

Socio-economic determinants of gender inequality in higher education in rural areas in Rwanda

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Research Paper

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This study examined socio economic determinants of gender inequality in higher education in rural areas in Rwanda. The objectives of the study were to analyze the socio economic factors of gender inequality in higher education in rural areas in Rwanda; to determine the effects of low level of women education on their livelihoods in rural areas in Rwanda. Self-administered questionnaires, interview, Focus Group Discussion, observation and documentation review were used as the main methods of data collection. The researcher considered 497 respondents among them teachers and head teachers in primary and secondary schools, students in secondary schools and parents. The study revealed that the main socio economic determinants of gender inequality in higher education in

Rwanda are: poverty, early marriage, culture, education level of parents, domestic and agricultural labour responsibilities, pregnancies and aspirations for children. In addition, the study revealed that gender inequality in higher education has negative effects on the socio-economic welfare of rural households in Rwanda which include: obstacle to improving health, exclusion of women from economic and political opportunities, obstacle to good health and nutrition, effect on children's education and high birth rates.

Key words: Gender, gender equality, gender inequality, education, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as an important means in development strategies to improve conditions and reduce poverty in Third World countries. Researches have shown very crucial benefits of educating girls and women. Decrease in infant mortality and fertility rates are among the most important results. In addition, an educated woman is more likely to send her children to school, and also acknowledges the special importance of educating her daughters (Gwyn and Okazawa, 2001). It is no wonder that education of the both boys and girl child with a gender-based framework is widely acknowledged as being a single and most powerful vehicle of self-advancement and fulfilment of developmental outcomes for present and future generations of children (Maluwa-Banda, 2003).

Rwanda has made enormous strides forward in improving access of boys and girls to education at all levels, and in promoting gender equality within the

education system. Yet girl students continue to lag behind in educational achievement and access, particularly at tertiary level, where girls' enrolment, completion and achievement rates are lower (Huggins and Randell, 2008).

After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda's new government made a commitment to strengthen its higher education system as part of its overall development strategies for the country. Unfortunately, government scholarships are limited in number and have had little effect in increasing university access for Rwanda's poor (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Although gender imbalance is a global issue, several studies have been conducted in other parts of the world, and none has put a special emphasis on the socio economic determinants of gender inequality in higher education in rural areas in Rwanda. This study thus endeavours to explore the factors of gender inequality

and their effects on socio economic development of rural households in Rwanda.

Statement of the problem

Higher education is a key factor in a nation's effort to develop a highly skilled workforce to compete favorably in the global economy. There are important private and public benefits to participating in higher education. Higher salaries, better employment opportunities, increased savings, and upward mobility are some of the private economic benefits obtained by taking part in higher education. High education levels and social integration significantly improve the productivity of all members of the household and improve equity throughout society. A higher education graduate also obtains non-economic benefits including a better quality of life, improved health and greater opportunities for the future (United Nations Summit, 2010).

Rwanda in general faces real challenges in relation to the gender inequality in higher education. It is appreciable that boys and girls almost have equal access to enrolment in primary schools and the government of Rwanda has invested and made enormous strides forward in improving access of boys and girls to education at all levels and improving gender equality within the education system. However, girl students continue to lag behind in educational achievements and access, particularly at the higher levels where girls' enrolment, completion and achievement rates continue to be lower.

Although the total enrolment rates have been steadily increasing over the past five years, women continue to be under-represented in public institutions of higher education. Gakenke District has a net attendance rates (NAR) in secondary school of 26.5%. According to the Monograph of Gakenke District (2010), 38% of females are pursuing their higher education against 62% of males.

Research questions

On the basis of the issues raised, the present study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the socio economic factors of gender inequality in higher education in rural areas in Rwanda?
2. What are the effects of low level of women education on their living conditions in rural areas in Rwanda?
3. What is the model or a framework for inclusive higher education in rural settings/ areas?

The conceptual framework of this study demonstrates different variables to be discussed in the study. The variables under scrutiny include the independent

variables, dependent variables and intervening/moderating variables.

As shown in the (Figures 1 and 2), the independent variable is socio-economic factors. The socio-economic factors are the causes of gender inequality in higher education which includes poverty, early marriage, culture, education level of parents, domestic and agricultural labour responsibilities, pregnancies, high dropout and repetition rates and aspirations for children.

