Towards Capability Approach: Researching Gender Inequalities Represented in Ethiopian Higher Educational Policies

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Abstract: On both national and international level, 'gender issues' have historically been viewed as one character of categorical inequality, constituting one of the fundamental terms toward social differentiation[1]. In the context of Ethiopia, particularly in higher education (HE), gender inequality always sustains, even when approximately two decades after the implementation of privileged access policies for women, who has been historically biased. Not only female students are marginalized both in participation and experience level due to gender norms, but also female staff are limited in career development [2]. Therefore, to address the gender inequality problems embedded in Ethiopian HE, a series of equality policies had been introduced in the past two decades, widening the access and participation for disadvantaged groups, especially for female students [3]. This article currently have a basis on capability approach to analyse the reconstruction of gender inequalities in Ethiopian HE equity policies, in order to transform the inequality problems.

Keywords: capability approach; gender inequalities; higher educational policies

1. Introduction

In social context, 'inequality' could typically be characterized through terms of individual life and well-being (fundamental ones), recognition and respect, as well as material circumstances and symbolic resources [4]. In response to the remaining critical challenge generated by gender inequality, both Ethiopian Government and the World Bank made efforts to centralize HE within the Government's national development plan outlined in its second poverty reduction strategy paper, and within other subsequent policies [3]. This article can be divided into three sections: Firstly, a brief description of the term, capability approach and its relationship with education; on the next stage, analysis of gender inequality issues and accordingly policies put in place in Ethiopian HE; finally, to transform the problem in HE, equity in policy instrument will be assessed based on capability approach, then problems will be reframed as capability deprivation of opportunity and agency freedom.

2. Capability approach

2.1. Brief description of capabilities

For Sen [5], capability is a person's potential functioning, ncluding what he or she is actually able to be and to do; namely,

being well nourished, having access to participate in communities, to be well sheltered, well educated, having interrelations with other social peers, being respected, being able to work in labour market, being healthy and so on. On this basis, he claims, when making normative evaluations of people's capabilities to function, rather than focusing exclusively on income, 'primary social goods' [6], commodities and material resources, what shall be assessed are equality and well-being. One of the reasons why is that through 'utility-based' evaluation, some significant dimensions, for instance, social obstacles on the level of injustice, might be overlooked [7], then it would possibly mislead interpersonal or intertemporal comparisons. In detail, from Andrew Clark's research in Britain, it had reflected British females due to their lower expectations, those who with worse objective terms however have the same utility level as male do. However, even Sen argues against the evaluation based on resources, he does not disconnected the relation between resources and people's well-being, as inequalities of resources could significantly lead to inequalities in capabilities [8]. While Walker [7] points out the fundamental inequalities involved in gender, race and disability might have an impact on converting resources and opportunities into capabilities, he then highlights the importance of the opportunities for converting in empirical activities. According to Dreze and Sen [9], capability represents one of freedoms (a range of options to achieve well-being). Sen [10] further claims all sets of capabilities constitute in the overall freedom, leading a life that a person has reason to value. Moreover, he recognizes the importance of 'reason to value' as spontaneously value specific lifestyles and reflect person's motivation upon it [11]. Besides, 'agency' is central to Sen's capability approach, which is deeply connected to well-being, enabling a person to pursue goals that one values. Similarly, well-being is assessed by a person's valued capabilities, 'genuine opportunities to achieve valuable states of being' [12]. Therefore, in capability approach, restricted freedom constrains the amount of opportunities, thus leads to a restricted future freedom and agency for individuals.

2.2. Capability approach and education

Sen conceives education as a fundamental capability, as 'a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being', regarding education as a means to a person's economic and non-economic benefits. He then emphasizes that freedom may to a large extent be achieved through the education a person receive. Based on Sen's theory, Molla and Gale further identify features of education as capabilities when achieving functionings as 'being knowledgeable and skilled, being recognized and respected'. More importantly, informed by capability approach, problems represented in education policy such as actual opportunities and the relevance of the opportunities to the circumstances of policy targets could be transformed [13]. Therefore, in the next section, context of females' participation in Ethiopian HE and related policies implemented will be discussed.

