



Mainstreaming The Gender Equality Approach As A Transformative Axis In Angolan Higher Education: The Case Of The Bengo Polytechnic Institute.

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SUMMARY

Gender equality in higher education involves not only eliminating structural barriers and gender-based discrimination, but also promoting inclusive, diverse, and effective educational policies that guarantee equitable and diversity-respecting academic environments. This perspective constitutes a fundamental axis for achieving sustainable development and building a more just, democratic, relevant, and quality society. This article aims to critically analyze the treatment of gender equality mainstreaming in the context of the Bengo Polytechnic Institute in Angola. The research is framed within a qualitative methodology, supported by a documentary review and theoretical analysis of the main conceptualizations of gender and their application in higher education. The results identify structural challenges, institutional gaps, and opportunities for improvement, with the aim of contributing to a more effective, transformative, and sustained implementation of the gender approach in Angolan higher education institutions.

Keywords : higher education, gender equality, equal opportunities, inclusion, educational policies, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education, as a cultural center par excellence and an agent of social transformation, has among its priority functions the training of ethical citizens, committed to their context, and capable of offering solutions in a globalized world characterized by profound socioeconomic changes. These changes have intensified existing inequalities, fostering new forms of vulnerability, social exclusion, and spaces of inequality. This scenario imposes a growing demand for more inclusive, equitable, high-quality, and relevant educational systems (Arango et al., 2022).

Faced with these challenges, higher education must undertake a profound, unprecedented renewal that will allow society—currently immersed in a crisis of values—to transcend purely economic considerations and incorporate moral and spiritual dimensions oriented toward social, cultural, political, artistic and technological transformation (UNESCO, 2009).

In this context, gender issues have occupied a central place on the agendas of multiple international organizations and forums. Initiatives such as the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the World Summit for Social Development (1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and, more recently, the World Education Forum (2015)—which adopted the

Incheon Declaration for Education 2030—have contributed to the advancement of gender equality policies, including their incorporation into education, and in particular, higher education.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proposes a profound transformation toward economic, social, and environmental sustainability, placing human dignity and equality at its core (Hernández & Delgado, 2023a). SDG 4 establishes the commitment to guarantee inclusive, equitable, and quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities. This goal reinforces the strategic role of higher education in building more just and equitable societies (UNESCO, 2015).

Various academic studies and research have highlighted the importance of addressing gender equality in the university setting as a fundamental means of achieving social inclusion with relevance and quality. Authors such as Buquet (2011), Viveros (2019), Silva Laya (2019), García and Hernández (2020), among others, have made significant contributions from a sociocultural perspective, offering both theoretical foundations and practical suggestions. These studies agree on the need to avoid the reproduction of gender stereotypes and inequalities and on the importance of promoting higher education with a gender perspective, especially in the training of professionals committed to social transformation.

In Angola, gender equality in higher education has been incorporated into action plans, programs, and educational projects promoted by the Ministry of Education. While there is institutional recognition of the importance of women's social inclusion and the role of schools as a key agent in promoting equal opportunities, the results in terms of effective policies are still limited. Although there has been an increase in women's access to higher education, female representation persists in areas such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), as well as in positions of power, authority, and high academic status.

At the institutional level, theoretical and methodological constructs on gender are still framed within a traditional view of the human being as a bio-psycho-social entity, and conservative beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions persist, reinforcing heteronormative stereotypes surrounding sexuality, sex, and gender. Consequently, the majority of knowledge transmitters remain men, with a low female presence among faculty and research staff. Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership, management, and decision-making roles.

Furthermore, there is a lack of specific institutional criteria that favor the promotion, development, and success of women in higher education. The integration of gender content into curricula is limited, and teacher training to address these issues is still incipient. These weaknesses were confirmed by the diagnostic study carried out within the framework of the Higher Education Support Program (UNIAO), implemented between the last quarter of

2021 and the first quarter of 2022, as part of a cooperation between the European Union and the Republic of Angola.

