FORMULATING INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND MECHANISMS FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN SYRIA: WORKING PAPER FOR NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This research examines the formulation of national policy paper in the scope of gender equality at higher education sector in Syria. The research produces a situation analysis of female academics' environment, representation and needs for training examining the justification and importance of introduction of Gender Equality education. The paper examines a private higher education institution investigating the higher education environment in Syria highlighting the situation after 2011. The methodology applied in diagnosing the situation, is based on an Erasmus + Capacity building in Higher Education project, namely FREE Project. The methodology employs the design of questionnaire survey administered at the research target groups. A one-way translation from English to Arabic is performed by AIU and verified by experts. The sample design employs nonprobability sampling techniques. The size of the sample is 47 observations for academics. The findings of the analysis are reported across individual, group, and institutional levels, examining the project target groups. The finding of the situation analysis leads to the identification and formulation of dimensions for gender equality in the scope of higher education at Syria. The first dimension of this national policy paper is associated with the lack of Gender Knowledge in Education and Research in Syria. The second dimension reflects the need to revise Gender Equality policies in Employment and HR Practices. The recommendations of the national policy brief indicate strong need to introduce the concept of gender equality in teaching and research and promote, where appropriate, inclusion in the curricula. The national policy brief also recommends policy reforms related to employment and HR practices to ensure equality, equity between men and women.

Key words: gender equality, institutional policy, education sector.

Introduction

To succeed in today's new paradigm of academic learning and research environment, higher education institutions need sustainable leadership in academic environment that can transcend time, place, geography, race, and above all gender. Prior academic research indicates that there is requirement for a greater number of female academics in the Middle East and South Mediterranean region. Challenges associated with social, cultural, economic and gender issues are evident factors that could impair female academics from taking leadership roles in academic environment. On the other hand, information overload, technological advancement and connectivity, battle for analytical and research competencies and increasing ethical dilemmas have been among important factors stimulating the need for female leaders, who acquire effective competencies and that could transcend cultural, geographical, political, racial and national aspects.

Equality is one of the five values on which the European Union has based its foundation on. The EU has put significant and strategies to establish and sustain gender equality which was positively reflected on the social, economic, political and other important aspects of European society. Gender inequality as a phenomenon under examination reflects negatively on the human, social, economic and political aspects of a society. Establishing economic independence across both men and women has a positive impact on the economy and will result in better utilization of human capital in a given nation. Gender gap exists in different sectors where women are found to be overrepresented in lower paid sectors and underrepresented in senior management levels and decision-making positions

Generally, the topic of gender equality is significant because gender gap has 50 % impact on total population. The rationale and significance of the gender equality is that if 50 % of human beings are not contributing effectively to different social, economic, professional and political aspects of life, then

this society is not fully or effectively employing or achieving its full potential. The Middle East and North Africa region is no exception to this approach.

The global gender gap index is measured in four dimensions: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health, survival and political empowerment. Economic participation sub index, which is a significant indicator in the scope of this project, is defined in three main approaches: the participation gap, the remuneration gap and the advancement gap. In addition, education attainment is sub index indicator with a crucial significance for project FREE. Educational attainment is measured in by examining the gap men and women access to education through ratios of female to male in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, as well as female versus male literacy rates.

The prevalent organizational environment of Higher Education industry in the Middle eastern region is generally considered as male dominated paradigm which is characterized by (1) deficiency in the development of a sustainable development training programs for its human academic resources particularly in the scope of female executive leadership, (2) lack of career support and counselling centres for female academics and students subject to different forms of discrimination at Higher Education institutions; (3) lack of integration of gender issues at courses and curricula levels; (4) and lack of strategic emphasis and investment in development of scientific research centres in the scope of gender equality and female empowerment.