The consequences will return again to the family and can be characterised by the obstacle to improving health, obstacle to improving nutrition, obstacle to children education, high birth rates and exclusion of women from economic and political opportunities.

Government and local authorities' strategies as well as support by government and non-governmental organisations (Intervening and Moderating Variables) may enable females to participate in decision-making and be able to exploit their full potential in socio-economic and political sphere if they get equal opportunities with males. This study sought to establish whether or not the above conceptual framework applies to issues in higher education in Rwanda and specifically in Gakenke District.

Education as a key for women empowerment

Educating girls is one of the best investments a society can make. An educated woman has the skills, the self-confidence and the information she needs to become a better parent, worker and citizen. Education is central to the achievement of greater equality in society and investing in education of girls has especially powerful benefits not only for civic participation and family health and welfare, but also positive implications for all other measures of development. (Tuyizere, 2007). When women are able to attain more education, this can benefit the family in many ways. Experience shows that when income is in the hands of women, more money and attention flow to areas such as children's education, food and health. Families become more child-focused and oriented to meeting basic needs. Women who complete basic education are able to make use of health facilities and service for their children and had a higher interest in sending their children to school (Dighe, 1998). The close relationship between a woman's level of educational attainment and higher wage levels is expected to continue in many jobs. A lack of educational qualifications is a key obstacle for women's welfare who need greater educational opportunity if they are to acquire meaningful work (Gwyn and Okazawa, 2001).

Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them. Worldwide, women are agents of change and they are more likely than men to want to put their education to use by helping their families and communities. According to Geeta, (2002), education of women improves child