This study revealed that the main barriers women face in accessing leadership positions in higher education institutions include: a) lack of confidence in their abilities; b) lack of self-assertion; c) lack of initiative to take on challenges; and d) family responsibilities. At the workplace, these asymmetries are particularly evident in access to positions of greater responsibility and power. Sociocultural factors such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, lack of family support, and low parental expectations also negatively impact female participation in higher education.

These limitations highlight the urgent need to further analyze and implement strategies that allow for a truly mainstreaming of the gender perspective in the Angolan university context. Despite regulatory and institutional advances, there has yet to be a substantial shift in the mindset of the academic community that would foster ownership of the issue and empower university stakeholders to influence their educational and social practices.

In light of this analysis, this article aims to reflect on the approach to gender equality at the Instituto Superior Politécnico do Bengo, Angola, with the aim of identifying the main challenges and actions needed to improve the quality of education. From this perspective, a central question arises for academic debate and educational policymaking:

What is the most appropriate educational model for implementing a gender equality approach in Angolan higher education?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was carried out at the Instituto Superior Politécnico do Bengo, Angola, during the period between November 2024 and March 2025. To address the object of study, a qualitative approach methodology was used, supported by a bibliographic review and the use of theoretical and empirical methods, with the aim of analyzing the current state of gender equality mainstreaming in Angolan higher education.

The theoretical methods used include the analytical-synthetic, inductive-deductive, and systemic approaches. These methods allowed for a rigorous examination of the research problem, facilitating the identification, organization, and systematization of existing knowledge, as well as the construction of a theoretical framework and the interpretation of the collected data.

Regarding empirical methods, techniques such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and direct observation were applied. These tools enabled the initial diagnosis of the problem in the institutional

context, providing relevant information on perceptions, practices, and conditions related to gender equality in the university setting.

The bibliographic review constituted the fundamental methodological basis of the study, allowing for the collection, organization, analysis, and critical reflection of information from various specialized sources in education, gender, and public policy (Alaiza, 2020; Deroncele-Acosta, 2020, 2022). This methodological strategy contributed significantly to the consolidation of a solid theoretical perspective and the design of contextualized proposals.

Results and discussion

The results of the study conducted at the Instituto Superior Politécnico do Bengo, Angola, identified multiple structural, cultural, and pedagogical constraints that hinder the effective mainstreaming of a gender equality approach in higher education. The main findings, along with their corresponding analysis, are presented below:

1. Low female representation in STEM fields and leadership positions

Despite the progressive increase in female enrollment in higher education, a persistent underrepresentation of women was observed in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-related careers, as well as in leadership, academic management, and decision-making positions. This phenomenon reveals the persistence of gender biases in career choices and access to positions of power within the institutional structure. This aligns with international studies that have highlighted the global trend of masculinization in STEM fields and the feminization of other disciplines traditionally considered "soft" (Buquet, 2011; Schmelkes, 2021).

2. Sociocultural barriers that affect women's access and permanence

The assessment also highlighted sociocultural factors that negatively impact female participation in higher education, such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, lack of family support, and low parental expectations for their daughters. These conditions, widely documented in the literature on gender and education (Silva Laya, 2019; García & Hernández, 2020), reinforce patterns of inequality and limit women's academic and professional development.

3. Limited inclusion of the gender perspective in curricula and teacher training

There was a poor integration of gender-related content into curricula, as well as insufficient teacher training on this topic. This shortcoming prevents the academic community from developing the skills to critically address gender stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination present in both content and teaching practices. According to UNESCO (2015), mainstreaming a gender approach in education requires not only curricular reforms but also a thorough process of teacher awareness and training.

4. Inequality in the production and transmission of knowledge

The results also revealed that the main transmitters and producers of knowledge continue to be predominantly men. The limited presence of women as professors and researchers reproduces structural inequalities and limits epistemological diversity within the institution. This situation reinforces an androcentric model of knowledge, which excludes or minimizes female contributions and critical gender perspectives (Viveros, 2019; Ricaldi & Subiría, 2020).