Higher Education Environment in Syria

Universities at Syria definitely need the knowledge and expertise of social and technical innovation skills to create a sustainable future for Syria. Before 2011 Higher Education sector was expanding as the introduction of private universities in Syria through a legislation which was applied in 2001 allowed the operation of Syrian private HEIs. Before the devastating war in Syria and between 2001 and 2010 private universities in Syria were growing gradually and were competing to win and recruit students primarily undergraduates. At 2011 a long-term crisis has torn Syria over the past eight years, which has created a devastating situation on a social, economic, environmental and political levels including both private and public sectors. Higher education is still operating; however, it has gone through significant declination and worsening through the past eight years of struggle and devastation. Many people in Syria either lost their jobs, their assets and properties or in the worst cases their lives. The devastating situation drove many individuals including students and academics to leave Syria seeking safer and better living conditions. Currently and after 8 years of war, destruction and devastation on human, social, economic and environmental levels the subject of equality and sustainable development is even more vital than previously, considering the economic background and context which characterizes Syria, particularly reflecting on the social and economic environment. Before 2011 Syrian Higher Education was going through a development phase, characterised by modernising teaching and research environments and knowledge transfer, accreditation with international and mainly EU partners. After 2011 and during the past eight years Syrian Higher Education is characterised with different challenges associated with its infrastructure, operational, human, technical, intellectual and social levels (Dalati & Alchach, 2018). Currently, the economic and political environment in Syria became more complicated particularly after the global pandemic and its effect on Syria in different aspects including the higher education infrastructure (Rouh, Dalati, and Al Bich 2021).

Methodology

The methodology section encompasses the sampling design and the questionnaire design. The following sections clarify the main methodology factors related to sampling design, strategy and size, and to data collection design. It is critical to clarify that this research is part of an Erasmus + project which is dedicated to Capacity building in Higher Education, Namely FREE project (https://freeproject.eu/). The sample unit of analysis comprises of academic staff. The sample strategy a non-probability sampling

approach. A quota sampling is applied to improve representativeness (Cooper, D. and Schindler, 2014). A proposed quota sampling strategy, has divided the sample into different subgroups indicating 9 faculties operating at a private university in Syria. The size of the sample in this current study is 47 academics Figure 1 illustrates sampling design and size. Data was collected between June - July 2019. Research unit of analyses is based on academic staff at private university in Syria. The first model questionnaire is for academics. This prototype will be oriented for academic staff. The questions will be customized taking into consideration the field of expertise, research and teaching, as well as training needs for this category. The academics prototype questionnaire is designed addressing the individual, professional, group, and institutional characteristics, as well as training needs of this target group. The questions are customized taking into consideration the characteristics of this target group. The questions are customized taking into consideration the field of expertise, knowledge and strategic scope of this target group, as well as training needs for this category.

Analysis and Findings

Academics are teaching and research staff, who are associated with developing research in the scope of gender equality, equity and curriculum development. Academic staff analysis is examined on different levels, including demographical, individual, group, professional and institutional levels.

Demographic profile

The demographic profile comprises academic staff members from all faculties, providing data about age, gender, educational level, position, and work experience. At faculty level, 31.9% of respondents are from the business administration, 12.8% from pharmacy, 17% from information technology, 12.8 % from architecture, 6.4 % from languages' department, 10.6% from the Fine Arts, and finally 8.5 % from the University Requirements. The majority of respondents (34%) were between 40 -50, and 17% was equal between respondents who are less than 30 and those between 30 and under 40. 19.1% goes to age group 50 and 60, whereas the least goes to 60-70 age group, with 4.3%, a and 8.5% goes to age group 70 and above. Females account for 53.2 %, compared to 44.7% males, and 2.1 % who prefer not to say. 97.7 % of respondents are Syrians, whereas 2.3% have other nationalities. 59.6% of academic staff are PhD holders, 31.9% are holders of Master's degree, while 8.5% are Bachelor holders. 27.7% of respondents are part time staff, whereas 72.3 % are fulltime staff. Respondents' academic levels range between lecturer and professor. Most of them are instructors (42.6%), while 8.5% are professors. 19.1 % of respondents are lecturers, whereas 21.3 % are assistant professor compared to 2.1 % only associate professor. In terms of work experience, 26.1 % of academic staff accompanied the university since its establishment, 10 – 15 years. 43.5 % have work experience between 1-5 years, while 13% have 5-10 years of experience. 8.7% have between 15 years and under 20 years, and 2.2 % have 30 and above years of experience. Table 1 illustrate demographical data analysis for academics.

Table 1. Demographical data – academics (n =47)

Faculty	Frequency	Percent %
Business Administration	15	31.9
Pharmacy	6	12.8
Information Technology	8	17.0
Architecture	6	12.8
Languages	3	6.4
University requirement	4	8.5
Fine Arts	5	10.6
Total	47	100.0
Age Categories	**Frequency**	**Percent %**
less than 30	8	17.0
30 years– under 40 years	8	17.0

