The problems of female students at Jimma University, Ethiopia, with some suggested solutions

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Abstract

Background: Education is perhaps the single essential measure to ensure a full participation of women in development. Women's participation in all fields of the world has become significant.
Objective: This study was conducted to identify gender related problems of female students in Jimma University (JU).
Methods: This study is a cross-sectional study undertaken using quantitative and qualitative methods, in which the university community (staff and students of both sexes) participated.
Results: The problems most frequently cited were violence, harassment and lack of security. Lack of facilities and assertiveness, workload, and academic performance were mentioned less often. In particular, awareness towards the existence of gender discrimination in campus diverge between males (30%) and females (64%), P< 0.001. However, the solutions suggested focused on raising awareness, guidance and counseling, academic support and improvement of facilities.
Conclusion: This study strongly suggests that in order to improve female achievement in tertiary education, attention should be given to personal security, material support and assertiveness creation in addition to academic needs. [*Ethiop.J.Health Dev.* 2002;16(3):257-266]

Introduction

Every society around the world assigns gender roles which direct activities and govern behaviour for males and females of all ages. These gender roles are reflected in socio-economic levels and status, and exert various degrees of constraints for both sexes. In general, the more rigid the gender role in a society, the sharper the gender division of labour and the lower the status accorded to women (1). Women face gender oppression especially in developing countries, in all aspects of life, including education. Gender imbalance in different sectors is one of the current critical issues that requires immediate intervention and empowerment of females in political decisions and senior management posts and implementation of affirmative action to correct it.

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Education is perhaps the single most important measure that can be taken to ensure a fuller integration of women in development. Education raises the social status and self-image of women, increases their ability to question the status quo, enables them to make decisions for themselves, and increases their contribution to the well-being of society. It delays marriage and the onset of childbearing. It also reduces women's acceptance of traditional practices that may be harmful to health and helps them to combat the barrier for women to improve their lives. Educated women are more likely to seek health care for themselves and their children, to practice family planning, and to have increased opportunity for paid employment, that benefit the entire family (2). However, education is not within the reach of many girls and women in the developing world.

Studies from around sub-Saharan Africa repeatedly tell the same story regarding female

Education.   In Sudanese society, despite the strides made towards improving women's status in recent years, blatant inequalities still characterize their position (3).   Although boys and girls have equal access to education and training programs, boys are given preference for cultural and economic reasons.   Problems impeding girls education in Sudan include shortage of funds, equipment and text books, limited building resources, fewer female secondary schools, rural facilities that are inferior to urban ones, limited numbers of female teachers willing to relocate to rural schools, and large class size. This, adds to the problems of lack of parental encouragement, and finances, and early marriage. This leads to under-representation of women in higher education, as well as vocational and technical education.

In Malawi, only 3% of girls who attend primary school go on to secondary school, and an even smaller number attend college. A qualitative study conducted among eleven female students at the university of Malawi illustrated some of the problems faced by sub-Saharan African women who pursue higher education. Obstacles cited by the college students included a lack of knowledge of how to pursue university admittance, sex discrimination in obtaining promotion to secondary schools, lack of teacher encouragement, the expectation that female students perform domestic duties at school, pressure to conform to cultural norms, and gender stereotyping at coeducational secondary schools (4).

In Ethiopia the role of women has been minimized based on a long tradition of their exclusion from education and development. Their participation in the economic, social, political and cultural sectors of the country is seriously affected by cultural barriers and low expectations by and of females (5). The enrolment ratio in Ethiopia is more than three times lower than some sub-Sahara countries. This can clearly tell us that we are left behind

and are expected   to work harder in the education sector. The problems for Ethiopian women fighting their way through the education system are no different from those in Sudan, Malawi and elsewhere. Forty percent of girls attend primary school, compared with 56% boys, and even these quickly drop out, and only 8% get as far as secondary school. In higher education they account for about 10% of the student population.   (personal communication - Ministry of Education, Ethiopia). But what is interesting is that even when females enter places of higher education, they are still hampered by their socialization and the low expectations received from their homes and society at large.   In studies of medical students at Gondar College of Medical Sciences, Ethiopia, differences in academic performance between males and females were observed during the early phases of medical education.   Social and psychological factors were cited as reasons and it was also shown that female students reported more feelings of isolation and discomfort than their male peers (6). Amongst the nursing students at the same institution, attrition rates for females were higher than for males (7).

