



AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BY LOWERING UNIVERSITY ENTRY POINTS FOR FEMALES: GREAT ZIMBABWE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VIEWS

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Abstract

Some universities in Zimbabwe have sought to address student enrolment gender imbalances by lowering entry points for female applicants. This study aimed at soliciting for and comparing the views of male and female students on the issue, using Great Zimbabwe University as a case study. In-depth interviews were held with twenty-five female and twenty-five male first year Bachelor of Arts students who were randomly selected to participate in this qualitative inquiry. The study established that more female than male students saw this positive discrimination as a noble idea and gave more reasons in favour of it than against it as the policy, among other benefits, empowers females who have been marginalized for a long time in a patriarchal society. However, some female students were of the view that this form of affirmative action should be discontinued as it is demeaning and insulting because it seems to imply that females cannot achieve the same or higher level of academic performance at Advanced Level than males. More male than female students were against affirmative action and they gave more reasons against it than for it. For example, they argued that affirmative action is against the spirit of gender equality, and that it lowers university academic standards. The male students also felt the policy short-changed and marginalized them and they suggested that there might be need for 'reverse' affirmative action in favour of males in the near future. The paper concludes that affirmative action is a controversial issue, as there were mixed views regarding the lowering of university entry points for females. The paper recommends that this form of affirmative action should be implemented with moderation so that male students do not feel overly disadvantaged and at the same time females do not feel belittled. The paper also recommends that society in general and teachers in particular should stop perpetuating prejudices and stereotypes against the girl child.

Key words: affirmative action; discrimination; prejudice university entry points.

Introduction

According to Gordon (1995), at independence in 1980 the Government of Zimbabwe embarked on a programme of educational reconstruction and expansion, the aim being to make access to education a reality for all Zimbabweans. Education was perceived as a human right and an important means by which development and the redress of social inequalities inherited from the colonial era could be attained. Machinga (2000) also asserts that the Zimbabwean Government is committed to achieving the national goal of education for all by ensuring that there is equality of access and participation in education. The government is also committed to the promotion of equality with regards to the education of women, girls and other disadvantaged groups who traditionally have suffered limited access to education. As evidence that Zimbabwe is committed to gender equity in education, Machinga (2000: 119) says,

Zimbabwe is a signatory to several international conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls. It has also participated in several international conferences for the sharing of experiences as well as designing strategies for the implementation of programmes aimed at addressing gender imbalances.

One such conference was the 1991 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Zimbabwe, which drew up the Harare Declaration which provided clear directions and priorities for the Commonwealth as a whole and reaffirmed equality for women for them to exercise their full equal rights (Singh in Bown, 2003). In spite of the above, Nziramasanga (1999) established that there is evident gender disparity in education in favour of males at secondary school level, and cultural beliefs and practices, long distances to school, abuse of the girl-child and inequitable sharing of educational resources were cited as some of the reasons for the disparity.

Table 1 below shows that in 1996, indeed while at early childhood centres the situation was favourable to females and at primary schools there is near parity, at secondary schools and tertiary level, females were by far outnumbered by males.

Table 1: Summary of Total Enrolment Data by sex-1996:

Level	Female	Male	Total
ECEC centres	202410	181 052	383 462
Pry Schools	1 227 900	1 265 891	2 493 791
Sec Schools	346 944	404 405	751 349
Tertiary Educ	16 144	27 312	43 456

(Source: Nziramasanga, 1999:174)

Table 2 below shows the female-male ratios at secondary school level:

Table 2: Enrolment in Forms 1V, Lower VI, Upper VI by Sex: 1985-1991

Year	Form 1V		Lower VI		Upper VI	
	%Girls	%Boys	%Girls	%Boys	%Girls	%Boys
1985	37.8	62.2	39.3	60.7	27.0	73.0
1987	39.0	61.0	32.5	67.5	31.3	68.7
1989	38.8	61.2	30.3	69.7	29.4	70.6
1991	42.3	57.7	38.2	61.8	37.7	62.3

(Source: Report of the Secretary for Education, in Gordon, 1985).

