gender as a key element.

As mentioned, the lack of a standalone gender policy means that there is no aspirational policy to address elements such as gender mainstreaming, the collection of gender-disaggregated data, gender budgeting, engendering the curriculum and the application of a gender lens in research, etc. Aspirations to increase the number of women faculty members and the setting of targets are addressed through statutory institutional Employment Equity Plans, but the other gender elements mentioned above are excluded. This is a major flaw.

Finnemore and Jurkovich (2020) highlight the importance of aspirational work for social activism and driving change. The authors argue that successful organisations and governments are built on shared aspirations and cite UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals as an example. The benefits of articulating and recording shared goals are provided as concrete examples of the value of aspirations.

Based on the WHO's classification of gender responsiveness, we find the South African institutions with anti-discrimination policies but not gender policies to be categorised as gender specific not gender transformative. They fall short when it comes to addressing the root causes of unequal power relations between men and women and going beyond addressing equality in terms of just numbers. A gender policy is a prerequisite for the attainment of gender transformation at a university.

Therefore, we conclude that ARUA universities and their policies vary in their gender responsiveness. We highlight the importance of an overarching ARUA policy to serve as a unifying and guiding framework for individual member institutions. Further, we emphasise the importance of developing gender-specific policies for those universities that do not currently have them.

Given the recent global movement towards gender-transformative policies and practices, we hope that the current chapter provides a basis for evaluating gender responsiveness in individual HEIs and broader networks like ARUA. Future work should interrogate the extent of gender transformation by including its key elements at the outset of the evaluation.

It is important to bear in mind that gender transformation moves beyond individual self-improvement among women and girls by tackling the root causes of gender inequality. It aims to change gender norms – including gender roles, expectations, stereotypes, harmful attitudes, and customs and practices – to

address imbalances of power and privilege between men and women. Gender transformation goes beyond a focus on an increase in numbers. It aims to strengthen women's agency and visibility and generally reshape unequal power relations.

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