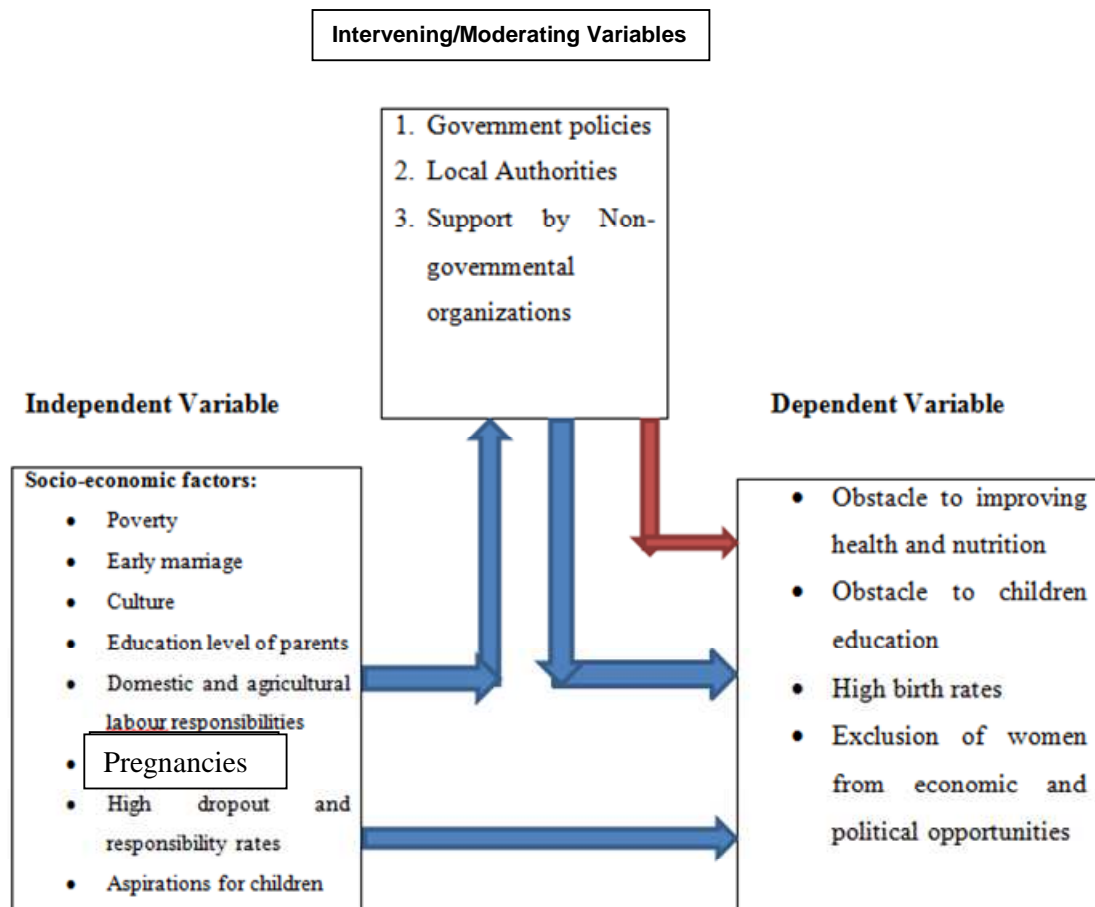


Figure1. Conceptual framework. Source: Developed by the Researcher.

health because of educated mothers' greater knowledge of the importance of hygiene and of simple remedies.

Factors affecting women's access to higher education

The major constraints include inadequate qualified female candidates to join higher institutions. This is due to lower enrolment, higher dropout rates and poor performance of girls at primary and secondary levels of education which result in only a small pool of female secondary school completers.

The 1993 Women in higher education Management study conducted by UNESCO and the Common Wealth Secretariat reveals that critical barriers to women participating in the decision-making arena are lack of access to higher education, the stress of dual family and professional roles, family attitudes and cultural stereotyping. From the economic point of view, many parents consider women's education as a waste of funds. Such parents believe that money spent on a girl's education is a waste since she will soon marry into her

husband's family thus leaving only boys in their original family to cater for their parents.

According to Geeta, (2002), there are many reasons why women's education seriously lags behind men's education particularly in developing countries. The most commonly cited is that in certain societies many parents continue to envisage a strict gender division of labour. If for most of her adult life a daughter will be a housewife, it seems pointless to educate her. In some countries, societal norms such as early marriage or the dowry system militate against girls' education. But most importantly, when people live on low incomes as in rural areas of all developing countries, it is the mismatch between the costs and benefits of girls' schooling that causes the gender gap in education to persist.

Effects of gender inequality in education on socio-economic development

Low levels of female school enrolment in developing countries have significantly lower levels of economic productivity, lower fertility and higher infant and maternal

mortality. Not providing girls with a proper education have negative returns to society overall as well as to the economy specifically because education gives girls the skills, opportunities and self-confidence they need to become active contributors to their nation's development, illiteracy in women is an obstacle for improving health, nutrition and education in the family and empowering women to participate in decision-making in society (Tuyizere, 2007).

The girls and rural women farmers cannot require specialised services because of the lack of education. Gender disparities impede economic growth, hamper poverty reduction and adversely affect human well-being. When women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty and the well-being of men, women and children is enhanced (Lips, 2000). The researcher therefore wanted to establish whether what the scholars put forward in the reviewed literature are a true reflection of what is going on practically in Rwanda.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection methods

Data was collected with the help of questionnaire and interview, observation and focus group discussion methods. For sampling, 497 respondents were selected as samples from four sectors: Cyabingo, Kivuruga, Gakenke and Nemba from Gakenke District had been selected based on purposive method. One Secondary and one primary school were randomly chosen from each sector and all teachers and head teachers from those selected schools were given questionnaire.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the study were analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). For qualitative data, the researcher used a thematic approach. Thematic analysis is a search of themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN RWANDA

Poverty as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

The results of the research show that 66.4% of respondents agreed that poverty contributes to gender

inequality in higher education in Gakenke District. Due to insufficient financial means of many people, women and girls do not access to high level of education. For the couple of respondents who have not yet completed their studies, the priority is given to the man due to the position that he has in the family when economic means are not sufficient.

In Gakenke District, household poverty leads some families not to meet school related costs for instance uniforms, school fees and other related scholastic materials. Sometimes, girls leave school to earn money. In addition, household poverty sometimes drives girls to prostitution so as to get money to meet their needs.

Early marriage as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

During this research, 73.7% of respondents agreed that early marriage is a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District. The respondents stated marriage as an obstacle that hinders girls or women from continuing in secondary or tertiary education. They said that after marriage, it is difficult for a woman to continue with her studies especially when her husband does not agree. Moreover, when a woman gets many children before she finishes her studies, it is difficult for her to leave all those children in order to continue her studies.