Table 3 below shows that at tertiary level, except at teachers' colleges, females are glaringly outnumbered by males:

Table 3: Tertiary Institutions: Total Enrolment by Sex-1996

Institution	Male	female	Total
Trs Colleges	8 204	8 478	16 682
Universities	8 223	3 302	11 532
Voc & tech Colleges	10 875	4 394	15 239
Total	27 312	16 144	43 456

(Source: Nziramasanga, 1999).

According to Zindi (1998), in 1996, the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) had a total of 5 444 male students, as compared to 2 408 females. At Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) students' admission records show that in 2008, the University had a total of 3 324 male students compared to 2 794 female students, while in the first half of 2009, the institution had 1 805 males compared to 1 500 female students.

The above statistics show a blatantly gendered education system in Zimbabwe, yet there are many benefits to accrue from educating females. For example, Leach in Sweetman (1998:12) observes that,

In particular, women's education has been shown to be linked to reduced infant and maternal mortality, greater access to education for children (especially daughters), and, of crucial significance for donors and governments preoccupied with global population explosion, to reduced fertility rates.

In the same vein, from the family-welfare perspective, King and Hill (1993) say a woman's education improves her contribution to the family's welfare, leading to better living standards for the family.

Therefore, it could be against the background of the above statistics, that Nziramasanga (1999: 191), among other gender-related recommendations advocates, A/A by "creating more places and opportunities for girls and women in schools and tertiary institutions." The Nziramasanga Report also advocates that the Zimbabwean constitution and the Education Act should be amended to positively address and promote gender equity in education.

It could also be against the backdrop of the above statistics that some universities in Zimbabwe have taken aboard affirmative action so as to bridge the gap between male and female student enrolment figures, and one way of achieving this is by lowering the A-Level entry points for females in all programmes. According to the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA), the Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe has a Gender Policy through affirmative action in the admission of students and the recruitment of staff, the aim being the achievement of a male-female ratio of 48-52 in the student population, so as to reflect the national male-female population (www.sarua.org/%3Fq%3Dcontent/midlan...).

Statement of the Problem

Affirmative action is undoubtedly a controversial issue that is bound to be met with mixed feelings by the targeted beneficiaries and the non-targeted groups. On the one hand, affirmative action is viewed by conflict theorists and feminists as a legislative attempt at reducing the inequality that is embedded in the social structure by increasing opportunities for groups that have in the past been deprived (Schaefer, 2010). On the other hand, affirmative action is often criticized as a kind of reverse discrimination. In the USA, for instance, in 1996 Proposition 209 sought to do away with preferential treatment to women and minorities in college admissions, hiring, promotion, or awarding of government contracts (Schaefer, 2010). The paper's focus, therefore, is on establishing how the targeted beneficiaries of affirmative action in Zimbabwe's universities (females) and the non-targeted (males) feel about females entering universities with lower points than males. The research uses GZU as a case study. The inquiry is, thus, guided by following research questions:

Research Questions

- (a) What are the views of male and female GZU students on affirmative action by lowering university entry points for females?
- (b) What arguments do the students proffer for their views on affirmative action in university enrolments?

Literature Review

According to Nittle (www.racerelements.about.com/od/diversit...), affirmative action is an agenda designed to counteract historic discrimination faced by ethnic minorities, women and other underrepresented groups by prioritizing the inclusion of such minority groups in employment, education and government sectors, among others. Affirmative action refers to positive steps to enhance the diversity of a group so as to remedy cumulative effects of subtle and gross expression of prejudice, by giving preference to racial minorities or women when hiring employees, giving awards or deciding when to admit (www.exampleessays.com/./23942.html). Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993:61) views affirmative action as a programme that aims "to provide equality for all citizens in a country by increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups or individuals", with focus being on the educational and economic structures of

society, in which the disadvantaged groups are given preferential treatment. Affirmative action is also often referred to as positive discrimination, preferential policies, standardization, among other terms (Claassen, in Dekker and Lemmer, 1993).

A basic tenet of affirmative action is giving preferential treatment to previously disadvantaged groups in society, such as women. In education, the policy is obviously premised on the reality that women have for long been marginalized. Gilbert and Taylor, quoted in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) observe that in every society, and always, the education of girls and women has been considered less important and has assumed a different form from the education of boys and men.

Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993:69) identifies the USA, India, Malaysia, Namibia, Canada, Pakistan, the Phillipines and England as some of the countries in which affirmative action is being implemented and concludes that “in all types of societies – first, second, and third world countries, developed and developing countries – affirmative action is being practised.” Claassen goes on to observe that there seems to be universal basic tenets about affirmative action, which include, firstly, that in all societies there exists underrepresented groups and individuals. Secondly, the underrepresentation is attributable to past injustices. Thirdly, that discrimination against disadvantaged groups is deemed morally wrong because all citizens have a right to equality of opportunity. Fourthly, special compensatory measures have to be taken to redress the imbalances.

In the SADC region, of which Zimbabwe is part, the desirability of affirmative action is quite manifest. Gaidzanwa (1989:4) observes that in this region, there is a predominance and strength of patrilineality, so boys often get preference for education, especially at post primary level. So “Investment in the education of girls in such systems is risky because girls can be forced to discontinue their education before obtaining a terminal qualification if they get pregnant while at school.” Conversely, because in a patrilineal system a son perpetuates the family name in a way the female child cannot, the view held by families is that investment in the future of the son cannot be totally fruitless. Hence “fewer women than men get any type of education . . . the females are outnumbered by males and the difference becomes greater the higher up the education system one progresses” (Gaidzanwa, 1989:5). Gaidzanwa’s observation is proven valid when one looks at the school enrolment figures cited in the introductory part of this paper.

Dorsey (1989:10) laments the situation in Zimbabwe after independence where there has been an imbalance between the number of boys and girls going to primary and secondary school, in favour of boys, an imbalance which is “still a cause for concern and shows clearly that girls are disadvantaged in access to the educational rewards of the society even after independence and is a definite policy by government to eliminate gender inequalities in education.”

This inquiry sought the views of GZU students on affirmative action with regards to enrolment of students at universities after the realization that numerous arguments have been advanced both in favour of, and against affirmative action.

One of the arguments advanced in favour of affirmative action is that it gives a boost to students starting at a disadvantage. It also encourages diversity, a desirable phenomenon which will not always occur if left to chance (www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative...). This view is shared by Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/) who adds the dimension of promoting social integration in environments where the minority is looked down upon and would not normally be accepted. Minority groups, thus, break through social barriers which would otherwise stop them from entering certain professions, schools etc.

Harris further argues that groups that have suffered years of oppression view affirmative action as a means of compensation for past injustices. This argument is also proffered by www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative... which says affirmative action is necessary to compensate minorities for centuries of oppression. Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) also sees affirmative action as redressing past injustices suffered by a group by making compensation in the present. Claassen further observes that affirmative action ensures that individuals who would otherwise be lost to society and the economy realize their full potential and that it contributes to national development by providing opportunities and resources to make use of neglected talent. Thus, Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/) advocates the perpetuation of affirmative action policies, since they continue to protect the minority groups from oppression. Removal of the policies may allow discrimination and prejudice to resurface.

On the other hand, Claassen, in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) finds fault with affirmative action, arguing that it leads to incompetence and a lowering of standards as it tolerates the filling of positions by unqualified appointees. Furthermore, Claassen says the qualifications and achievements of targeted individuals and groups are considered suspect by both the non-preferred group and the beneficiaries of affirmative action. What is more, the success of the preferred individual is attributed to affirmative action, not to the person’s ability and hard work. Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/) also observes that individuals accepted through lowered standards may be unable to perform to the extent required for their environments, which may lead to failure or poor performance. This observation is also made by www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative..., which argues that students admitted on the basis of affirmative action are often ill-equipped to handle the schools to which they have been admitted. Also, www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative... allude to the fact that affirmative action may lead to reverse discrimination. In the same vein, Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/) says affirmative action may encourage discrimination against the majority groups as it gives preferential treatment to minority groups, thus impacting negatively on the selection of more qualified candidates. Yet another argument against affirmative action is that once enacted, affirmative action policies are hard to remove, even after the underlying discrimination has been eliminated (www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative...). This view is shared by Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/), who avers that affirmative action policies should be phased out when society becomes more integrated, but interest groups may continue to defend them even after the discrimination has ceased. A further argument against affirmative action that it is considered condescending to minority groups to say they need affirmative action in order to succeed (www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative...). Two more arguments against affirmative action proffered by Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) are that it places an unfair handicap individuals who are deprived of opportunities they deserve on

merit, and that affirmative action increases polarization, as non-preferred groups respond negatively and targeted groups feel alienated from society as a whole.