5. Internal factors that limit female empowerment

In both interviews and surveys, women and men agreed that factors such as a lack of self-confidence, a lack of self-confidence, a lack of initiative to take on challenges (boldness), and family responsibilities are factors that hinder women's advancement to academic leadership positions. These results are consistent with the findings of the diagnostic study conducted within the framework of the UNI.AO Program (2021–2022), in collaboration with the European Union, reinforcing the need to develop empowerment policies aimed at transforming subjectivities and power relations in the university environment.

Critical analysis

The results show that, while there are institutional efforts in Angola to incorporate gender equality into educational plans and programs, these efforts have not yet translated into substantive transformations in organizational culture, teaching practices, or power structures.

The treatment of gender in higher education remains marginal and often instrumental, which prevents its real appropriation as a cross-cutting element of the educational process. The absence of clear institutional policies, equity criteria for academic access and promotion, and the lack of political will to eradicate gender inequalities are significant obstacles that must be overcome.

It is also essential to emphasize that gender equality cannot be understood solely from the perspective of numerical access or formal participation. A profound transformation of social imaginaries, power relations, and knowledge production systems is required. This transformation must be supported by a critical, inclusive, and rights-based educational model that recognizes diversity, promotes women's empowerment, and actively challenges the patriarchal structures that permeate the educational system.

APPROACH

Based on the bibliographic review carried out, it was found that, throughout history, the concept of "gender" has been subject to various transformations from the theoretical contributions made by authors in diverse social contexts that explain, from the perspective of science and everyday life, the complexity and variety of the term. From this perspective, gender issues and concerns for equality involve not only women, but also men, without exclusion due to their diversity in terms of age, skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identities, which reach a more comprehensive approach (Trejo Sirvent, ML, Llaven Coutiño, G, Pérez and Pérez, HC. 2015).

Along these lines, in Mireya's (2019) opinion, gender as a traditional subject refers to the behavior established by society towards human beings in relation to their sex and sexual preferences, as well as their social and psychological development. Thus, in the opinion of Valenzuela & Cartes (2020a), gender is one of the fundamental categories that is constructed among human beings and that does not have to coincide with all the masculine or feminine characteristics according to sex. Elements consistent with the criteria of Leyva et al. (2020), when they argue that gender is a category that is socially constructed from symbols and roles associated with a corresponding sex and Rodríguez & Pease (2020a) and Vázquez & Aragón, (2021a), who argue that gender associated with sex perpetuates social, cultural, economic and political differences.

Regarding the gender equality approach in Higher Education, it essentially responds to the need to align knowledge with reality, learning, and potential so that professionals can guarantee gender equality in their performance in the workplace. Therefore, to make the gender equality approach effective, it is not only achieved through changes in the structure of policy and economic resources; it is also necessary to change the way teachers think and act in their teaching dynamics to articulate gender equality in their content. This shift in mentality seeks to raise awareness among their students so that they are empowered on the issue of equality and, through their professional intervention, generate positive changes in society (Karla, 2018).

More recent conceptualizations regarding the gender approach suggest that it emerges to break gender inequalities, primarily those associated with sex; and also to reinforce gender identities that are not within the heteronormative, so that people can develop by valuing themselves and others (Leyva *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez & Pease, 2020b; Valenzuela & Cartes, 2020b). Thus, this approach is characterized by establishing guidelines to combat and eradicate inequality by valuing gender diversity (Roldan *et al.*, 2023a). Hence, the implementation of the gender equality approach, according to Vázquez & Aragón (2021b), is pertinent because it combats the systematic and structural violence present in society, which, in turn, is characterized by the presence of unequal

opportunities between men and women. Other authors argue that the application of this approach in curricula is necessary to avoid the reproduction of gender stereotypes and inequalities in future generations; Therefore, in turn, teacher training on this subject must be ensured (Jara *et al.*, 2021; López, 2021; García & Montenegro, 2021; Vizuite & Lárez, 2021; cited in Roldan *et al.*, 2023b).