Culture and religion as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

In Gakenke District, the findings show that 60.6% agreed that culture has an impact on gender inequality in higher education.

The socio-cultural factors are mainly based on the sexual division of roles in the society. More valued tasks and responsibilities are attributed to male. Females are considered as weak people in all spheres. They are discouraged from doing some activities said inappropriate to females including moving to higher education.

According to Jerry, (1996), in Muslim societies the requirement that girls and boys attend separate schools may reduce the access for girls; they also have the same-sex teachers, which reduce job opportunities available to women.

The study findings are also in agreement with the findings from Maluwa-Banda, (2003) which indicate that the major reasons why students drop-out of secondary schools are pregnancy, discipline, lack of school fees and other reasons.

The findings are in line with the results found by Joy (2002), in a research carried out in Uganda where societal barriers, cultural and religious challenges impede women's full and equitable attainment of higher education.

Low level of parents' education as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

The results of the findings show that 57.7% of respondents agreed with the statement that the level of parents' education has an impact on gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District.

The findings revealed that illiteracy of parents is a factor of paramount importance because when parents are illiterate or have a low level of education, they do not understand easily the importance of sending a girl to school.

Thus, they do not perceive the importance of education appropriately. Children whose parents have a higher level of education are more likely to have a home that fosters educational advancement.

Even if parents are not communicating with their children, the latter can see from their surroundings that education is important and so they ambitiously strive to complete their studies.

In a study on rural attitudes towards female education, Mensah, (1992) notes that a correlation was made between the level of education and attitudes towards girls' education.

It was found out that parents with little or no education failed to appreciate the importance of schooling. Therefore, if the parents are illiterate or have a low level of education, they cannot understand the importance of sending their children to school.

Early pregnancies as a factor of gender inequality in higher education

In Gakenke District, early pregnancy was reported as one of the factors which prevent girls and women from continuing their studies. According to the respondents, 64.2% agreed that early pregnancies affect gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District in two ways; first, they are sometimes asked to leave school or expelled especially in religious founded schools; second, they have to get married early afterwards because otherwise the community will discriminate against them.

Domestic and agricultural labour responsibilities as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

In this study, 59.1% of respondents agreed that domestic and agriculture labour responsibilities are a big factor of gender inequality in higher education in Rwanda. These results are in line with those from other researches where they state that girls have too many tasks at home. According to Celikten,(2005), the major barrier to women's advancement refers to the family responsibilities that the majority of women in developing countries hold.

Aspirations for children as a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District

This research shows that 54.5% of respondents agreed with the opinion that aspirations for children are a factor of gender inequality in higher education in Gakenke District. Children's aspirations have been identified as the underlying factor of gender differences in education; where female children seem to be less ambitious with education and focus more on marriage, therefore their number in higher education is reduced as long as the age of marriage coincides with the age of higher education. In fact, women who get married before they accomplished their studies usually discontinue altogether especially when they give birth to many children, the later become a challenge to them to pursue their education. On the other hand male children's aspirations are for further higher education.

THE EFFECTS OF LOW LEVELS OF WOMEN EDUCATION ON THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

Lower level of women education, an obstacle to good health and nutrition

From this study, 64.2% of participants agreed that lower level of women education is an obstacle for improving health and nutrition. One of the reasons they gave is that all the problems relating to the lack of cleanness are found in households of illiterate women.

They do not know whether a person must wash his body every day that he must wear washed clothes and that all materials in the house must be cleaned every time, that food has to be well prepared and many others. So, when everything in a house is dirty, this brings about different diseases that can cause even death especially for children.

Illiterate women do not seek medical care, do not ensure that their children are immunised, they are not informed about their children's nutritional requirements and they do not adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their infants and children have lower survival rates and are not healthier and better nourished.

High birth rates as an affect of lower level of Women education

The results of this study show that 65.7% of the participants agreed that high birth rates is an effect of lower level of women education in Gakenke District. The respondents stated that women with low level of education are the ones who do not comply with the family planning policy. To them, God gives children, and brings them up. Besides, the more children you have, the richer you become, yet, when there are many children in a household with limited resources, it is very difficult to

nourish, educate and clothe them. It is, therefore, easy to sensitise educated women about family planning than uneducated women.

