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Policy brief

Expanding entrepreneurship and employability opportunities for female students in African universities

Policy actions for development partners

May 2025

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Background

Development partners have played a significant role in supporting African governments to expand and strengthen higher education systems. Their contributions deal with longstanding and emerging challenges in the sector across several African countries.

This policy brief draws on findings from a study commissioned by the British Council and conducted by the African Network for Internationalization of Education. This study explored barriers facing female students in African universities in accessing entrepreneurship and employability opportunities. It focused on universities in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, providing insights into gender disparities in access, participation and achievements.

The study finds that female students still face myriad challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education and further hurdles in accessing entrepreneurship and employability opportunities. Women continue to experience gender-based stereotypes and biases that affect their access to education and academic progression. Financial constraints are a major problem for women, especially those from low-income families. Cultural norms, early marriages and the preference for educating boys over girls can prevent women from pursuing higher education. While there is evidence of progress at various levels, including the institutional level, these efforts remain sufficient. Although national and institutional policies exist, weak enforcement, socio-cultural norms and inadequate support systems hinder their effectiveness within universities.

Development partners play a crucial role in bridging these gaps with targeted interventions aimed at making higher education more inclusive, particularly for women and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their contributions also strengthen effective leadership, transparency, accountability and resource management, all of which improve the overall functioning of higher education institutions. Some development partners enable collaborations between universities and the private sector, which helps align academic training with industry needs and promotes employability and entrepreneurship. Some partners also provide funding or create internship and employment opportunities for graduates.

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Policy problem

Achieving gender equity in higher education is a global priority that requires strong collaboration between universities, governments and development partners. Persistent gender disparities limit women's contributions to entrepreneurship and the labour market. Bridging these gaps requires comprehensive policy actions supported by development agencies, international organisations and donor institutions with strategic investments, knowledge sharing and advocacy.

Development partners often work alongside African governments and higher education institutions to help shape education policies that align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and deal with the specific needs of the continent. They also advocate for reforms in higher education that foster inclusion, equity and access for marginalised groups.

Nearly all the universities in the study have developed international partnerships and collaborations with institutions in other world regions. These partnerships are supported by various development partners, several of which are undertaking transformative initiatives within these institutions, including:

- the British Council's Innovation for African Universities project, which aims to foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in several African universities
- Women in STEM programme in Ghana, supported by the Korea International Cooperation Agency
- Nnamdi Azikiwe University's programmes in Nigeria
- the Work Integrated Learning programmes in South Africa
- several initiatives in Kenya highlighted in the study's synthesis report.

These examples clearly indicate that development partners have a significant role to play in augmenting government efforts to support higher education and expand opportunities for female students. It is therefore imperative that development partners prioritise support for women, especially female students, in areas such as employability and entrepreneurship opportunities. In some countries, gender equality in higher education remains a low policy priority, resulting in the underrepresentation of women in universities and leadership roles. Even when policies exist, weak implementation undermines progress.

Important findings from the study

Challenges and barriers

- Gender-based discrimination: Female students experience sexual harassment, bribery and exclusion from leadership roles.
- Weak implementation of gender policies: Many universities have gender policies, but enforcement mechanisms remain weak.
- Limited financial support: Women entrepreneurs face significant barriers in accessing startup capital and financial services.
- Cultural barriers: Deep-rooted societal norms limit women's participation in STEM fields and entrepreneurship.
- Graduate unemployment: Female graduates face higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts.
- Weak university–industry links: Limited collaboration between universities and industry restricts job placement and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Lack of gender-sensitive support systems: Most universities do not provide targeted support services for female students, such as daycare, flexible learning schedules or mentorship programmes.
- Slow curriculum reforms: University curricula have not evolved to match the demands of the digital economy and changing job market trends.

Policy recommendations for development partners

The introductory section acknowledges the challenges that most African countries face, particularly in providing financial support to their higher education sectors. These constraints exacerbate challenges in various areas within institutions. As outlined above, development partners have a role to play in supporting governments to bridge these gaps. This is therefore a call to action for development partners to prioritise efforts to support women's access to higher education, employability and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Below are areas where development partners can direct their policies and strategic interventions.

1. Strengthen funding and investment in gender equity programmes

- Expand funding for entrepreneurship training and incubation programmes for female students.
- Support universities in establishing gender-sensitive microfinance initiatives.
- Provide seed funding and grants to encourage female-led startups and innovations.

2. Support institutional capacity building for gender mainstreaming

- Assist universities in developing robust gender policies and implementation frameworks.
- Fund training programmes for faculty and university leaders on gender-responsive pedagogy.
- Help institutional audits to assess gender gaps and areas for policy improvement.

3. Foster university–industry partnerships and job market links

- Support internship and mentorship programmes connecting female students with industry professionals.
- Encourage university–industry collaborations to increase employment opportunities.
- Provide funding for joint university–industry research projects focusing on gender inclusion.

4. Improve digital inclusion and technology-driven opportunities

- Support investments in information and communication technology infrastructure and digital learning platforms.
- Fund digital literacy training programmes for female students to boost employability.
- Promote online networking and mentorship programmes to foster cross-border collaborations.

5. Deal with socio-cultural barriers with awareness and advocacy

- Support awareness campaigns that challenge gender norms in higher education and employment.
- Collaborate with community organisations to sensitise families and local leaders on the benefits of women's education and entrepreneurship.
- Advocate for policy reforms at national and institutional levels to improve gender equity.

6. Establish monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems

- Develop gender-responsive MEL frameworks to assess progress in gender equity initiatives.
- Support universities in conducting regular impact assessments of gender policies and programmes.
- Promote knowledge sharing platforms to disseminate best practices and success stories.

Implementation strategy for development partners

Development agency actions

- Align funding priorities with gender equity goals in higher education.
- Develop long-term partnerships with universities and research institutions.
- Support evidence-based policymaking by funding gender-related studies.

International organisation actions

- Enable cross-border collaboration and learning exchanges.
- Provide technical assistance for gender policy development and implementation.
- Advocate for regional and global commitments to gender equity in education.

Donor and philanthropy actions

- Invest in sustainable gender initiatives beyond short-term projects.
- Encourage private sector contributions to gender-focused university programmes.
- Support multi-stakeholder discussions on gender and higher education.

Conclusion

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Development partners play a vital role in closing gender gaps in higher education and fostering a more inclusive entrepreneurial and employment landscape for women. By supporting funding, policy development, institutional strengthening and advocacy, international agencies and donor institutions can drive long-lasting change.

With targeted investments, capacity building, skills development and collaborative action, development partners can help universities in Sub-Saharan Africa create gender-equitable, digitally inclusive and economically strengthened higher education environments that enable female students to thrive in entrepreneurship and the labour market.