



Retention and Gender Equity: Female Experiences on Graduate Evening Programmes

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Authors' contributions

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ABSTRACT

In Uganda, the effort to make education available and accessible to all and to enable citizens achieve the highest level of learning led to the introduction of evening programmes at higher level to target those who cannot fit in normal day-hours programmes. Despite considerable research dedicated to female enrolment at higher education, attention has not been given to challenges faced by female graduate students in accessing evening programmes. Researchers examine the physical, organisational, managerial, and policy frameworks within which female students access graduate evening programmes. In understanding some female graduate students' experiences on evening programmes, researchers discover multifaceted challenges they encounter such as lack of enough facilities to accommodate female graduate students, poor security, sexual harassment, poor economic background of most female students including single mothers, lack of guidance and counselling services, and household responsibilities for the married females. Researchers conclude that the causes are personal, social, economic, institutional and administrative. Researchers, therefore, recommend that the University should set up or lobby the private sector to provide affordable female accommodation near campus, strengthen security measures in and around campus, revitalise guidance and counselling services, and ensure equal opportunity policy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although considerable effort has been dedicated to challenges faced by females on accessing higher education, attention has not been given to challenges faced by female graduate students on accessing evening programmes. Challenges faced by female undergraduates on day or evening programmes may not necessarily echo those faced by female graduates. The two levels are different and students who enrol for these levels most likely differ in physical, mental, moral, intellectual, and emotional maturity. Differences may also extend to private and public responsibilities.

This study therefore, is unique in that it examines the voices of female graduate students on evening programme on accessing facilities, services and other structures within the university that enable them to undertake their studies with minimum difficulties and complete their academic programmes with minimal wastage. The focus, is therefore, not on enrolment, but on retention and consequent completion of female graduate students on evening programmes. The study examines the physical, organisational, managerial, and policy frameworks within which female students access graduate evening programmes.

Researchers chose Makerere University as the unit for study, and focused on the East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development (EASHESD), which offers only graduate programmes, two of which run in the evening. Six female graduate students on the evening programmes were selected. To these participants, in-depth interviews were administered to understand whether life for graduate female students on evening programmes was smooth enough to enable them achieve their goals. The findings indicate an improved university atmosphere for female students albeit the multifaceted challenges they still encounter. In the study, the researchers provide recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The need and the importance of women education to as high a level as possible cannot be overemphasized. In Uganda, the effort to make education available and accessible to all and to enable citizens achieve the highest level of learning led to the introduction of evening

programmes to enable those who cannot fit in normal day-hours programmes enrol for the evening ones. While many programmes are at undergraduate level, a few have been designed to target graduate students. Studies carried out on enrolments of, particularly, females at higher education in Uganda [1,2,3,4,5,6] have focused mainly on challenges faced by females on accessing higher education.

Education is a fundamental human right as emphasized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1945) and the Banjur Charter, all of which Uganda is a signatory. The right to education irrespective of one's gender is emphasized in the constitution of the Republic of Uganda, articles 30 and 34 [7]. Beyond being a right, education is a key to both national and individual development and economic growth [8-11]. While there is sufficient evidence that women enrolment at higher education has greatly improved to near parity in Uganda [1,2,6], many questions remain unanswered pertaining to the path of female graduate students on evening programmes in regard to retention, performance and completion.

The discussion is rooted in the wider discussion that women have been for long side lined in the provision of higher education [6,12], hence the concerns of gender equity in the provision of graduate education. In this relation, therefore, sex refers to the biological determinants between men and women which are universal and determined at birth. It is a useful analytical category that distinguishes biological differences between men and women from socially constructed differences [13].

Gender, on the other hand, as a concept is not static. In this article, the term gender is used as described in the Makerere University Gender Equality Policy, in the sense that society and culture apportion characteristics, requirements and expectations to males and females. Individual members of a society are assigned norms of behaviours, roles and duties on the basis of their sex. Biology bestows only a small portion of those attributes and roles; the greater part of what we are as men and women is bestowed on us by culture and society. That is why it is said that we are *born* female and male but *learn* to be feminine and masculine [14]. Consequently, two concepts emerge related to gender and provision of services such as

educational services to women compared to their male counter parts; that is, gender equality and gender equity.