3. Context in Ethiopia

3.1. Social and historical context

In 2009, Ridgeway claimed that gender is the primary criteria to divide roles of people in social arrangement. Similarly, gender, in Ethiopia, decides the labour division between men and women in household level, job market and education. For instance, women are more likely to be kept at home with domestic chores while men are empowered to control the economic sphere. Two main causes are responsible for these phenomena: at first, studied as a case in other developing societies in Africa [14], in Ethiopia, masculinity is viewed as the most essential value, thus social resources are disproportionately dominated by male, shaping a subordinate status upon women [15]; on the other hand, in 1993, patriarchal ideology was recognized as the main structural factor marginalizing women in political, economic and social contexts. Such subordinate status of women is by and large continued by cultural and historical stereotypes rooted in core social institutions, namely, schools and universities [2]. Also, a case study reveals that in Ethiopia, most parents regard labour of girls at home as a 'take-for-granted' activity or a significant property for a family [7], to some extent, resulting in the inequalities for access in schooling between Ethiopian boys and girls. As a result, women in Ethiopia are underrepresented mainly in sphere of employment and education. Specifically, the situation of gender inequality has been represented in

both quantitative (participation) and qualitative (experience) terms [16].

3.2. Context and policies in HE

On the level of participation term, in Ethiopia, in the 1998/99 academic year, as demonstrated by Wondimu, females constitutes merely 6 percent in public HEIs; and he affirms the reasons why are mainly because deficiency of quality secondary education, cultural (historical) disadvantages and geo-politically peripheral barriers. Since the late 1990s, policies and reform has been underway through the development of Ethiopian HE subsystem[17], though it still not responses, to some extent, fully functionally to the needs of females, minorities and rural groups[8]. In recognition of the historical and present efforts made by Government, Ethiopia's Education and Training Policy [18] entitles 'women and those students who did not get educational opportunities in the preparation, distribution and use of educational support input, which are lately represented in most national education policy documents. For instance, the Higher Education Proclamation reclaims the importance of the provision of differential admission advantage for 'disadvantaged groups', particularly including females; and to 'promote and uphold justice, fairness, and rule of law in institutional life [in HE]. Corresponding to those policy and law represented, the Government's Strategic Framework for gender inequality in HE [9], to promote the participation and enrollment for females in public HEIs, outlined a number of processes: merging the existing colleges and universities and then enhancing the admission capacity of them, constructing new institutions and expanding the private HE provision to a large extent [19]. Moreover, as motivated by World Bank [17], represented in the first Education Sector Development Program [20], to expand the access and lower the governments' budget, the Ethiopian government approves a cost-sharing scheme under the Higher Education Cost-Sharing Council of Ministers (Regulation No. 91/2003) and the Proclamation (No.650/2009)--is recognized functional in enhancing the participation of historically marginalized groups without financial causes [16]. These efforts through policy instruments lead to an increase of the number of public universities from two in 1999 to 22 in 2009 in Ethiopia, with four non-university HEIs, and it is projected that in the next five years, the number will increased to 32. In line with this result, enrollment of full-time undergraduate in Ethiopian public universities increases from approximately 20000 in 1999 to about 190000 in 2010. In general, in a phase of a decade, the enrollment rate improves by around 950 percent.

On the other hand, in general, private HEIs still merely constitute a minimal proportion with student number, while based on the data, the participation of the female students in private HEIs is much more optimism than that in the public ones [21]. Explained from another dimension, this result reflects the comparatively disadvantaged performance of female students in public HEIs [19]. Notwithstanding the contributions above, the motive of Ethiopian private HEIs has been profit and geographical oriented. In other words, it seems still difficult for them to escape from the limitations of accessing female students who are financially and geographically constrained [22]. Furthermore, Unterhalter [23] argued that despite increasing school enrollment (in Sen's context, social opportunities), human capability for female are far from being expanded in many educational systems. Namely, as argued by Gale [10], gender disadvantage in Ethiopian HE is not merely reflected to inequality in access to opportunities, it can also be embedded in opportunities themselves; on qualitative level, for instance, gender-biased segregation.