40 – under 50	16	34.0
50 – under 60	9	19.1
60- under 70	2	4.3
70 and above	4	8.5
Total	47	100.0
Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent%**
Male	21	44.7
Female	25	53.2
prefer not to answer	1	2.1
Total	47	100.0
Education Level	**Frequency**	**Percent %**
Bachelor	4	8.5
Master	15	31.9
PhD	28	59.6
Total	47	100.0
Academic Level	**Frequency**	**Percent %**
Lecturer	9	19.1
Instructor	20	42.6
Assistant Professor	10	21.3
Associate professor	1	2.1
Professor	4	8.5
Other Academic level	3	6.4
Total	47	100.0

Departmental Level – Curriculum and Research:

Almost half the respondents (47.7%) signified that courses which address gender issues in their departments are provided to a minimum extent, while only 2.3% indicated opposite. 27.3% were not sure, whereas 11.4% said that gender issues are addressed to a good extent and the same percentage indicated to a little extent. Figure 4 illustrates percentages on extent to which Gender Equality is integrated at faculty courses at AIU.
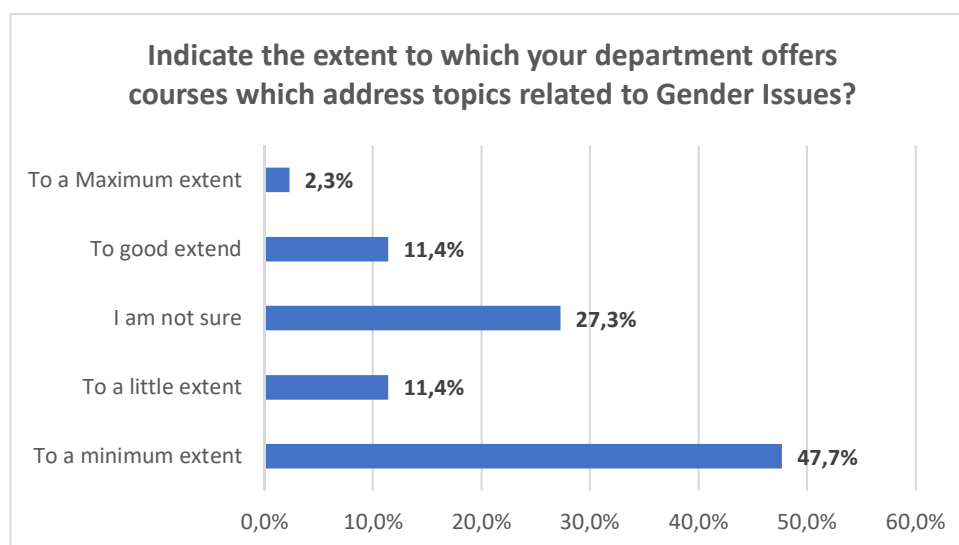

Figure 1. Integration of Gender Equality in faculty courses (Source: FREE Questionnaire Survey)

Source: own study

Descriptive analysis proves that there is little awareness about gender issues since 87% of respondents are not aware of any student's research related to gender issues, compared to only 13%

demonstrating otherwise. Furthermore, 89.4% are not currently doing any research that address gender issues, compared to only 10.6% who are doing so. Figure 5 illustrates percentages on academics performing research in gender issues.
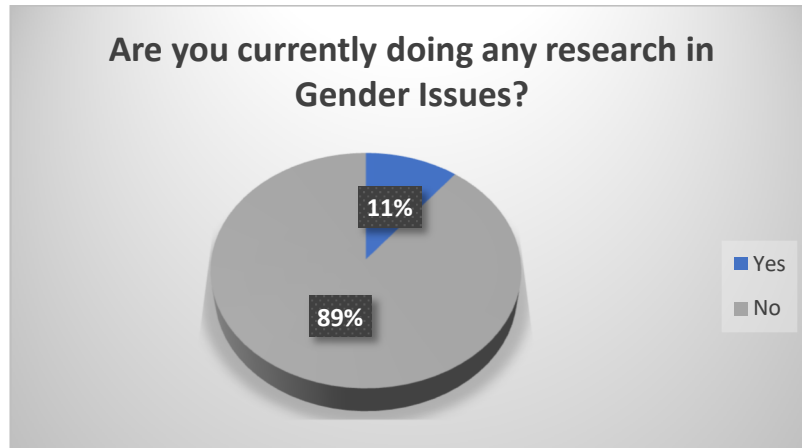
Are you currently doing any research in Gender Issues?