Jimma University (JU) is typical of tertiary level educational facilities in Ethiopia, in having few female role models amongst its academic staff, a low number of female students compared with male students, and a female population which lacks confidence and assertiveness (8,9). The high attrition rate of female students during the first semester of study has given cause for concern, and resulted, in 1998, in the introduction of an affirmative action programme. This programme includes an annual orientation programme for all first year female students; female-only tutorials in at most four subjects chosen by the students during their first academic year; guidance and counselling by a female counsellor on a one to one basis; peer counselling and support by second-year female students; academic guidance by second-year role model female

students; and all first year females undertaking assertiveness training. The results of this initiative have been encouraging, with attrition rates reducing from 24% to 11% over two years (10). Such focused attention on a specific problem is vital, but there are no broad-based data regarding wider gender issues at JU. The research reported here is an attempt to rectify this deficiency.

The purpose of this study is thus to identify gender related problems of JU female students and contribute to a tactical plan to solve them. Specifically, the study tries to identify factors relating to both academic and social problems which may affect the performance of female students, attitudes of the university community towards the gender issue related to problems of female students, formulate possible suggestions that the community may consider to alleviate these problems.

Methods

A cross sectional study design was used to gather information on the problems of female students at Jimma University (JU) using quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was conducted between May and July 2000.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires for quantitative, and focus group discussion (FGD) for qualitative information, after validation of the instrument with a pre-test. The questionnaire was prepared in Amharic, distributed over statistically derived random samples of 800 respondents from the total community of the university, academic staff (237), administrative staff (313) and students (2032) proportionally stratified. In addition, the focus groups consisted of 8 people matching the group criteria, (relating to job/sex and for those who cannot do the questionnaire) and who indicated willingness to take part in the study. Eleven different groups were held, made up of: 3 student groups (2 female, 1 male); 2 academic staff groups (male); 4 female administrative staff groups; 2 male

administrative staff groups. Although groups were allowed a free discussion of issues, moderators ensured that the following issues were raised: opinions on gender equality; whether females need special attention; the specific problems of female students; the causes of female weaker academic performance compared to their male counterparts; and solutions for the above-mentioned problems. Discussions were recorded by tape-recorder with the agreement of the group members.

Information was sought on socio-demographic information such as age, sex, ethnicity, family income, urban/rural origin, government/private educational background, and attitudes towards gender issues using both open and closed ended questions.

The data were analysed using basic statistical methods; the closed questions analysed by an SPSS statistical package applying chi square test, and the comments from open questions were coded into major categories and analysed in a semi-quantitative manner, where the results of the focus group discussions were summarised and categorised.

Results

Socio-demographic data: From more than 800 questionnaires distributed, only 502 were completed. In particular, there was a poor response rate from the lecturing staff, with only 5 returned out of 150 distributed. The completed questionnaire were from 155 female students, 203 male students, 66 female staff and 76 male staff. The staff category was mainly administrative workers, but included the five (male) instructors. Some returned questionnaires were incomplete, but all available data have been included in the analyses.

Analysis of student data showed there was a significant difference in their age distribution (Figure 1) ($\chi2 = 82.5$, p<0.001), due mainly to the higher number of females 74%(96),
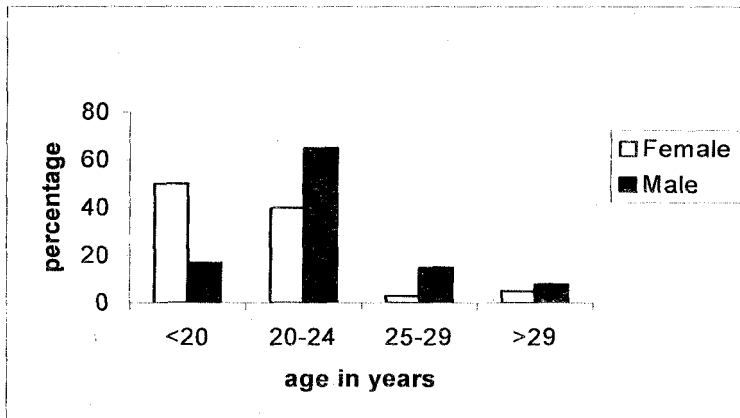
Figure 1: **Age distribution of male and female student respondents at JU.**
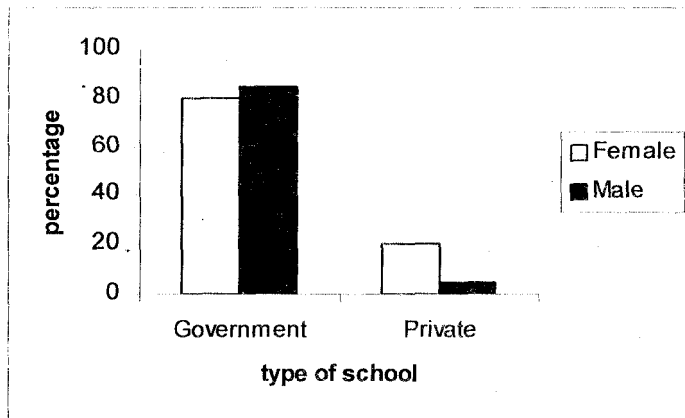