Although differences exist between men and women, gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially-valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Gender equality does not mean that men and women become the same, but that their opportunities and life chances are equal [14]. In other words, gender equality is the absence of discrimination which is based on a person's sex, in opportunities, allocation of resources and benefits, human rights, and in access to services such as education [13,15]. As postulated by Spark [16], "greater gender equality is increasingly seen as a key to the advancement of development goals, and education, as a starting point for female empowerment" and participation in the modern world. Gender equality in the context of this article describes programmes and policy interventions aimed at enhancing equal opportunities and resources for women undertaking evening programmes at graduate level.

Gender equity, on the other hand, goes beyond formal equality of the sexes and emphasizes substantive forms of justice which may entail treating men and women differently, when appropriate, in order to achieve outcomes that are fair and just. It requires fairness and justice in the distribution of responsibilities, access to and control over resources, and access to benefits between women and men. Gender equity embraces affirmative action where and when necessary and it is a step towards gender equality [15].

Accessibility to higher education generally means being able to enrol in higher education institutions [4]. Indabawa [17] defines accessibility as "getting an opportunity for education and reaching out unhindered to educational resources." In this study, however, researchers have taken accessibility to refer to retention and successful completion of a programme of study.

Universities are at the apex of higher education. They are authorized by law to award degrees, diplomas and certificates. Their main distinguishing characteristic is that they create new knowledge through research and publication. They are, in addition, expected to engage with the community around them in

terms of passing on knowledge and skills, and rendering services to the community [1]. The degrees awarded are clustered as undergraduate (bachelors) and graduate (masters and doctoral studies). This study focuses on female students pursuing graduate level studies. Although all university students are at a relatively mature age, most of those at graduate level are assumed already to have families and jobs as well as social and other responsibilities. Many at that level are assumed to be on their own and not living or supported by their parents or guardians.

3. FEMALE ENROLMENT ON GRADUATE STUDY

Significant academic work has been done to study women enrolment trends in the entire education system in general, and higher education institutions in particular, both globally and at regional and national levels. Although much still remains to be done, there are clear signs that sufficient strides have been made to improve women's accessibility to enrolment in higher education [3-5]. For instance, in Uganda, female enrolment in higher education rose from 40.7% in 2005 to 44% in 2010 [1]. As Adair [18] argues, "The process of earning ... graduate degrees can and does break otherwise inviolate cycles of intergenerational poverty. ... Education is important to all citizens; it is absolutely essential to those who must go on to face continued obstacles of racism, classism, and sexism ... and to those who have suffered lifetimes of oppression and marginalisation."

In Uganda, both at national and institutional level, there have been various factors and initiatives widening the accessibility of women to higher education. Such factors include the proliferation in the number of higher education institutions [3,1]; the democratization of higher education services [2,4]; and affirmative action practices [5], among others. Narrowing it to Makerere University, it is noticeable that the discussion on women's accessibility to higher education has had a long history. From in the University's inception in 1922, it was only until 1945 that the first female students were admitted to Makerere University; it was then also that its Motto was changed from "Let us be men" to "We build for the future" [3,14].

However, higher education is broad as defined above. This article goes beyond assessment of accessibility from the point of view of being

enrolled in higher education, to understanding how female graduate students on evening programmes experience their stay on the programmes in order to reach completion.

4. POLICY INITIATIVES PROMOTING WOMEN ACCESSIBILITY

There is a positive environment on the global, regional and national scenes, even in a wider framework of human rights and freedoms movement, which favours the cause for women's accessibility to education and educational resources on the university campus. On the global level, for example, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (which Uganda ratified in 1985); and The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), are all forces to reckon with. Within the African continent, there is, for example, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the African Union has set a benchmark of 50% for women's participation in decision-making processes.

In Uganda, the national constitution provides for the recognition of gender equality as well as equality of persons, and outlaws all forms of discrimination including that based on sex. Article 33, for example, elaborates on the rights of women, including their right to dignity and realization of their full potential and advancement (The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1997) [7]. From the education point of view, the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001, (article 28) requires that admission in a public university be open to all qualified persons without discrimination whatsoever. Hence, provision of full accessibility of women to education and educational resources on campus is not an option but mandatory.