Based on the data in UIS [24], female graduates account for only 14 percent in science and technology majors; also, in the 2009/10 academic year, female students in Bahir Dar University constitute 24 percent and 36 percent among full-time undergraduates enrolled in the majors of respectively technology and social science [25]. Even some females choose science and technology fields, they face a high attrition rate, which means very few of them will manage to graduate, not to mention pursue further careers in such sphere [2]. Similarly, in 2013, Molla argues such segregation biases females' status in job market, as they are mostly excluded for high-paying jobs; as a result, with their significant influence in social and economic equity, HEIs reinforce the situation of unequal labour division and subordinate socio-economic status of females. Therefore, in order to enhance females' completion in HE, the Strategic Framework presents promoting female intake in HE, including establishing Gender Office, in order to provide an enabling environment and constructing Gender and Women's studies [26]. To the end of the establishment of self-esteem and assertiveness for them, the Framework also

introduces the affirmative action, assertive training, academic guidance and counselling services for female students; then offer them tutorial programmes to meet their academic needs [27]. Besides, as the signatory of UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW [28], Ethiopian government represents 'women have equal right with men in every aspect, including positive discrimination' . However, as is pointed out by Molla [19], according to gender office directors in two Ethiopian universities, government lacks annual budget to support them for their internal revenues, thus the gender offices in some cases are understaffed and not fully functional, due to the incomplete implementation of policy provision. The root cause could be traced back to Eveline[29] (1998)'s recognition that the policy does not challenge the patriarchal norms 'against which women were being assessed' and recognize women as 'the problem', by attributing under-representation of women as their inability to compete with men [19], which means policy instruments represent inequality as numerical (superficial) problems instead of being responsive to the structural obstacles Ethiopian females suffer in HE [16]. While although not without its critiques, provision of supplementary tutorial services can still be considered as a positive strategy in terms of promoting females' academic performance in HE [26].

Besides, manifested by the case study in Addis Ababa, 15 percent female students reported to suffer from unintended pregnancy and terminated schooling; 10 percent reflected their roommates were infected by HIV/AIDS. So far, nevertheless, little systematic study has been conducted for the correlation between these issues and academic performance. There are two reasons responsible for this: firstly, to avoid stigma and further discrimination, few would choose to disclose their HIV/AIDS in most African countries; also, both illness infection and pregnancy among students could be seen as premarital sex behavior, which is intolerable socially and culturally in Ethiopia [22].

4. Application of capability approach in educational policy

4.1. Capability-based evaluative terms

Capability approach can be a normative framework to assess inequality and social arrangements [30]. In this section, three terms aiming for evaluating the equity in education policy based on capability approach will be discussed. They are human agency, social commitment and adaptive aspirations [2].

As is argued by Molla, an equity policy based on capability approach should be attentive to human agency instead of human capital. In the early 1960s, economists from the University of Chicago support the view of human capital theory as it transforms individual capacities such as knowledge and skills, into higher economic productivity (power, social status and income), as well as improves investment in education [31]. After half a century since 1993, human capital theory has prevailed as a policy paragon which makes education an economic policy. On the other hand, in the 'global education field' [32], practice of human capital theory is a discourse of neoliberal instrumentalism, implying education is valued for cultivating a skilled workforce, which is excluded from its contribution to capital promotion. In Ethiopian HE, more importantly, framing inequality problems in human capital narrative merely places emphasis on expanding enrollment rate of female students in HEIs with an economic rationale, restricting actions put on addressing the problems [2]. In opposite, capability-based framework, namely, human agency: values education via a broader sphere, aiming to enhance a person's empowerment, fulfillment and aspiration [33]. Specifically, in education context, agency means students' 'social and educational' recognition in terms of 'having equal claims on resources and opportunities' [34]. As a result, when transforming to capability-based equity policy with focus on human agency, education is valued for 'preserving and encouraging social heterogeneity', by which students' agency freedom and 'voice of change' is informed, thus enhances the equity in education policy [2].

