

Gender Equity Interventions on Access in a Sri Lankan University

Kanchana Bulumulle¹

The university statistics reveal that women are well-represented in higher education (UGC Statistics Handbook 2001). It is noted that most women are enrolled in the Arts oriented disciplines while lowest percentages of women are enrolled in technical courses such as engineering, computer and IT studies. At the decision-making levels in universities, women's representation is much lower than that of men.

The objective of this paper is to address the issue of initiatives taken with regard to improving access to higher education concentrating especially on the two affirmative actions of: 1) District quota 2) Mahapola scholarships, and to see to what extent these interventions have contributed towards bringing about gender Equity in Higher Education in the University. The research site access here is defined not merely as gaining admission, but opportunity to actively participate in all areas of higher education.

Data was collected using qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. Documented data was also analysed. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 21, including students, policy-makers and staff members. Observations of five classrooms and of three faculty Board meetings were conducted

The findings revealed that even though District Quotas and Mahapola Scholarships had facilitated the entry and retention of the women students, especially from the rural and underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds, they had not given women any substantial advantage in gaining access to non-traditional, more prestigious courses of study. Women also concentrate on gaining excellence in achievement as Epstein et. al. (1998) referred to as feminization of learning. Data also revealed that women students were often reluctant to cross over the stipulated gender boundaries due to fear of being stigmatized as non-conformist. This attitude of the women students have led to the exclusion of women from most other areas of achievement other than academic, that is, politics, decision-making and other social activities of the university life even at higher levels.

Key words: Gender; Equity; Interventions; Sri Lanka; University

¹ Department of Social Studies, Open University, Sri Lanka. E-mail: k.bulumulle@yahoo.com