Along these same lines, Marrero (2019) states that this approach should not only be proposed as a cross-cutting theme in curricular areas, it is also a tool that helps to make visible the problems suffered by men and women and encourages critical and constructive reflection in the classroom on the privileges that both men and women enjoy in certain areas of society. In this way, the relevance of the implementation of the gender equality approach is possible thanks to the application of curricular contents from a gender perspective optimally mediated by the teacher (Marrero, 2019; Vázquez & Aragón, 2021c).

Gender equality is a central theme in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in September 2015. The 2030 Agenda is a global plan that establishes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with interlinked and ambitious targets to address global challenges and promote sustainable and inclusive development. Gender equality is a cross-cutting objective, explicitly included in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5): "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." This goal recognizes the importance of eliminating gender inequalities, promoting the empowerment of women and girls, and ensuring their equal participation in all spheres of society.

Therefore, some of the specific targets of SDG 5 include ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, ensuring equal opportunities in education and the workplace, promoting equal participation in decision-making, and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services. Furthermore, gender equality is also linked to other Sustainable Development Goals, such as quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), among others. In short, gender equality is a fundamental element of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Promoting gender equality is not only a moral imperative but also key to achieving sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development globally. The effective implementation of measures and policies that promote gender equality will contribute to building a more just world that respects the human rights of all people.

The mainstreaming of the gender perspective has advanced on the global agenda and in that of many countries. Particularly noteworthy are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to whose Committee States Parties are accountable; and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which incorporates gender targets and indicators in all the SDGs. Advancing this issue in Higher

Education is strategic. Not only because it must guarantee the right to equality (physical, economic, and decision-making autonomy) within the university community, but also because, through training and research activities, it must play a key role in extending this approach to society as a whole (Alpízar et al., 2024).

Consequently, gender mainstreaming involves mobilizing all general policies and measures with the specific objective of achieving gender equality. This is achieved by considering the potential effects of policies on the situation of men, women, and other gender identities from the moment of policy planning. This entails systematically examining measures and policies and taking into account their potential gender effects when defining or implementing them (Hernández & Delgado, 2023b). Thus, gender mainstreaming occurs not only when it is incorporated into curricular content, but also when it becomes part of the culture of the educational institution that adopts it (García et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Pease, 2020; Barrientos et al., 2022; cited in Roldan et al., 2023c).

At this point, according to the UNESCO Education Monitoring Report (2016), gender must be considered a priority in educational planning, from infrastructure to the development of materials and teaching processes. The full and equal participation of women is vital to ensuring a sustainable future because:

- Gender roles are created by society and learned from one generation to the next;
- Gender roles are social constructs and can be changed to achieve equality and equity between women and men;
- Empowering women is an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty;
- Gender inequalities undermine the ability of girls and women to exercise their rights;
- Ensuring gender equality between boys and girls means that both have the same opportunities to access school, as well as throughout their studies (p. 11).

Based on the above, the objectives to achieve progress in gender equality in higher education are presented (González & Ledesma, 2015):

- Establish the public budgets necessary to implement the established educational policies and launch the proposed gender equality initiatives.
- Implement affirmative action policies aimed at achieving parity in access to higher education.
- Ensure the safety of students, professors, and researchers in university spaces.
- Establish support measures, such as university tutoring programs, that aim to reduce repetition and dropout rates.

- Promote the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate access to and continuation in higher education.
- Include content related to gender equality in university degrees and programs.
- Promote women's access to all degrees, as well as their recruitment as teachers and researchers in all academic fields.
- Implement scholarship policies aimed at women to pursue doctoral programs.
- Promote lines of research that benefit the most vulnerable groups (p.176).