The commitment of Makerere University to promote accessibility of women to education has grown from 1945, when the first six females were admitted, through 1990 with the institutionalization of the affirmative action in the University's admission processes, and the establishment of two institutional mechanisms: the Department of Women and Gender Studies (1990/1991) and the Gender Mainstreaming Division. Today, Makerere University has a Gender Equality Policy [13] whose overall objective is to define a common value system of

gender equality and equity as well as women's empowerment within the core functions of the University; namely, teaching and learning, research and innovation, knowledge transfer and networking, while specifying strategic interventions for institutional and organisational change.

Furthermore, in an effort to cultivate a healthy academic environment, Makerere University has put in place a policy and regulations on Sexual Harassment Prevention [19]. Although both sexes are victims to sexual harassment, women are often more vulnerable. Thus, the University affirms that sexual harassment is a negation of reciprocal respect in addition to being a violation of the fundamental rights, dignity and integrity of the person, and that it undermines the environment required for the advancement of learning, the dissemination of knowledge, research, and productive work.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER JUSTICE

The discussion on women retention on graduate evening programmes may be viewed from two broad perspectives: rights-based and human development – related approaches, which generally perceive education as an intrinsic value, or from more instrumental approaches which tend to perceive women's education as a means to greater social goods rather than an end in itself [20]. Grounded in this background, our focus is on mechanisms that exclude women from various aspects of academia. This literature emphasizes the importance of understanding gender inequity at graduate level as a structural rather than an individual agency issue and perceives the quest for gender justice as a battle against cultural norms and social practices that exclude or hinder one gender - in most cases women - from access to and advancement within academia [21].

Accordingly, a central difference between instrumental and intrinsic approaches to education and development is their understanding of gender equality. While the former tend to limit their focus on gender equality to the question of equal access, the latter will generally have a broader understanding of gender equality based on three dimensions of equal rights: rights *to*, rights *in*, and rights *through* education [20]. Equal rights *to* education implies access to education and progression to different stages of learning, while equal rights *in* education covers a range of factors including

curriculum, teaching methods, subject choice, assessment modes, management, and peer relationships. Equal rights *through* education refer particularly to educated women's equal opportunities to make constructive use of their education in the world of employment, work, and political representation [22].

These dimensions of gender equity in education define challenges with which communities grapple concerning women access, depending on their peculiar conditions. In many of the poorest countries, for example, where women still constitute a small minority among students of higher education, equal access to higher education may be the most pertinent challenge [23,24]. In richer countries, on the other hand, many of which have more women than men among their students of higher education, lack of equal rights through education may represent the largest problem [25,23].

The importance assigned to the relationship between women's participation in higher education and development will obviously vary with the theoretical perspective adopted. Those who understand development as economic growth, and consider higher education as valuable to the extent that it contributes to such growth, will, of course, assign it less fundamental value than those who consider gender parity in education as a central indicator of development in itself [21]. This article relates to the latter position in its development and analysis.

6. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To access and understand female experiences on graduate evening programmes at Makerere University, the researchers carried out a field study. The approach was purely qualitative so as to access female graduate students' voices on issues of accessibility and gender equity. Researchers used the following interview guide to collect the data:

1. What is your perception of female accessibility to graduate study on evening programmes at the EASHESD?

2. Evaluate the female graduate enrolment and retention on evening programmes at the university. What challenges do female students face while at the EASHESD?
3. Identify and explain services, structures, or policy frameworks that enhance the life of graduate female students at the EASHESD.
4. What are the obstacles to the implementation of the above mentioned policy framework?

Since the unit of analysis in this article is a female graduate student on evening programme at Makerere University, only female students qualified for face-to-face interview. Six students were randomly selected, three from each of the EASHESD's two evening programmes; namely, Master of Arts in Education Policy and Planning (MEP) and Master of Arts in Education Management (MEM). Therefore, participants A, B, and E are MEP students and C, D, and F are MEM students. Details about their age brackets, marital status, and whether campus residents or not, are provided under participant and programme section in the table. The assumption is that these factors may influence their various perceptions. This being qualitative, the sample of six does not represent all female graduate students but individual participants, whose perceptions and views may be applied to similar cases. During interview schedules that lasted for about thirty minutes each, the participants provided information free of charge. Since participants are at graduate level, the interview medium was English.

