

## Policy brief

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# Improving gender equity in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa:

Accessing opportunities for entrepreneurship and employability

May 2025

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# Accessing opportunities for entrepreneurship and employability

# Introduction

Women in higher education across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continue to face significant barriers in accessing entrepreneurship and employability opportunities (Okeke, 2022). The higher education sector in SSA has witnessed several developments and transformations over the past few years. Despite some progress being made, women in the sector still face serious, persistent challenges. They also face further barriers in accessing employment opportunities. Although entrepreneurship has been recognised as a way of solving the challenge of unemployment, female students face additional barriers in accessing entrepreneurship opportunities.

This policy brief is based on a study that examined the challenges facing female students at universities in SSA. The study undertook a contextualised analysis of the main challenges and barriers faced by students – especially female students – in accessing entrepreneurship and employability opportunities, with specific focus on universities in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.

The study adopted a multimethod and intersectional approach, due to the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by female students in their institutions and the growing complexities of contemporary society in general. It was built on the Accountability for Gender Equality in Education framework, which has previously proved useful for such studies. The study brings out the myriad and persistent challenges encountered by female students in SSA universities and how these affect their pursuit of entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. Unemployment is now one of the main challenges for people in higher education systems, to the point that it is almost becoming a crisis. While entrepreneurship has been considered as a way of responding to rising unemployment, it also brings several drawbacks – especially for women.

# Principal findings

## The central findings of the study are:

- **Gender-based discrimination:** Female students experience various forms of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and exclusion from leadership roles and opportunities, including employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Weak implementation of gender policies:** While most of the countries and universities have put gender policies in place, implementation and enforcement remain weak. There are also low levels of awareness of these policies, especially among students who should be the main beneficiaries. There is thus a discernible disconnect between policy and practice.
- **Limited financial support:** Women entrepreneurs face significant barriers in accessing start-up capital and financial services. There are limited opportunities for female students to access financial support, especially start-up funds to help them engage in entrepreneurship activities. Generally, within the higher education institutions, female students face varied challenges due to their financial backgrounds, as well as challenges in accessing financing.
- **Societal norms and cultural barriers:** In nearly all the countries, deep-seated societal norms, cultural practices and stereotypes stifle women's participation in employability and entrepreneurship. These also manifest as barriers to women in accessing study opportunities, especially in STEM disciplines.
- **Graduate unemployment is becoming a crisis:** While unemployment is rising in all the study countries, female graduates face higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts, leading to an employability crisis. This needs to be remedied urgently, for example by strengthening entrepreneurship training and opportunities. All countries indicate an increasingly competitive job market with structural barriers that prevent women from fully flourishing in the world of work.
- **Weak university–industry links:** Limited collaboration between universities and industry restricts job placement and entrepreneurship opportunities. Just a handful of universities have mutually beneficial engagements with the industry and private sector, with this being particularly rare for South African universities. This creates difficulties for students, especially women, in accessing skills and opportunities from industry work during their training.
- **Lack of gender-sensitive support systems:** Most universities do not provide targeted support services for female students, such as day care, 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. Some of the universities are putting in place entrepreneurship training programmes, which are beginning to have some impact but can still be improved and are not accessible to all students.

# Policy difficulty and rationale

Higher education has a crucial role in developing the human resources needed to deal with the growing challenges facing African societies. The study identifies several barriers that face female students in the African universities and hinder them from fully accessing and benefiting from employability and entrepreneurship opportunities. Solving these problems requires a number of interventions, including policy-oriented interventions. Achieving gender equity in higher education is not only a matter of fairness but also a fundamental driver of economic and social development, because persistent gender disparities stop women contributing significantly to entrepreneurship and the labour market.

Removing these barriers will require comprehensive policy actions at national and institutional levels, alongside collaborative efforts with the private sector and development partners. Various stakeholders need to be actively involved, from governments and other significant societal actors, the universities themselves, and industry, to the private sector, development partners and parents of students. Based on the results of the study, this policy brief makes the following policy recommendations.

# Policy recommendations

## Strengthen entrepreneurship and employability training

- Integrate entrepreneurship education across disciplines, with a focus on female students.
- Develop business incubation centres to support student start-ups and innovations.
- Strengthen mentorship programmes that connect female students with successful entrepreneurs.
- Provide practical training in business planning, financial management and market strategies.

## Improve national and institutional gender policies

- Enforce existing gender policies and establish mechanisms for accountability.
- Implement affirmative action measures in student admissions and faculty recruitment.
- Develop robust monitoring systems to track the progress of gender-sensitive initiatives.
- Mandate anti-harassment policies with clear reporting and redress mechanisms.

## Increase financial access and support for female entrepreneurs

- Establish university-led microfinance initiatives targeting female students.
- Partner with the private sector to create special funding schemes for women in business.
- Introduce grants and low-interest loans for women-led start-ups.

## Strengthen university–industry collaboration

- Establish internship and apprenticeship programmes for female students in main industries.
- Encourage joint projects between universities and businesses.
- Develop career guidance services tailored to female students' employment needs.

## Tackle socio-cultural barriers and awareness

- Conduct community-based awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes in education and employment.
- Introduce mentorship programmes featuring successful female professionals.
- Promote gender-inclusive networking events to foster peer-to-peer learning.

## Use digitalisation for gender equity

- Expand digital skills training and include female students.
- Increase investment in ICT infrastructure to improve internet access for female students.
- Promote online learning platforms to accommodate flexible education schedules.

## Improve student support services

- Establish gender-responsive support centres offering counselling, career guidance and financial literacy training.
- Develop childcare facilities to support female students with families.
- Implement flexible learning schedules to accommodate female students' diverse needs.

# Implementation strategy

This policy brief is a call to action for the various stakeholders and duty bearers relevant to the principal findings of this study. The proposed implementation strategy for these policy recommendations is multilevel and multistakeholder. It calls for interventions from governments, the higher education institutions themselves, and the private sector, industry and development partners.

## Government actions

- Strengthen regulatory frameworks to ensure gender policies are enforced.
- Increase funding for gender-focused programmes in higher education.
- Align gender-sensitive entrepreneurship policies with national economic strategies.

## University actions

- Establish dedicated gender offices and support units to coordinate and oversee policy implementation.
- Strengthen university–industry partnerships for job placements and mentorship programmes.
- Revise curricula to integrate entrepreneurship, financial literacy and digital skills.

## Private sector and development partner actions

- Develop corporate social responsibility initiatives that fund female entrepreneurs.
- Provide business mentorship and internship opportunities for female graduates.
- Support research on gender disparities and interventions in higher education.

# Conclusion

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A comprehensive and multistakeholder approach is needed to bridge gender gaps in higher education, entrepreneurship and employability. Governments, universities, private sector actors and development partners must collaborate to ensure effective implementation of policies and mechanisms that support female students.

By dealing with systemic barriers and leveraging digital innovation, policy reform and financial support, SSA countries can create inclusive, gender-equitable and economically vibrant higher education and employment ecosystems.

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