

What can be done to better support women pursuing their PhDs in Africa

A doctor of philosophy - commonly known as a [PhD](#) - is the highest level of academic training. It allows the degree holder to teach the chosen subject at university, conduct research or practise in the specialised area.

By [Anne M. Khisa](#) 28 Sep 2020



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However, in many African countries like Kenya, there are [gender gaps](#) when it comes to women enrolling in and completing, their PhD studies. This subsequently [affects their](#) recruitment into university teaching and research positions. Women make up just [just](#) 30% of the Africa's researchers.

There are various reasons for this. For instance, [a study](#) covering several African countries found that barriers include sexual harassment, a lack of mentors – with some male faculty mentors unwilling to act as mentors for junior women – and difficulty finding a balance between career and family.

A study by the African Academy of Sciences reported similar challenges faced by women scholars in [science, technology, engineering and mathematics \(STEM\)](#) disciplines. It found that the success of women already working in STEM was highly influenced by the work environment, the recruitment process and gender relations. [More has to be done](#) to help women overcome gender-based challenges.

To support postgraduates in further education, [several initiatives](#) offer PhD fellowships – a merit-based scholarship – in Africa.

My colleagues and I from the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) wanted to examine one of these and how it catered for women. Our [case study](#) was on the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA). This is an initiative that was formed in 2008 and is jointly led by the APHRC, based in Kenya, and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa.

We focused on CARTA for our study because it tries to build the capacity of individual PhD scholars – who focus on public and population health – using doctoral fellowships and research grants. CARTA also tries to get member universities to [institutionalise](#) good practices.

By the end of 2019, CARTA had graduated 87 of its 209 active PhD fellows. These individuals [produced](#) peer-reviewed publications and some fellows were promoted in their academic careers.

Of the active fellows, 55% are women. We found that the programme caters well for women looking to complete their doctorates. For instance, it recognises that women need special consideration when it comes to pregnancy and in the care of newborn babies, and that they may have different responsibilities when it comes to domestic chores and the care of the family.

All of these are factors that could have previously prevented them from enrolling in, or completing, their PhDs. It's important that other institutions offering fellowships replicate aspects of this model to better support Africa's women academics.

Gender-sensitive

CARTA works with eight partner African universities and four research centres. Individuals attached to these institutions can apply for PhD fellowships that can last for up to four years. The fellowship includes participation in seminars, stipends and small grants for research activities.

One of CARTA's gender-sensitive policies is that it uses a different cut-off age for male and female applicants, at 40 and 45 years respectively. The aim of this is to cater for women who may have been delayed starting their PhD studies until later because they had children.

PhD fellows are entitled to paid maternity and paternity leave. And fellows are granted a leave of absence during their maternity leave – their award restarts upon their return. This ensures they are not penalised in any way and eventually enjoy the same benefits as other fellows.

The programme also supports new parents as they participate in month-long “joint advanced seminars”, training courses offered four times in the course of the PhD. CARTA pays for the cost of a childminder during the seminar, and the fellow can use this facility for as many seminars as they need.

We found that meeting these practical needs during training supported women to maintain on-time graduation rates similar to their male counterparts.

There are a few challenges though. A recent [evaluation](#) of the CARTA programme revealed that it lacked systematisation of data and learning from it.

A second challenge relates to building a stronger feedback mechanism between actors. While the CARTA programme has managed to address practical gender needs, structural barriers – like unequal pay and unfair workloads – can be addressed by working with institutions to change their gender policies in higher education.

Future benefits

Having a programme like this, which strategically addresses gender differences, has long-term benefits. Women CARTA fellows were able to gain certain strategic advantages in academia. This includes

promotion to senior academic and leadership positions, winning other research grants, [sustaining collaborative research](#) and being recognised by their peers, hence providing female role models to junior scholars.

The programme is a timely initiative that ought to be replicated for greater coverage across the continent. It would take careful programming, [commitment of resources in cash and kind](#) and sustainable partnerships African state and non-state actors with northern partners. But these could help create a more gender equitable mix of successful PhD researchers and faculty on the continent.

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