Figure 2: **Schooling of students prior to attending JU**

compared to males in the under 20 age group. There was also a difference in the type of schooling received by students prior to their attendance at Jimma University (Figure 2) ($\chi 2$ = 12.5, p<0.001), with females 73%(33) more likely to have received private education than respondents. Harassment/violence and rape are considered the most serious worry by both sexes. The extent of such harassment can be seen in the answer to a closed section of the questionnaire where 47/174 (27%) and 16/163

(10%) female students admitted to being harassed by male students/staff respectively. Of the other problems listed, it was interesting to note that males rated shyness as most serious, workload and family, were not necessarily those considered most important by females, who mentioned security and facilities more often.

Respondents were asked for possible solutions to the problems of females on campus. Their

Table 1: Problems of females listed by respondents to the questionnaire

Type of problem	Female responses: 221 max	Male responses: 279 max
	No (%)	No (%)
Harassment & violence	83 (38)	65 (23)
Raping	57 (26)	77 (26)
Early marriage	24 (11)	32 (11)
Lack of security in dorms	23 (11)	1 (0.3)
Lack of Facilities (medical, recreation; water; materials,)	19 (8)	4 (1.4)
Negative societal attitude	18 (8)	30 911)
Political/economical inequality	13 (6)	7 (2.5)
Workload/lack of time	8 (4)	28 (10)
Shyness/lack of assertiveness	8 (4)	17 (6)
Family imposition	5 (2)	23 (8)

answers were varied and therefore categorised into broad groups. Table 2 shows these groups with the numbers and percentages of the respondents suggesting each type of solution. It is noticeable that males and females roughly agree on the approaches to be used, and that many of the suggestions are broad-based. However there were some practical suggestions such as the removal of inefficient proctors. It is also interesting that 6% are worried about unnecessary support to females and that 8 respondents recognised the problems but stated they had no solutions.

Qualitative Information: After thorough discussions and detailed description of problems, focus group discussants agreed on more or less similar points, and came up with more specific solutions. Both male and female groups expressed the view that females are equal to males in ability, but that culture, society and low self-esteem of females conspired against them. Many felt these problems were particularly true in rural areas. There were some awareness that females are naturally different, particularly during pregnancy and in areas of work which require physical strength.

Table 2: Suggested solutions to the problems

	Female responses: 221 max	Male responses: 279 max
	No (%)	No (%)
Awareness training of gender issues/societal change of attitude	54 (24)	50 (18)
Education of females themselves regarding rights, assertiveness and confidence	34 (15)	65 923)
Proper security, protection, law, and punishment	32 (14)	40 (140
Avoid unnecessary support	13 (6)	17 (6)
Create facilities and recreation for females	18 (8)	9 (3)
Avoid family impositions	8 (4)	14 (5)
Change inefficient proctors	7 (3)	0 (0)
Don't know	2 (1)	6 (3)

Opinion on whether females should receive special support was divided. Many stated that there was a need for support to make up for previous male domination and lack of opportunity, and, supported for example, the government policy of prioritising females for education. However, some, from both sexes, expressed fears that special support implies weakness, and that females should be left to manage as best they can. Others made the point, that not all females need support, and that some males do.