11%

89%

- Yes
- No

Figure 2. Research production in the Gender Issues (Source: FREE Questionnaire Survey)

Source: own study

Institutional Level

Gender inequality – Institution HR practices:

Respondents were asked if a gender quota, based on merit, policy would be good, 58.7% agreed and 41.3% disagreed. 40.4% indicated that positions should be given based on abilities and not only gender. 10.6 % justified that it might be viewed as unfair. 6.4 % said it will not be helpful, and only 4.3 % said it is not necessary. Figure 6 illustrates percentages on introduction of gender quota in higher education.
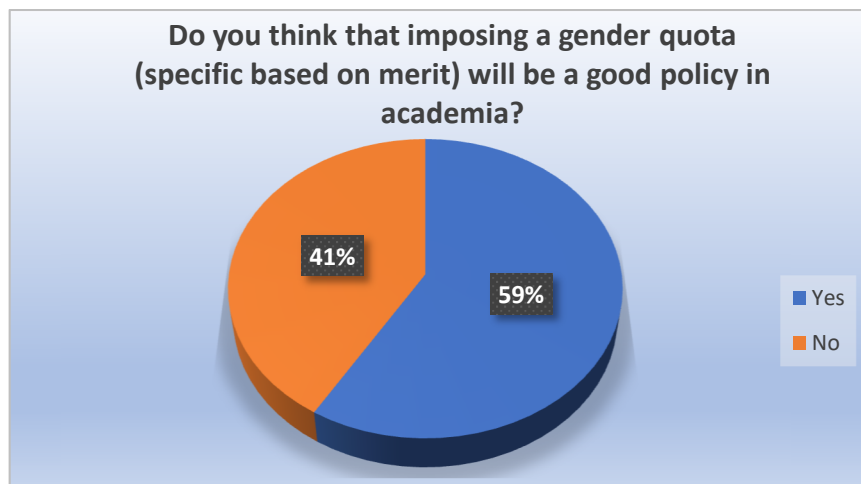
Do you think that imposing a gender quota (specific based on merit) will be a good policy in academia?

41%

59%

- Yes
- No

Figure 3. Gender Quota based on merit (Source : FREE Questionnaire Survey)

Source: own study

Descriptive data analysis generally reflects perceived agreement levels of respondents towards HR practices, where the highest mean score (4.13) goes to equal opportunities for promotion for both men and

women. Whereas, the lowest mean score (3.13) goes to providing training programs for women. This signifies the lack of training programs oriented for women and the critical need for this kind of training. Table 2 illustrates average mean scores and standard deviation on factors associated with HR practices.

Table 2. HR Practices at Institution

HR Practices at Institution	M	SD
1. Training programs for women	3.13	1.23
2. Equal opportunities for promotion for both men and women	4.13	1.08
3. Common recruitment & selection policy which is equal	3.97	1.09
4. Performance appraisal is independent of gender	4.11	.95
5. This university has Gender Equality at workplace	3.72	1.01
6. This university is a women friendly workplace	4.00	.89
7. Equal vacations all employees	4.08	.92
8. Common training and development policy for all.	3.74	.98
9. Fair reward and recognition policy	4.02	.93
10. Women get proper maternity leaves as per the law	4.12	.87
11. Women are allocated the same rewards as men	4.08	.95
12. Women are allocated the punishments as men	4.10	.94
13. Women are given leadership roles	3.91	1.01
14. I feel included in decision-making processes	3.27	1.03

Source: own study

Sexual Harassment, Sexism, and Stereotypes

Generally, descriptive analysis demonstrates higher percentages of respondents who neither experienced nor observed sexual behaviour, ranging from 85.1 % for those who neither experienced nor observed sexual teasing, jokes or remarks, to 91.5 % for those who neither experienced nor observed pressure for sexual favours, or sexual assault. 6.4% experienced sexual teasing, jokes or remarks, with another 6.4% who observed this behaviour, and only 2.1% who experienced and observed this phenomenon, while 85.1% neither observed nor experienced this. 6.4% experienced unwanted physical contact, while 4.3% observed this, while 89.4% neither observed, nor experienced. However, the subject of sexual harassment behaviour is a complex issue as it is differently interpreted across cultures. Moreover, higher percentages indicating neither observed nor experienced can be related to conservative culture of the Middle East. Such topics are perceived as taboos. Table 3 Illustrates descriptive data analysis on sexual harassment at institution for academics.

