

Book Review

Review of Joy Kwesiga's *Women's Access to Higher Education in Africa: Uganda's Experience*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2002

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Joy Kwesiga has cast her net far in this sweeping exposition of the factors influencing women's access to higher education, and by implication, preceding phases of education, in sub-Saharan Africa generally and Uganda more specifically. Drawing on a range of data, including the findings of her own research conducted in Uganda, Kwesiga presents a detailed and comprehensive analysis of conditions women face in the region and how these impact on their educational access.

The book goes beyond simply naming the problem, and providing evidence and a quick fix for it; herein lies one of its major strengths. Kwesiga does not compartmentalise education as a discrete area in which gender inequality happens in isolation to other forms of gender oppression. Instead, she treats it as a symptom and outcome of the insidious seepage of gender inequality which permeates the very fabric of society, down to the most basic, everyday level. Kwesiga takes the reader to different levels, elucidating ways in which practices such as marriage and the payment of bridewealth, and structures like the family contribute to the continued marginalisation of women from education generally, and higher education more specifically. Consequently, the inequality that exists in educational access is treated holistically and its roots are traced and analysed at the micro-level.

The book is divided into two sections: Part One describes women's access to formal education in sub-Saharan Africa and Uganda particularly. Here Kwesiga explains theories and concepts underpinning the understanding of gender equality and how it functions in society, and analyses how these concepts are applicable to education in the region. Using extensive statistical data, as well as case studies, she paints a grim picture of women's access to educational institutions and resources in sub-Saharan Africa, where women comprise only 33 percent of total enrolments at higher education institutions.

All the chapters in Part One form a coherent whole, providing a compelling argument for the need to educate women beyond basic primary education. That there is still a need to make this argument is in itself telling. In Chapter One Kwesiga takes African governments to task for paying lip service to the idea of the social importance of women's educational empowerment, while doing little to prioritise this conviction in policy. Chapter Two sets out the theoretical concepts used in the book. Kwesiga discusses three sets of theories: the human capital theory and how it is applied to education, social theories of gender inequalities and lastly, theories about women, gender and development. While acknowledging that these theories have originated within a western context, this chapter shows how they are useful analytical tools for explaining and redressing gender inequalities and the gender gap in sub-Saharan education, and also how they impact on women's educational access.

As a foundational text, this chapter is excellent, and students especially will find it useful in familiarising themselves with gender theories and debates. I found the section on theories about women, gender and development particularly valuable. It spells out different approaches to development theory and provides summaries of Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD), along with a useful table comparing the three approaches. The chapter also provides insights into how foreign donors set the agenda for what levels of education are prioritised, and shows how donor agencies often contribute to women being shut out of education.

Chapter Three makes a cogent argument for women's education, and specifically access to

higher education, while the following chapter looks at factors influencing educational access for women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa. Kwesiga examines factors such as parental attitudes, societal norms, socio-economic conditions and higher education models, and shows how these affect women's educational access. In Chapter Five, she focuses on Uganda, the site of her research, and contextualises the local educational landscape, while the following chapter, entitled "The Dichotomy Between Women and Men: Scanning Ugandan Society", provides a wide-ranging analysis of gender inequality in Uganda, its causes and effects, and its impact on education.

Having spelt out various theoretical frameworks and analysed the higher education sector in both sub-Saharan Africa and Uganda, Kwesiga goes on, in Section Two, to present the findings of her study into the factors affecting women's access to higher education. Chapter Seven introduces the survey and sets out its methodology: 643 people responded to a total of 747 questionnaires sent out. Respondents included students, parents, and what Kwesiga terms "opinion leaders", and their perceptions around key factors impacting on women's access to education were measured. In addition, interviews were conducted with heads of institutions and other key decision-makers within the national educational system, and documentary evidence such as reports and research works were analysed for statistical evidence. While this method seems to cover all fronts, Kwesiga mentions only fleetingly that the survey was conducted in 1992 and 1993, a fact that casts doubt on the relevance and topicality of findings. The survey results are dated, and in many cases predate some of the literature and figures underpinning the research and its formulation.

The rest of the book takes the reader through the survey findings, relating them to the factors which Kwesiga identifies in earlier chapters as having had an impact on women's access to higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter Eight, "The Influence of the Family", reveals, for example, that most questionnaire respondents (including parents) believe parental attitudes are the biggest obstacle to women gaining education in Uganda. One of the most startling findings shows that most parents surveyed believe that their daughters' future families (in-laws) would derive most benefit from their education, an attitude underlying many parents' decision to withdraw daughters from school at a young age. Using government expenditure and survey figures, Kwesiga also shows that the socio-economic status of a family is a strong indicator of the level of education a girl is likely to achieve. This is perceived by respondents as the most likely cause of girls dropping out of school.

Chapter Nine, "The Influence of Society" sheds shocking light on the way societal structures and institutions such as the family and marriage entrench gender oppression. Kwesiga analyses systems like universal marriage [1] and its contribution to high drop-out rates amongst women in secondary and higher education. She is particularly critical of the practice of bridewealth payment and how it mitigates against women going on to higher education. A young bride is more marketable and will attract a higher bridewealth payment; thus, parents facing financial hardship are more likely to sell off their daughters than struggle to find the money for higher education. Because boys are intrinsically more valued than girls as human beings they are more likely to be privileged when choices have to be made about who gets an education. Kwesiga shows how the human capital theory of education further mitigates against girls' and women's access.

She also looks at the role educational institutions play in limiting access for women. It is impossible to analyse women's access to higher education without looking at the preceding phases of education, and, to Kwesiga's credit, she views the entire educational system as a whole. She shows that women are not suddenly denied access when they reach the tertiary level, but that educational systems are structured in such a way which filters girls out at every stage of the educational process.

The book concludes with a number of recommendations on how to start addressing the different forms of inequity uncovered through its course.

It is an excellent resource, providing extensive empirical data as well as incisive analysis which goes beyond skimming the surface. Central to its argument lies the conviction that society as a whole needs to be radically transformed to ensure gender parity and greater access for women in education, and that this transformative work needs to be tackled at every level, from the most basic societal unit, the family, through to educational institutions and political structures like the state.

Footnote

[1] Kwesiga uses the term “universal marriage” to identify the societal expectation that every adult should marry. According to this expectation, unmarried people are viewed as inferior or unstable, and lack societal approval and standing.