A number of reasons were put forward to explain female academic weakness and the high attrition rate of female students. Those most often mentioned were: being away from home, causing both home sickness and new freedoms which students are unable to handle; lack of assertiveness in and out of the classroom; poor academic background; fear of failure; violence; grade and physical abuse by lecturers (mentioned only by the female groups); financial problems; lack of parental support; and lack of interest in the field of study. The very interesting issue raised here was, against a special female students group called 'ASCHARI' (Amharic word Aschari), lobbying and blending other innocent girls to go out with boys/males for extravagant activities during their study time diverting them from their main objectives, usually resulted in academic failure.

There was a considerable difference in the tone and content of discussion amongst male and female groups about the problems faced. The male groups felt that female students had few problems on campus, and that many female students were responsible for their own problems. In comparison the female staff and student groups listed a large number of problems (Table 3), many of which were similar to the problems mentioned in response to the questionnaire. The discussion came up with numerous suggestions, which are summarised in Table 4. In addition to the listed solutions, some participants mentioned more fundamental approaches, such as changing cultural attitudes, approaching religious organisations and requesting new government policies on gender.

Table 3: Problems of female students at JU recorded during female focus group discussions

1.	Problems in the dormitory:	- shortage of facilities; e.g, water, toilet, etc - theft - badly-trained proctors, unable to offer appropriate support
2.	Safety:	- unsafe to walk from study rooms to dormitories late at night - Unsafe when electricity goes out accidentally
3.	Harassment:	- embarrassment by males during study periods - difficult to study late (due to lack of safety)
4.	Problems with services:	- more attention given to males by service-offering staff - poor cafeteria system for lining up
5.	Miscellaneous:	- student immaturity - lack of assertiveness - Lack of a female counsellor on the satellite campus

Table 4: suggestions to alleviate problems of female students at JU, recorded from all focus group discussions

Awareness:	- appropriate orientation of male and female students, highlighting the problems ahead and the strategies to avoid/deal with them - encourage academic staff to support female students
Support:	- strengthen and extend the guidance and counselling service, to include promotion of gender issues and female medical services, - improve self-confidence among females, especially via assertiveness - training - identify academic weakness early - continue current affirmative action programmes
Study:	- rearrange library so males are not staring at the females - assign females according to their background/field of interest - extra English language classes - continue current programme of extra tutorials during year 1 of the - course - continue and extend help with study skills
Safety:	- form a task group to assess the problem - formulate strict rules and regulations regarding violence, and implement them without exception - install proper lighting from study rooms to the dormitories and elsewhere
Accommodation:	- provide adequate water supply - reduce crowding in the rooms or dormitories - employ only mature, 'motherly' proctors who are educated to grade 12

Discussion

Study populations: The study populations used in this survey were representative of a diverse group of people; workers and students, with different levels of education, of various ethnicity, and from varying home backgrounds. It is therefore not surprising that the results presented here represent a broad spectrum of views. The populations used for the questionnaires were obtained from the source population by statistical sampling methods and are deemed to represent the source population. However, the poor return from some sectors, especially the lecturing staff response to the questionnaires, makes it a reflection of their negligence towards the issues of gender, specially their female students. Academic staff were highly dominated by males at the time of this study. Variety of groups in the group discussions purposefully selected to represent the university community; staff (academic & administrative, males & females, and a group

from the low status workers like cleaners and cooks), and students (females and males) are balanced representatives to provide valid responses towards gender issues.

Of the socio-demographic data obtained, only two significant results were noted. One was that the number of female students under 20 years of age was significantly higher than the number of male students in the same age group. This could be a reflection of the known situation of girls in education in Ethiopia, specially being at or above the 'watershed' age of 20. It is well documented that few female students pass grade 12 (11). It seems logical to assume that those who do manage to overcome the cultural and other pressures to achieve this level of education are either highly intelligent and/or greatly encouraged by their parents. Such students are also likely to be those who would have a regular passage through the grades, starting young, not taking time out to

repeat years and not being withdrawn from school for family commitments. Thus they would qualify for university at the earliest age. In comparison, many of the males might have had interruptions to their schooling for the reasons mentioned above and therefore be, on average, a year or two older. The same logic can be applied to the statistically significant fact that female students are more likely to have been privately educated than males before coming to Jimma University.