Table 3. Sexual Harassment at Institution

Sexual Harassment at Institution	Experienced	Observed	Observed and experienced	Neither	Total
Sexual/sexist teasing, jokes, remarks or questions	6.4%	6.4%	2.1%	85.1%	100.0%
Pressure for dating	6.4%	2.1%	2.1%	89.4%	100.0%
Sexual/sexist letters, phone calls, emails	6.4%	0.0%	2.1%	91.5%	100.0%
Leaning over, cornering, pinching, touching, unwanted physical contact	6.4%	4.3%	0.0%	89.4%	100.0%
Pressure for sexual favours	8.5%	0.0%	0.0%	91.5%	100.0%
Stalking	6.4%	4.3%	2.1%	87.2%	100.0%
Physical/sexual assault	6.4%	2.1%	0.0%	91.5%	100.0%

Source: own study

Discussion

Ministry of Education and Science Republic of Poland

Doskonała Nauka

POLI[TECH>NIKA Czestochowa University of Technology

[⟨⌂⟩ Faculty of Management

[KSSiZZL⟩ Department of Applied Sociology and Human Resource Management

The results disclose finding on departmental, group and institutional levels. At a departmental level, results disclose that courses which addresses gender issues are at the very minimum levels. This brings a very interesting and predictable results that gender issues including the subject of gender equality and equity are not addressed adequately at the higher education institution. The results confirm little awareness exists on the subject of gender equality. Moreover, the results reveal minimal levels of gender research being performed in this scope at target institution. This is another finding which requires attention in the scope of developing institutional policies to introduce gender equality in higher education sector.

At the institutional level, results disclose that the introduction of gender quota based on merit would be considered as a good policy to boost female representation at various domains in higher education. However, the results vary across gender, indicating higher level of support by female academics, to the introduction of gender quota within higher education sector. The results disclose Human resources management at the target institution is regarded as a strength where the focus of human capital is evident and significant. The examination of sexual harassment does not reveal significant concern, although the discussion of this topic is sensitive. Alternative methodology would bring deeper insight on the topic, including focus groups or individual in-depth interviews.

Moreover, the results show that female academics at this private HE institution have positive perception and feel empowered as women working in higher education sector. Moreover, the results disclose that training in the scope of self- empowerment and Gender Equality are very significant and crucial for this target group.   Figure 5 illustrate the need Syrian national policy perspective in Higher education sector.
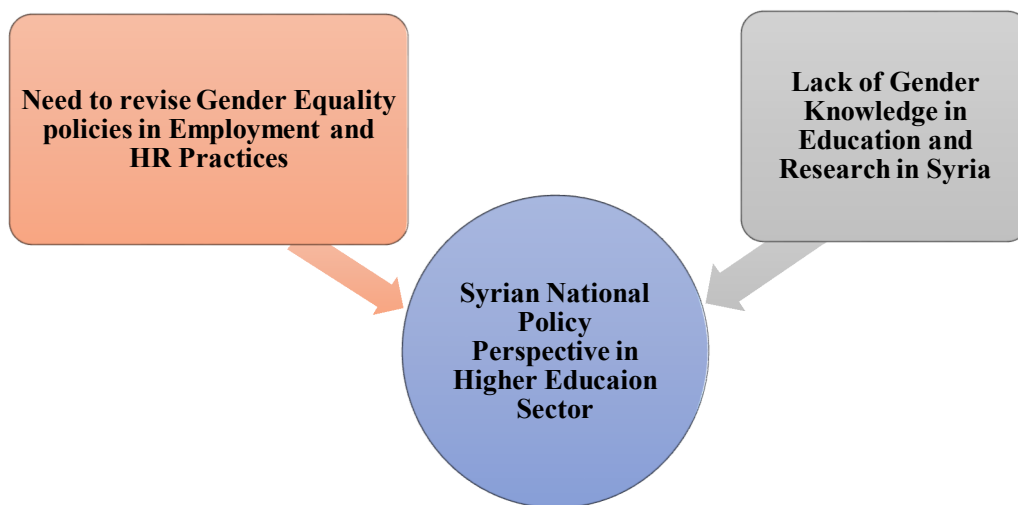

Figure 4. Syrian National Policy Perspective

Source: own study

Conclusion

The national policy paper reflects commitment to the principles of equity and equality in the field of higher education. Effective implementation of this tool will request senior levels of management at university level. Gender equality principles have been created from global and international initiatives, where governments have been dedicated themselves to promoting gender equality and reflecting this initiative in the formulation of national policies, which supports this global goal.

This national policy brief serves as internal guidance tools outlining vision, mission and strategic priorities and processes for infusion of gender equality perspective in the scope of higher education in Syria. The national policy brief should provide blueprint for the implementation and institutionalisation of equality in target higher education institutions.

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