7. FINDINGS

The questions used in this study evoked responses, the summary of which are tabulated below.

The results reflect a mixture of two phenomena for female graduate students: a relatively high rate of female graduate students on evening programmes compared to male students; and a series of challenges that more often than not hinder the academic success of the female students.

Table 1. Summary of participants' responses

Question	Participant and programme	Responses
Perception of female accessibility to	A (MEP) [24-29 age range, single,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life is hard for most female students, who, despite the fact that many of them are economically poor, the university services, facilities and structures are not favourable to them.

Question	Participant and programme	Responses
graduate study	<p>resident]</p> <p>B (MEP) [24-29 age range, single, resident]</p> <p>C (MEM) [24-29 age range, married, non-resident]</p> <p>D (MEM) [30-34 age range, married, non-resident]</p> <p>E (MEP) [30-34 age range, single, non-resident]</p> <p>F (MEM) [24-29 age range, married, non-resident]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some female graduate students live on begging their male counterparts and, as a result, they fall prey to sexual harassment. Sanitation facilities are much better compared to other universities. They are in most cases clean and water is available. The university environment is not secure for most female students. For example, last semester, many female students lost their laptops to thieves at campus. There is high rate of female students in the university today compared to males. There is positive social attitude towards female graduate education. There is greater moral support for female graduate students at the EASHESD. The number of ladies who are on the graduate evening programmes has grown tremendously. To some extent, this is an indicator of improved accessibility measures on the university campus. Significant improvement in women enrolment on graduate evening programmes. There is positive attitude towards women in the EASHESD. Most female students are from economically poor backgrounds, which affect their access to educational needs within the EASHESD and their approach to life in general.
Female graduate enrolment, retention and challenges they face at campus	<p>A (MEP)</p> <p>B (MEP)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although there is a high number of female students, the retention and completion rate of women at graduate level is much lower compared to that of men. Many female students stay in the system much longer due to retakes and repetition of years. Many others end up dropping out. While some are sexually harassed, and so the university ceases to be a good environment for meaningful studies, others lack self-esteem and they resort to self-pity and many female students are simply lazy. <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demands for sexual intimacy from some lecturers and male students more often than not is sexual harassment. Security, safety and health are not the best for female graduate students on evening programmes. Some of them have lost their lives at the university. Thieves snatch their property while many others have been raped and are ashamed of reporting. Most female students are poor and have no financial resources for upkeep. <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I appreciate the fact that female enrolment on graduate evening programmes is high. However, the dropout rate is high for girls; sometimes more than a quarter do dropout. Upon admission on the programme, many of them become over excited, mismanage their lives and end up being entangled in situations that affect their continuity. The issue of male-female relationships has cost many. Lack of parental guidance: once these students join university, their parents tend to think that they are mature enough, and so they are not well equipped to meet the challenges at the university campus.

Question	Participant and programme	Responses
	C (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative peer pressure. There is very limited accommodation for girls in the university (only one hall for graduate students out of the total nine). Security is not the best for female students, some of them have been killed in their rooms. They are cautioned not to move alone at night. Some female graduate students who enrol on graduate evening programmes successfully complete their study. <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balancing family responsibilities and studies is a great challenge. Ladies movement to and from the university is tasking for those who do not reside at the university. Married ladies face particular family challenges especially for evening lessons that in most cases stretch up to the night. There are security threats especially during the night hours when students have to move from classes and the library to their respective areas of residence.
	D (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The retention and completion rate of female graduate students is lower compared to their male counterparts. Many ladies face challenges and then end up either spending more years or drop out of school. <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of enough facilities, for example, places of residence. Enrolment, retention and completion rates are still lower compared to the male counter parts. Many female students are economically poor.
	E (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent security threats. Many female students have lost their lives. <p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A single hostel for graduate students. At the university many female students are more economically challenged than males; many end up cohabiting with male 'sponsors' they become pregnant, others carry out abortions, many develop complications and end up dropping out of the university.
	F (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accommodation is one of the greatest challenges. Of the nine university hostels only one is for graduate students and for mixed sexes. It is tiresome for women to commute to the university every day, let alone the house chores that they have to deal with where they reside. Many female youth students are misguided and they think that they know better yet they are ignorant and come to regret only later.
Services, structures or policy frameworks that enhance female graduate student campus life	A (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have not been keen to take interest. I know of the policy on sexual harassment prevention, which appears to protect females more than males.
	B (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a hostel for those who reside in the university. They have access to spiritual services. The policy on prevention of sexual harassment protects female students much more than their male counterparts. I have not taken keen interest in existing policies to promote the cause of female students in the university. However, I note with concern the absence of guidance and counselling services to help female students cope with the university environment.
	C (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't have adequate knowledge of specific services and