Thus, gender equality in Angolan higher education must be characterized by several fundamental qualities:

- Recognize and value the diversity of gender identities, promoting inclusion and respect for all people, regardless of their gender identity.
- Apply the principle of equity, which involves treating all people fairly and without discrimination, regardless of their gender or other personal characteristics.
- Respect the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations, recognizing the multiplicity of people's experiences and realities in relation to gender.
- Ensure that men and women have equal rights and opportunities in all areas of life, including access to education, work, health, political and social participation, among others.
- Challenge and eliminate gender stereotypes that perpetuate inequalities and discrimination, allowing people to develop and express themselves freely, without limitations imposed by rigid gender norms.
- Promote initiatives and policies to empower all people, especially those who have been historically marginalized or discriminated against due to gender, encouraging their active participation, autonomy, and decision-making capacity in all areas of life.

In general, the proposed qualities are extremely relevant, although they must be implemented with due regard for African customs, traditions, and idiosyncrasies. This is especially true considering that the increase in gender equality in education is not translating into greater equality in employment opportunities or access to decision-making and power. These qualities seek sustainability, in which each member of society respects others and contributes to promoting equity and justice between men and women, as well as respecting the diversity of gender identities.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE BENGU POLYTECHNIC HIGHER INSTITUTE, IN THE REPUBLIC OF ANGOLA

The Superior Polytechnic Institute of Bengo was created under Presidential Decree No. 285/20 of October 29, whose organic statute promulgated in Presidential Decree No. 1/21 of December 22. It is located in the Caboxa neighborhood, three (3) kilometers from the Dande Municipal headquarters, Bengo Province.

It was inaugurated on July 21, 2022. It has an impressive infrastructure with 5 blocks designated A, BC, D, and E. Among which is a boarding school not yet equipped.

In 2022, it began offering the Agro-Food Transformation Technology Engineering program. It then opened the Agronomic Engineering program in 2023. The institution plans to expand its training offerings by 2027 with the opening of programs in Animal Husbandry, Mechanical Engineering, Energy and Electrical Engineering, and Industrial Engineering.

It has 350 students. 250 male and 100 female.

- 188, For the career of Engineering in Technology and Agro-food Transformation
- 162 For the Agronomic Engineering degree. The careers taught and those that are intended to be taught are inserted in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), where gender equality is demanded in the Angolan context.

FAVORABLE CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY IN ANGOLAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Below are some challenges for mainstreaming gender equality in Angolan higher education. These include:

- Ensure a culture of equality, respect for diversity, and non-discrimination in communications and information policy; expand and enhance the presence of these topics in television, radio, print media, and social media.
- Implement specific gender equality policies in educational institutions related to issues such as equal access, gender representation in governing bodies, prevention of gender-based violence in various university settings, and promotion of equal opportunities for women in academia.
- Create leadership programs, spaces for dialogue, and opportunities for women's participation to strengthen empowerment and skills development, create more inclusive, equitable, and fair educational environments for all, regardless of gender, and foster women's confidence to assume decision-making and leadership roles in educational institutions based on their professional and academic development.

- To raise awareness and educate the academic and student community from a gender equality perspective through videos, talks, courses, free virtual platforms, and educational activities that address topics related to the importance of gender equality in higher education, stereotypes, the role of science, technology, and innovation, access to information, environmental protection, adaptation to climate change, working conditions for women and men, expressions of violence in the workplace, harassment, discrimination, and gender-based violence, with the aim of fostering an inclusive and respectful institutional culture.
- Diversify the range of training modalities and distance learning
- Conceive coordinated strategies that promote inclusion and training for a critical understanding of the new realities and dilemmas emerging in society related to gender violence, discrimination based on gender, wage disparities, intellectual, academic, and scientific levels, among other topics.
- Implement leadership training programs for women professors and researchers to help change discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, challenge deep-rooted gender stereotypes in Angolan society, and promote gender equity in higher education.