Unlike the emphasis of neoliberal policy's belief, capability approach highlights the 'deep complementarity between individual agency and social commitment [13]. Put it differently, the government should not only offer women and other disadvantaged group equal resources and access, but also 'compensatory preferential advantages' for them to achieve freedom and practice agency [14]. In Ethiopian HE, as whether disadvantaged group could access fair opportunities and resources is decided by how HEIs function in education, so that the educational capability for females could be

evaluated by assessing whether policymakers are capable of addressing structural problems and meeting the demands of target group [2].

Thirdly, Sen [35] recognizes the role of adaptive aspirations as a means to evaluate equity policy, on the contrary to utility-based approach towards policy provision focusing on increasing the 'maximum sum total of utilities and preference satisfaction. As is argued by Appadurai [15], a person's 'capacity to aspire' for his/her future career depends on socio-economic circumstances and the access to information necessary for decision-making, and such person probably has a decreasing capacity to aspire. Even with access to opportunities, he or she may not be capable of actually benefiting from them. Therefore, equity policy should not only be able to pursue the achievements of agency goals, but also to involve differences in opportunities to shape agency goals; which means when evaluating equity problems, preference formation in different situations and the discourse of 'one's ability to be and do what he or she has reason to value' comes as the top agenda. In Ethiopian HE, as a result, policy instrument is suggested to place emphasis on structures within social arrangements, which are able to have impact on choices and decisions of policy target, for instance, on their ability to choose particular universities and subject fields they want to study. In addition, policy provision should discourse by which way and to what degree learning experience for females such as pedagogical practices and curricular materials enable them to have the ability to access real opportunity, as well as to recognize and achieve agency goals [2].

4.2. Reframing equity as capability deprivation

Opposite to what is mentioned in the second section that policy instrument in Ethiopian HE represents inequalities as superficial rather than structural problems, reframing the equity problems as capability deprivation reduces the limitations led by conventional means, such as focusing on the enrollment rate, the amount of distributive resources allocated, outcomes of standardized examination. It evaluates social arrangements which impede students' freedom of having access to real opportunities. [2], and asks what the objects of policy (in this case, female students in Ethiopian HE) are able to be and to do.

In this respect, before the application of affirmative action mentioned in the second section, a sphere aiming to establish enabling environments where females can learn and interact safely through their experiences should be constructed. Put it differently, to create a gender-sensitive environment, the primary task is to address sexual harassment, violence, abuse and bullying phenomena. Specifically, policymakers should carry out enabling legislation and protective laws ranging from 'anti-discrimination laws and provisions of fair treatment, to codes to conduct which outline proper actions expected of members of a university community, and rules and procedures that penalize misconduct' mentioned beyond.

Besides, by establishing Gender Offices and conducting careers, HEIs should introduce role models for female students to consult, by which policy targets would be more likely to have aspirations to high-level learning goals because they are motivated by promoted assertiveness. In this way, gender inequality problems lying in policy could finally be challenged both in academic experience and future life, enabling gender equity to be structurally enhanced within and outside HEIs. While in the second section, due to the insufficient annual budget from government, gender office suffers a shortage of its internal avenues and staffs; thus to put the policy instrument into action, sustainable financial commitment should basically be met. The government should be responsible for providing sufficient funding to HEIs, especially on the level of on-campus assertiveness and awareness training, supplementary tutorial classes, career guidance and gender sensitisation outreach services towards female students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is responsible for HEIs to provide disadvantaged students, in this article, females, with capabilities to pursue the real opportunity which they have reason to value. While merely acting on widening education opportunity does not always be accordance with the expansion of human capabilities, as what should be rearranged in policy provisions

is opportunity itself, not only the access to it. As general provision of equity policy in Ethiopian HE is problematic in representing equity problems as an inequality in resource and opportunity distribution rather than structural social injustice, mere slight effects has been made in benefiting policy target. As a result, only when equity in education is assessed based on capability approach, it could ask whether or not a person has capability for education; thus by reframing inequality as capability deprivation, systematic and institutional indicators of problems could be finally recognized, then be addressed with more feasibility.

Disclosure statement

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