Question	Participant and programme	Responses
		policies intended to enhance female students' academic life at the university. I can, however, mention the policy on prevention of sexual harassment which, I believe, protects more of female students.
	D (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though I know of the prevention of sexual harassment policy, I have no adequate knowledge.
	E (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have not been keen enough to find out about these policies, though I know the existence of the Gender Equality Policy.
	F (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a free atmosphere of interaction between students. They are free to participate in the political field of the university; some of them have been Guild Presidents.
Obstacles to the implementation of policy framework	A (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of financial resources to, for example, construct female hostels. Lack of good will. Managerial positions are dominated by males. Lack of consensus on some policies.
	B (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel female students are partly responsible for the problems that befall them. They seem not concerned about their safety. The location of the university is not a secure environment, that some students are taken control of by the surrounding environment. There are fewer females in the management and academic positions of the university. In the East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, of the twelve lecturers, only one is female. There are no good plans in place to foster the cause of women; and there seems to be lack of good will.
	C (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most female students fear to come up and report cases of sexual harassment. They suffer silently. For those who have come up, it is always a challenge to unearth evidence to pin the culprit.
	D (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For abused female students, it is always difficult to unearth concrete evidence.
	E (MEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of financial resources to implement the policies. Some people are not good willed.
	F (MEM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is too much freedom of movement in and out of the university. Some female students are not disciplined.

The issue of high rate of female graduate students on evening programmes compared to male students could be due to positive social attitude towards female students; moral support accorded to female students; existence of policies that safe guard the wellbeing of female students at the university such as the policy on prevention of sexual harassment and the Makerere University Gender Equality Policy (MUGEP); and the establishment of the Gender Mainstreaming Directorate.

The responses, however, reveal that the high number of female graduate students on evening programmes at the university is not commensurate with the facilities. While the high number of female graduates on evening programmes in itself indicates, to some degree,

improved accessibility for women, the responses indicate that there are many female students who take long to complete their academic programmes, while many drop out of the university without completion. The causes are institutional, social and personal. Despite the availability of policies and administrative structures on female protection, the findings cite lack of enough facilities to accommodate female graduate students, poor security for the female students, sexual harassment, poor economic background of most female students including single mothers, lack of guidance and counselling services for female students, household responsibilities for the married females, and getting entangled in boyfriend – girlfriend intimate relationships.

Strikingly, all participants confessed not having sufficient knowledge of certain specific policies, services or structures that are in place as initiatives to promote the cause of women in the University. Even for those policies they were able to cite (Makerere University Gender Equality Policy, Policy on Sexual harassment prevention), sufficient knowledge of the content was not exhibited. None of the participants had visited the office of gender at campus.

8. DISCUSSION

The profile of University students is fast changing and becoming more diverse in several ways, including gender, age, ethnicity, national origin, (dis)abilities, social class and the University is responsible for providing support services that accommodate the educational needs for all. It is against this background that this study set out to access and understand female students' experiences on graduate evening programmes in EASHESD at Makerere University.

Available literature [4,3,2] suggests that there is remarkable improvement in female enrolment, graduate education included. This is aligned with empirical responses such as E and C who said, "There is high rate of female students in the university today compared to males." And particularly on graduate evening programmes; D noted that "The number of ladies who are on the graduate evening programmes has grown tremendously." In other words, the traditional definition of female roles as mainly reproduction and child care is subsiding [26].