Highlighted Problems: The problems of female students at Jimma University are wide-ranging and very much in keeping with those identified elsewhere (5,6). However, it is interesting that safety and accommodation are the primary concerns for the females, and that relatively little was said about academic achievement. But it is true that all the above concerns are possible contributors for their under-achievement and female students will be in a very difficult situation to a better achievement unless they are alleviated. Consequently, one may suggest that only in an atmosphere of security, can female students settle to their work and therefore achieve their full potential. Prior to this research, and because of the documented high attrition rate of female students (8), academic problems have been the main focus for action at JU, specially the lack of interest of instructors on girls education implicating the impact on the academic performance of female students. This information suggests a more holistic approach may be necessary in future, attention given to the serious issue in raising the gender awareness level of the academic staff.

Conclusions

Of the two methods used to assess the needs of females on the campus, the focus discussion groups were the harder to analyse, yet produced the most useful information regarding true fears and practicalities. In comparison, the questionnaire, though sampling a larger number of people who demonstrated an understanding of the problems, gave very little in the way of practical suggestions. This shows that in order to make some true progress in the matter of gender equity, more direct discussion with students and staff, particularly females, and implementation of their suggestions is needed. The ease of obtaining female participants from amongst both staff and students in itself highlights the desire of females to be active in the solutions to their problems. Nevertheless, it is important not to forget the role of males in the gender equation. It was gratifying to see that the males who were surveyed had a good perception of the problems of women and showed an awareness that gender attitudes need to change. In a few cases there did appear to be anger, or possibly fear, expressed about the promotion of females at the perceived expense of males. It is therefore important that any positive actions taken by JU should be clearly accompanied by explanations in the form of increased awareness and publicising of why females are being 'favoured' in this way.

It is important that if strategies are to be implemented, their effects are properly monitored and evaluated. Some of the data collected here can act as a baseline against which to measure change. However, more accurate measures, particularly of academic performance are also needed. To this end, a database of the female students will be set up to monitor their progress, and to correlate change with positive actions taken. Using this research and ideas generated in the workshop mentioned above, Jimma University has developed a gender tactical plan which identifies activities intended to move the university towards its stated goal of achieving gender equity. The plan has been approved for implementation in the 2001/2 academic year

Recommendations

A long list of recommendations were generated by respondents, amongst them were many practical suggestions for increasing safety and offering support to female students. Some of

these would be relatively easy to implement; others would require more resources in terms of time, money, effort and management. For example, it would be simple to set aside two or three tables in the library for female use only. It would not be too difficult to provide some special recreation facilities; to improve conditions in the dormitory; to maintain the current affirmative action programme and to set up complaints procedure for sexual harassment. On the other hand it could be costly and difficult to make the dormitories completely secure, even though this is essential for the safety of the students.

Relatively little mention was made by study participants of the current affirmative action programme. However, the value of this has been recently assessed and the programme has coincided with a considerable drop in attrition rate of female students. Almost all of the female students taking part approve of the current three-pronged approach and would like to see an extension of the tutorial programme in particular (10). In terms of directly improving academic performance, this and other research indicates that confidence building and study skills are more important than knowledge and therefore intervention activities should be directed towards these where possible.

The subjects studied here seem very aware of and gender sensitive (except the lecturing staff that needs special attention to raise their awareness), but still insisting for increased awareness might imply awareness by itself is not sufficient unless behavioural change is seen coming into action. It is quite likely that those people who choose to participate in this kind of research are more gender sensitive than the population of the university as a whole. This would explain why, despite the awareness shown by this research, there is a strong perception of gender inequality on the campus. Perhaps, as with many large institutions, the overall tone is set by relatively few senior or

powerful people. If these leaders act in a chauvinistic manner, or condone or fail to condemn behaviour detrimental to females, the issue of gender equity is easily swept aside.

Some of the listed solutions require the involvement of government, religious leaders, NGOs and other bodies that link into the running and culture of Ethiopian society, and therefore are beyond the power of JU to change directly. However, this does not preclude the university from lobbying for such solutions.

In addition to the suggestions in this study, there are other ways to minimise the disparities between males and females. For example, a gender workshop at Jimma University held in March 2001, suggested that the lack of female role models was a key problem and came up with methods to empower and encourage females, including changes in recruitment policy, affirmative action in employment, and mainstreaming of gender issues.

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