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Gender equity tensions in higher education: a critique of post-apartheid gender equity policy

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has been an area of concern internationally, regionally and nationally. Black South African women in general suffered triple oppression during the apartheid regime, based on race, gender and class oppression. Higher education mirrored the varied forms of marginalisation that existed in society and therefore the majority did not have the access to quality higher education afforded their white minority counterparts. The few black women who did have access were concentrated in historically disadvantaged institutions or studied through correspondence (Chisholm & September, 2005). The courses for which they were enrolled were aimed at perpetuating male dominance in the public sphere and domesticating them through women's traditional roles of nurturing and caring. With the advent of democracy in 1994 the gates of higher education were opened to students who had previously been excluded. Effectively, black people in general and women in particular benefitted from race and gender categories of equity, according to the Department of Education, White Paper (1997). The equity clause that has been integrated in higher education policies encapsulates a clause that targets the redress of gender-related inequities and inequalities, aimed at ameliorating women's access to higher education. Although race, gender and disability were identified, the National Plan (2001) notes that race equity had been given primacy in policies over gender equity. I argue that aggregated data emanating from recent studies in higher education indicate that 57% of the current female population are accessing public higher education. Although the figures from documentary evidence affirm a high presence, on examination of other factors this study found a more nuanced picture. Specifically, a change in equity deduced from the same data indicates that fewer women were enrolled in courses such as Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) or in postgraduate studies. Other areas of concern include high dropout rates, attrition and throughput (CHE, 2010; Draft Green Paper, 2012). This argument is made using theoretical and thematic exploration of post-apartheid South African gender equity reform agenda in higher education. In addition, higher education policy documents (National Council for Higher Education, 1996; White Paper, 1997; Higher Education Act, 1997; National Plan for Higher Education, 2001) and gender laws and frameworks have informed the study. It has aligned itself to one of the goals of White Paper (1997) that noted

that in order for equity to be meaningful to the formerly disadvantaged; access and success have to run concurrently. Ultimately, the study has contended that by homogenising women the particular contexts of social justice have not been recognised (Young, 1990). The implication of the misrecognition of the particular and specific experiences of black women in higher education could be contributing to the enigmatic low throughput, high dropout rates and high levels of attrition currently being experienced in higher education. This thesis poses a challenge to policymakers and institutions of higher learning to shift their attention from viewing the attainment of gender equity and equality through notions of expanded access (global participation). To narrow the current gap it proposes a hybridisation of equity and equality policies (macro) with initiatives that target the particular and specific conditions (micro) of black women who access higher education.

Key words: gender, equity, higher education, post-apartheid, policy, women.