Gender equity in education accessibility is more than access to schooling; that is, simply enrolling in a university; it encompasses a range of factors including curriculum, teaching methods, subject choice, assessment modes, management, and peer relationships [21]. Jones [27] further suggests that accessibility includes participation in decision-making, leadership roles, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and having a voice in all areas of learning. In addition, security on the University campus, adequate sanitation facilities, space in lecture rooms and the library, are all important. Precisely, the University learning environment should be conducive. The assumption is as Surez [28] reflects, the more women are available for upward mobility in academics, the better the representation at senior social, economic, and academic positions.

The assertion that access to higher education is not enough to evaluate female accessibility to graduate study is evident in the findings. In evaluating female retention and completion rates, save Participant C, the rest acknowledged that the female dropout rate from the academic programmes is high, while many female graduate students complete their university studies after wasting a number of years in dead years and retakes. Participant A, for example, asserted that, "Although there is a high number of female students, the retention and completion rate of women at graduate level is much lower compared to that of men. Many female students stay in the system much longer due to retakes and repetition of years. Many others end up dropping out." Although dropouts and wastage of years are common for both sexes, participants noted that the rate of female students is much higher compared to their male counterparts as noted by B, "The dropout rate is high for girls, sometimes more than a quarter do drop out."

It is important to note that all participants credited the positive efforts taken by Makerere University to create a positive and supportive environment for the female students. Such positive efforts include affirmative action, administration of a female only scholarship program, establishment of the Department of Women and Gender Studies and the Gender Mainstreaming Division, and the enactment of policies that include the Gender Equality Policy and the Policy and Provisions on Sexual Harassment Prevention, but also support from their own social backgrounds. "[Female students] are free to participate in the political field of the university; some of them have been Guild Presidents" was highlighted by participant F. Besides, in the university administration structure, and students' association leadership, there are specific places reserved for women (University and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001). There is no doubt that such initiatives indicate a positive attitude toward female students and moral support for them on the campus.

However, many female students, as evident in responses from A, B, C, D, and E have inadequate knowledge of policy initiatives that cater for their welfare at the university. Such ignorance affects proper women accessibility to graduate study. Despite the presence of gender related policies, many higher education institutions in patriarchal societies are still inclined to feminine-phobia, harassment, and discrimination [29]. Therefore, environment that

disfavours female success at higher education evening programmes could be a ramification of indirect discrimination against women including in relation to opportunities for further study [16]. As Odhiambo (2011; 669) [30] argues, "... women are not always targeted for discrimination, but are sometimes overlooked or not encouraged, mentored, or supported; discrimination can either be by default rather than by design."

The findings further suggest significant institutional and personal challenges. Notable of these cited by D, E, and F is inadequate accommodation facilities that force many female students to reside far away from the university campus and instead commute daily to the university. Participant F underlined that, "Of the nine university hostels, only one is for graduate students and for mixed sexes." Many resort to reside in privately owned hostels, whose security is not assured, and others commute from home to school. Participants A, C, and E noted that this puts their lives and scholastic property at risk. Participant A said that, "Some of them have lost their lives ... thieves snatch their property while many others have been raped and are ashamed of reporting." Security challenges have been on several occasions reported, and not once but many times, they have led to loss of life of some female students when moving from lectures or library to go back home. Participant B re-echoed the advice that, female students "are cautioned not to move alone at night". Sexual harassment is a challenge that plagues female students. Although there is a policy in place to address grievances of such issues, many female student victims remain silent for fear of either shame or others feel it will be hard to unearth the evidence. Nevertheless, Participant A intimated that, "Demands for sexual intimacy from some lecturers and male students are all sexual harassment."

From another perspective, participants almost unanimously agreed that most female graduate students are hampered by their poor economic background. This matches well with Leach's [31] welfare. Not all are lucky to be like one participant who stated that "I am financially and morally supported by my husband to be in school." Participant A claimed that, "Some female graduates live on begging their male counterparts." Whether willingly or unwillingly, many female students end up falling prey to unscrupulous men who exploit them under the guise of supporting them financially. Participant F

noted, "... many end up cohabiting with male 'sponsors', they become pregnant ...". Relationships that develop out of such encounters with men, more often than not, end up distracting female students from their studies. Many a female student's life has been darkened by reckless intimate relationships.

The financial constraints extend to household responsibility. Many female graduate students are single mothers who have to struggle between supporting their offspring and themselves at school; others come from poor economic background. As Stevenson and Clegg [32,33] aver, these students get economically active in order to sustain their families, themselves and studies, a reason to seek work to satisfy both ends. Consequently, fatigue, shortage of time for study, and/or meagre income may affect their pursuance of a graduate programme.