Below is a set of proposed actions that could contribute to mainstreaming the gender equality approach at the Instituto Superior Politécnico do Bengo. These include:

1. **Communication and Information Policy:** It is proposed to expand and refine a communication policy to publicize the programs and courses offered by the institution, with a special focus on promoting gender equality in the communication of these programs, thereby encouraging women and men to choose courses without pre-established gender stereotypes.
2. **Inclusion and training strategies:** Articulated strategies must be designed to promote a critical understanding of current societal dilemmas, such as gender-based violence, wage discrimination, and gender stereotypes. These strategies should also encourage reflection and action against inequalities and help build a more inclusive and respectful society.
3. **Gender Equality Awareness:** Using media such as videos, talks, courses, and virtual platforms, the goal is to raise awareness about gender equality among the academic and student community. The goal is to address issues such as stereotypes, access to technology, climate change, and environmental protection, as well as promote a workplace free from harassment and violence.
4. **Female Leadership in Education and Research:** The aim is to strengthen the leadership of women professors and researchers by providing them with the necessary tools to challenge gender stereotypes in Angolan society and promote gender equity in academia.

5. Gender equality policies: It is essential to implement concrete policies in educational institutions that guarantee equal access for all genders, promoting the prevention of gender-based violence and equal opportunities within university governing bodies.
6. Gender perspective in the academic curriculum: Gender perspective should be mainstreamed into all academic programs, integrating this approach into teaching and raising awareness among students about gender inequalities and their effects on society.
7. Diversification of specialties for women: We seek to increase the dissemination and promotion of careers and specialties where the female presence has historically been low, providing recognition to women working in these fields, especially those necessary for Angola's economic development.
8. Gender Research: It is crucial to encourage research on diversity and gender equality, promoting projects that address issues such as the digital divide, population aging, caregiving, and gender-based violence. This will help raise awareness among the university community about gender inequalities and help promote concrete actions to reduce them.
9. Equality education through teaching materials: Curricula, textbooks, and teaching materials should promote a culture of equality, reflecting the history of women in the struggle for Angolan independence and educating women in ethical and moral principles from a gender equality perspective.
10. Female participation in science and technology: Policies should be encouraged to increase women's participation in academic and professional areas related to science, technology, and innovation (STI), fields in which women still have limited representation.
11. Faculty training on gender: It is essential to improve the training of university faculty on gender issues and legislation, with the aim of eliminating sexist and discriminatory patterns that limit women's opportunities in higher education.
12. Equal access to higher education: Progress must be made in expanding access to higher education, overcoming the socioeconomic and cultural barriers that limit women's ability to attend university and continue their studies.
13. Equal opportunities in higher education: Ensure that men and women have equal access to resources and opportunities in education, including scholarships, leadership programs, and extracurricular activities that promote the comprehensive development of both genders.
14. Overcoming sexist notions: Gender mainstreaming must be an integral part of higher education in Angola, addressing three key areas: training, research, and institutionalization. This will help overcome sexist notions and reduce gender inequalities in the academic field.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the theoretical foundations allowed us to affirm that gender equality implies eliminating discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudices based on gender, and promoting equal opportunities in all aspects of life, such as education, employment, politics, society, and culture. It is therefore a matter of recognizing and valuing the contribution of all people to achieving a more equal and just future, regardless of their gender, in building a more equitable, democratic, inclusive, and respectful society that reduces equity gaps and generates real opportunities for access and use, as well as effective, inclusive, and diverse educational policies to guarantee social justice.

The proposed challenges and prospects for advancing gender equality in Angolan higher education require the commitment and collaboration of the entire educational community, including academic authorities, teachers, students, and community leaders, to move forward in this direction. This also includes the implementation of policies to achieve gender equality, promoting women's participation in science, technology, and innovation, strengthening awareness-raising and gender education, and supporting programs and projects that empower women and promote gender equity in the Angolan education system, as well as a profound cultural shift.

Finally, it is recommended that higher education institutions in the Angolan context include gender equality in their university outreach activities, in order to generate a change in student mindset and achieve greater comprehensiveness and effectiveness in preventing and eliminating forms of discrimination against women. This also helps strengthen the mechanisms and professional capacity of public officials and civil servants to advance the incorporation of gender equality issues in the development of policies, programs, and the provision of services that guarantee the achievement of gender parity.

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