In view of the above general arguments for and against affirmative action, this study sought to establish the views of GZU male and female students on affirmative action in favour of females with regard to admission to universities.

Methodology

Qualitative research design in which semi-structured interviews were held with fifty randomly selected first year (twenty-five male, twenty-five female) students was used. Ten students were selected from each of the university's five faculties of Education, Commerce, Arts, Social Sciences and Natural Science.

Findings

Female Students' Views

Table 4 below summarises the views of female students:

Table 4: Female Students' Views

View (Yes to Affirmative Action)	Number of Students
Girls face many challenges at home before and after school, such as engaging in domestic chores, which boys do not face.	22
Some teachers label and treat girls as dull, resulting in girls receiving less attention and resources.	20
Parents usually give preference to the boy child to go to school in times of drought, famine, or financial crises.	22
It is a good way of empowering women, who were for long marginalized, to become self-reliant.	21
Policy will boost women's chances of employment, thereby eradicating gender imbalances at home and in society.	18
Affirmative action will help eradicate gender imbalances at universities.	18
Policy will reduce vices like gossip, prostitution and crime as more women will be engaged in university education then employment.	15
Affirmative action will reduce the country's high birth rate by delaying female marriages as they pursue university education.	16
View (No to Affirmative Action)	
Boys and girls have the same capacity for educational attainment, so some girls actually perform better than boys at secondary school.	3
Same entry points will motivate the girl child to work hard and believe in herself.	3
Affirmative action will perpetuate the myth that females are the weaker, inferior, less intelligent sex.	4
Policy will result in females looking down upon themselves as under-achievers.	4
Employers will be skeptical of females' university qualifications.	2
Some female students will become lazy at high school because they are 'assured' of university places.	2

Male Students' Views

Table 5 below summarises the views of male students:

Table 5: Male Students' Views

View (Yes to Affirmative Action)	Number of Students
Affirmative action is good because women have been marginalized for a long time.	5
This will empower women and as a result boost the family's income.	4
Girls are less intelligent than boys so they should be given preferential treatment.	2
Affirmative action will result in a lower population growth rate as females will spend time in university and on careers of their choice.	3
View (No to Affirmative Action)	
The policy smacks of favouritism and is against the spirit of gender equality.	20
At secondary school males and females learn in the same environment, do the same curriculum and write the same examinations.	20
University entry should not be based on gender but on merit so females should work hard to acquire the same or higher points than males.	18
Policy lowers university academic standards.	17
The policy will result in gender imbalance at universities in favour of females.	19
Affirmative action will actually entrench the notion that males are more intelligent than females.	16
The policy belittles females.	16
It is reverse discrimination that will in future call for affirmative action in favour of males.	20

The two tables above show that more female than male students were in favour of affirmative action by lowering university entry points for females. Twenty-one (84 %) of the females viewed affirmative action as a good policy, as opposed to only five (20 %) of the male students. In other words, more male students, twenty (80 %) of the male students were against affirmative action, as compared to four (16 %) of the females. These findings confirm what Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) observes, that affirmative action increases polarization, as non-preferred groups react negatively to it.