As Millen [34] discusses, female students are deeply inscribed with the constructions of femininity and mothering that make them differently experience graduate evening study than the male counterparts. The study findings revealed that many female graduate students are married, and despite being occupied with academic undertakings, they are still expected to fulfil their home responsibilities of preparing meals, tidying up homes, and caring for the children's needs. For Participant C, "balancing family responsibilities and studies is a great challenge," and some evening lectures stretch late in the night. As a result, family chores may conflict with graduate programmes run in the evening and thus, making it hard for a student to continue.

Although the findings and the literature show that there are efforts to take more initiatives to improve women accessibility to education on campus, there are several obstacles that many times hinder the success of such undertakings. Such obstacles include lack of adequate resources like finances on the part of the university, personal neglect and ignorance. For instance, Participant A noted that, there is "lack of financial resources to, for example, construct female hostels." Despite Koncz's [35] understatement that women tend to avoid leadership positions, other researchers [36,37]; Brown, [38,29] argue that lack of female academic and administrative staff may make females feel insecure on the programme because these act as models of reference. This was reflected in the words of Participant B who

noted that, "in the East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, of the twelve lecturers, only one is female". Therefore, fewer females in the academic and management positions may also affect the cause of female students at campus.

9. CONCLUSION

In this article researchers undertook to examine the experiences of female graduate students on evening programmes. The study has revealed that despite the growing number of females on graduate evening programmes due to improved university structures as is seen in the affirmative action schemes, female scholarship programmes, Gender Mainstreaming Division, Gender Equality Policy and the Policy and Provisions on Sexual Harassment Prevention, there is also a high dropout rate of females. The causes are personal, social, economic, institutional and administrative.

There are a number of other challenges as well. These include lack of enough facilities to accommodate female students, especially halls of residence, security threats, sexual harassment, and the fact that many who come from economically poor backgrounds end up, more often than not, entangled in relationships hoping to get survival benefits. The results of such challenges are either delay in completion of their studies, hence wastage, or drop out or even poor performance.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges of commuting long distances to the university and lack of enough security for female students were reflected in shortage of enough accommodation for female students. Because of fatigue resulting from commuting from distant places, together with the responsibilities that come with it, and the fear for their security, many female students end up dropping out of the university. This necessitates the university to set up or lobby the private sector to provide, near the university, accommodation targeting mainly female students.

Improvement of security within and around the university is of paramount importance. Security measures should include, but not limited to, having all the university streets and dark spots well lit with security lights during the night, securing all university inlets and outlets, posting security personnel at key points of the university and having full time surveillance of the university

by an organized security group. Although many of these security measures are put down in the Gender Equality Policy, little realization has been made. Without adequate security to guard the lives of students, the university environment cannot be conducive for learning.

The researchers strongly recommend the need for and revitalization of guidance and counselling services in the university. Guidance and counselling is necessary to restore confidence in those female students who have been abused, for example, sexually, those who have been threatened security-wise, but also, as seen in the responses, many female students end up wasting their lives because they lack life skills to fit in the university campus environment. Although strengthening guidance and counselling services is already stated in the Gender Equality Policy, its effects and indicators have not yet been visible. Guidance and counselling services are necessary for those caught up in issues of emotions and shortage of funds, but also for those seeking guidance on how to go about the academic and social issues. Assistance of that type could help many to overcome private challenges if shared and advice solicited. Guidance on how to access funds that target female students, more so at graduate level, should be provided. If there are no funds to access, government or other agencies should consider setting up funds in form of bursaries or loans to assist female graduate students.

Since females feel insecure and inferior in departments where they are not well represented, the human resource office should ensure that equal opportunity policy in recruitment is properly observed so that women have equal competitive advantage with men for positions. The high presence of females in positions of management and academic makes a positive impact on females in striving for academic success. Therefore, the need to have more female staff in the senior management and administrative positions is equally important. Women in management positions serve a double purpose: they are role models for female students to look to, but also, they are the best placed people to promote positive initiatives that promote women accessibility to education and educational resources on the university campus.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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