Illiterate women are ignorant on reproductive health; the consequence will be to have many children who become a burden to the family. According to one of the respondents, *“Girls or women without any level of education, do not know to use reliable family planning methods, they get married while they are still young, they do not delay marriage and child bearing, as women with formal education”*.

Limited access of women to economic and political opportunities

According to the findings, 65% of participants agreed that lower level of women education excludes women from economic and political opportunities. Educated girls have better opportunities to earn higher wages, participate in community life and decision making. Increases in girls' higher education enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labour force and their contributions to household and national income. In case women differently access to education compared to their fellow men, their involvement in the country's economy is limited even excluded. In addition, when girls and women have a low level of education, they do not feel comfortable to participate in decision making.

In a study carried out by Nyiransabimana, (2008) in Nyakiriba Sector in Rubavu district, the results showed that an uneducated women are always afraid of expressing their ideas in a public, even if it is a good idea. Thus, it is difficult for them to participate in decision-making when they dare not to give their point of view on a given problem. One of the respondents from Gakenke District explained, *“The lack of educational qualifications is an obstacle for women to participate in decision making. Rwandan government stimulates girls and women to participate in decision making. Policies and legislation put in place by the government state that in all decision making place, women and girl should be represented by at least 30%. Unfortunately, illiterate girls and women cannot benefit from leadership positions”*

The respondents explained that when a woman has a low level of education, she cannot get any well-paying job. Therefore, it is very difficult for her to improve the living conditions of her household. Even if she is a farmer, she cannot master the modern technologies of agriculture. One of the respondents from Gakenke District added: *“Due to the lack of formal education, everything I do, I do it in traditional way which means in a bad way: cooking, farming activities and the result is always not good”*

Lower level of education of children as an effect of lower level of women Education in their Livelihoods

The results from the study show that 70.1% of the respondents agreed that lower level of education of

children is an effect of lower level of women education in their livelihoods in Gakenke District. In fact, the first and most important agents of socialisation are the people who care for infants who are usually also the biological parents. Parents have a great potential power because from them children acquire a self-identity and the physical, mental and social skills needed for survival in society.

Lower level of education of women has really negative effects on children's education. Clearly speaking, uneducated women fail to send their children to school since they are not aware of the importance of education.

An all inclusive model of education

In relation to the findings of this research, the researcher came up with a model framework, as a contribution to the knowledge gap identified through analysis and interpretation of the research findings. In order to enable all categories of Rwandan to have access to education system especially girls and women, an all-inclusive education has to be established at all levels. The model has a great significance in promoting gender equality in higher education. All inclusive education will be based on:

- (a) Free primary education
- (b) Free secondary education
- (c) Free higher education
- (d) Compulsory basic education

This proposed contribution has immediate, relevant and practical applicability. It is envisaged that the above all inclusive model of education if applied in Rwanda will solve the problem of gender inequality in higher education in Rwanda. Therefore, this all inclusive model of education intends to remove all barriers to access education so that right from primary school, secondary school and up to higher education all categories, males and females, will have equal and unlimited access to education.

Conclusions

The study on the socio-economic determinants of gender inequality in higher education in Rwanda conducted in Gakenke District identified and analysed the main causes of gender inequality in higher education; and ascertained its effects on socio-economic welfare of rural households in that district. The study revealed that there is gender inequality in higher education because from primary to tertiary education, passing by Secondary education, there are many factors that impede girls and women to continue with higher education. These include poverty, early marriage, culture, education level of parents, domestic and agricultural labour responsibilities, pregnancies and aspirations for children. The findings showed that the problem of gender inequality in higher