The most recurring reasons proffered by female students for saying yes to affirmative action are that women have been marginalized for a long time, and that the home is gendered in that girls have to grapple with domestic chores while boys are studying. These two reasons were cited by twenty-two (88 %) of the female students. The former reason confirms the skewed (in favour of females) primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment statistics cited in the introductory section to this paper. It also confirms Gaidzanwa's (1989) observation that in the SADC region boys often get preference for education over girls because of patrilineality. Dorsey (1989) also laments this imbalance which continued in Zimbabwe even after political independence in 1980. The third most recurring reason cited by twenty-one (84%) of the female students for supporting affirmative action was that the policy is a way of empowering women, who have been marginalized for a long time, to be self-reliant. This agrees with Schaefer's (2010) view of affirmative action as an attempt to reduce the inequality that is entrenched in society, by increasing opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups. In line with this, Leach in Sweetman (1998:12) states that "education bestows status, and in that sense is empowering." The fourth most recurring reason given by the female students was that girls are labelled by teachers as less intelligent, resulting in them receiving less attention and resources than boys. In line with this, Gordon (1998:55) says in her 1995 study, "Boys are described by teachers of both sexes as more serious about school work, more intelligent, and better able to grasp concepts, when compared to boys." The other four reasons why female university students accepted affirmative action are shown in Table 4 above.

Of interest to note is that four of the female students interviewed were against affirmative action by lowering their university entry points. This serves to show that affirmative action is a controversial issue on which there is no agreement even among the preferred groups. The two most recurring reasons were that affirmative action will perpetuate the myth that girls are less intelligent than boys, and that women will look down upon themselves as underachievers. This shows that some females feel belittled by affirmative action. In relation to this, Claassen in Dekker and Lemmer (1993) argues that the qualifications and achievements of targeted individuals and groups are considered suspect by both the non-preferred groups and the beneficiaries of affirmative action. Also, the success of the preferred individual is attributed to affirmative action, not to the person's ability and hard work. This view is also shared by Harris (www.affirmativeactionprosandcons.net/) who argues that it is considered condescending to say minority groups need affirmative action in order to succeed. For the other reasons why the four female students rejected affirmative action see Table 4.

As shown in Table 5 above, twenty (80%) of the interviewed male students were against affirmative action. The three most recurring reasons given were that affirmative action smacks of favouritism and is against the spirit of gender equality, that at high school males and females learn in the same environment, do the same curriculum and sit the same examinations, and that affirmative action is synonymous with reverse discrimination. The fourth most recurring reason was that affirmative action will eventually result in more gender imbalance in student enrolment at university, in favour of females. Related to these four reasons Schaefer (2010) confirms that affirmative action is criticized for being a kind of reverse discrimination, hence the lobby to do away with the policy in the USA in 1996.

However, noteworthy is the fact that not all the interviewed male students were against affirmative action by lowering entry points for females. Five (80%) of the male students were in support of the policy showing that even the non-preferred group recognizes the need for affirmative action. The most cited reason was that affirmative action is good because women have been marginalized for a long time, followed by the reason that affirmative action is a way of empowering women, who will contribute towards the family income, reasons that were also cited by their female counterparts. The other reasons given were that this kind of affirmative action will result in lowering the country's birth rate, and that girls are less intelligent than boys so they should be given preferential treatment. The former reason was also cited by their male counterparts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has unearthed that affirmative action by lowering university entry points for females is a controversial issue. While the majority of the preferred group (females) were in support of the policy and gave more reasons for supporting it than their male counterparts, some among this group (females) were against the policy. In the same vein, the majority of the non-preferred group (males) were against the preferential treatment for females and gave more reasons against it than their female colleagues. However, some among the male students were also in support of affirmative action by lowering entry points for females.

In light of the findings, the paper observes that while this form of affirmative action may be a noble idea so as to increase the number of female students at universities in Zimbabwe, the policy needs to be implemented with caution so that it becomes sensitive to the views of both the male and the female students. The paper, therefore, recommends that entry points for female students could be lowered by not more than one point per discipline, so that males do not feel overly disadvantaged and marginalized, and so that the females themselves do not feel too much belittled or regarded as less intelligent than the males. The paper also recommends that the lowering of entry points for females should be gradually phased out as the ratio of male to female students at universities becomes equal, so that the ratio will not in future be skewed against males. This recommendation stems from the observation by www.balancepolitics.org/affirmative..., that once enacted, affirmative action policies are hard to remove, even after the underlying discrimination has been removed. The paper also recommends that it is high time society was disabused of the patriarchal notion that gives preferential treatment to the male child at the expense of the female child. At schools, it is also high time teachers realized that the girl child is equally capable as the boy child, so that the system of labeling the girl child and giving her less attention and resources finds no place.

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