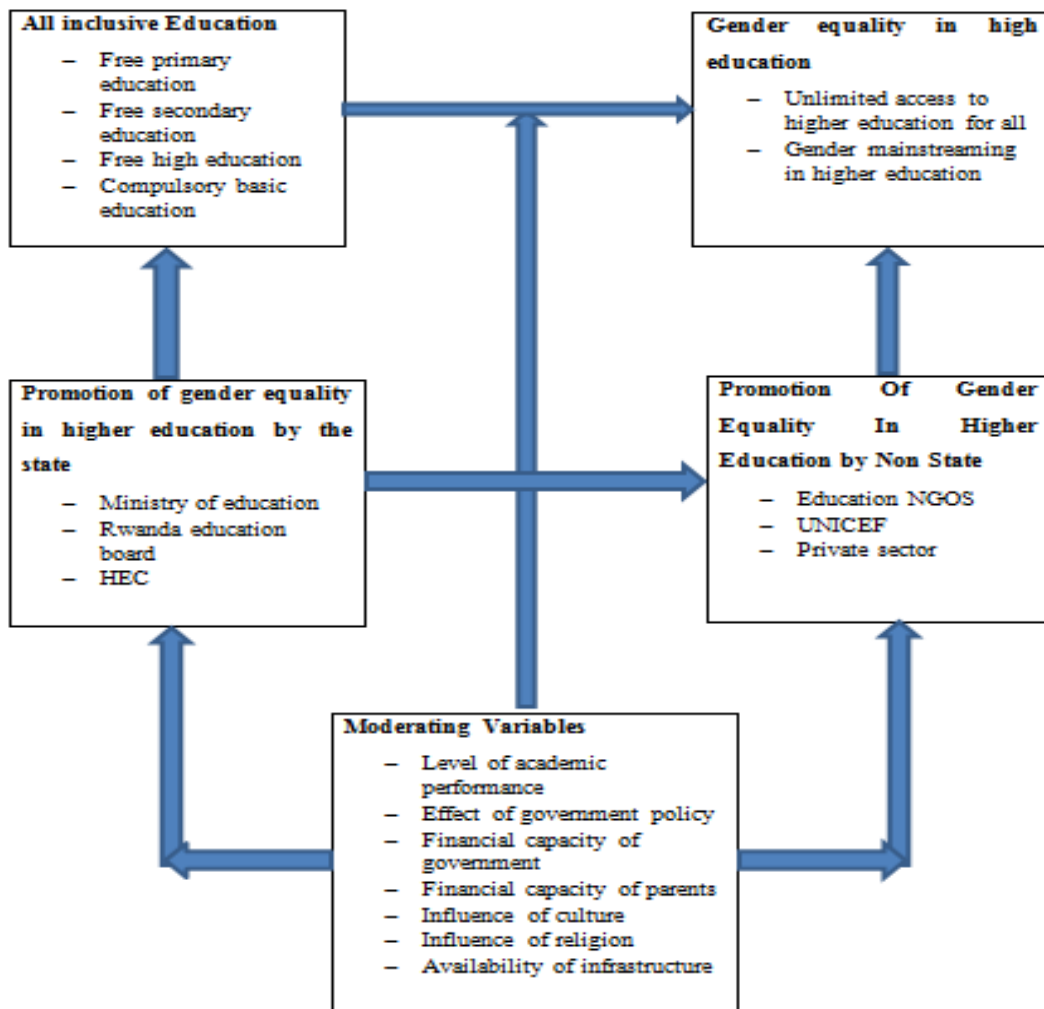


Figure 2. Model framework to ensure gender equality in higher education. Source: Developed by the Researcher.

education has negative impact on socio-economic welfare of rural households among them obstacle to improving health, exclusion of women from economic and political opportunities, obstacle to improving nutrition, high birth rates; and low level of children education.

Recommendations

This research concludes by outlining some strategic recommendations for those involved in education system in Rwanda in general and in Gakenke District in particular:

Increase the number of higher learning institutions

The findings revealed that many institutions of higher learning are mainly based in towns. The researcher, therefore, recommends that the number of higher

learning institutions should be increased and expanded in rural areas by both government and private sector.

Provide scholarships for girls and women to enable them access to higher education

The study finding revealed that some of girls do not go to public universities due to poverty. Therefore, it is recommended to the ministry of education to find them scholarship so that they can go in public universities.

Reinforce affirmative action measures targeted at ensuring gender equality

The research has proved that girl students continue to lag behind in educational achievement and access,

particularly at higher education, where girls' enrolment, completion and achievement rates are lower. Therefore, affirmative action measures should be envisaged to fast track gender equality in higher education. The measures to be taken may include girl specific entry requirements to higher education.

Ensure equal access of girls and young women to all levels of education

The Government through the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion has to take the primary responsibility to ensure equal access of girls and young women to all levels of education, overcome traditional attitudes preventing women and girls from enjoying of their right to education, and implement re-entry policies enabling young women to return to school after pregnancy.

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