# Examining Gender in Higher Education



## Gendered Patterns of HE Participation and Success: Initial Findings of the EGHE Network for Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, The Gambia and the UK

www.eghe.org

## Overview

This policy brief deliberates on the findings of work carried out by EGHE network in relation to female participation in HEIs in our study countries. Patterns of under-representation are outlined, as well as a discussion of a range of potential issues that may contribute to these patterns, including:

- gender dynamics at primary and secondary level that inevitably impact on entry to HE, including issues of early dropout due to financial constraints, pregnancy or early marriage
- access to role models in education and professional fields
- under-representation of female academic staff in HE, particularly in more senior roles
- continued influence of sociocultural expectations around care-giving that constrain both staff and students both in relation to HE study and future career paths
- the intersection of factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, and disability with gender
- the effects of a masculinised 'academic culture' that may affect staff progression, and student experience and sense of belonging in HE

The study recommends several research components that need to be addressed with suitable empirical evidence – in particular the urgent need for disaggregated data entry and progression at HE in relation to gender, socio-economic background, age, caring commitments, ethnicity and disability – as well as policy recommendations such as gender-specific strategies, activities and events focusing on the 'bridge' from school to HE, and workshops on challenging essentialist views on gender 'appropriate' study/career paths.

## Introduction

In the vast majority of 'developed' countries and those in transition, women are now in the majority as undergraduate students. However, in many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, South, West and East Asia, men remain in the majority at undergraduate level. There remains an urgent need to address the participation of women in HE across the world and across subject areas (see UNESCO 2010), emphasised by the continued prioritisation of equal access in terms of gender to "affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.3).

A key aspect of gender equality in this area is equality in terms of subject choice, including the role gender norms, stereotypes and assumptions play in influencing potential students' choice for or against certain subject areas or fields.

As well as a concern with access and subject choice, it is crucial to explore issues relating to student experience once at university: for example the ways in which gendered norms and assumptions may influence academic curricula, policy and pedagogical practice, as well as potential inequalities of lived experience of students and staff. It is vital to explore in depth the complexities of academic culture, policy and practice in HE and the experience of staff and students, in order to effectively challenge existing inequities based on gender and other aspects of social identity/positioning.

This briefing presents findings from a scoping exercise of current literature/research currently conducted by members of the Examining Gender in Higher Education (EGHE) network on issues affecting women's participation and success in HE in network member countries.

## METHODOLOGY

Funded by a grant from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, the network involves a collaborative partnership between academic and activist colleagues with interdisciplinary expertise based in Rwanda, Uganda, The Gambia; Scotland, and the pan-African Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

Established in 2017 for 18 months, the goal of the network was to draw together academics and activists to share and build knowledge and expertise on key areas of concern in gender and higher education (HE) comparatively across a range of African countries as well as the UK; and to build the foundations for sustained work that will address key issues of pressing concern in the field. Scoping work was undertaken on issues related to gender and higher education in member countries as part of the EGHE network's activities, in order to produce findings of relevance for policy makers and practitioners (both in providing the context in relation to multiple national contexts and to also provide a comparative perspective across countries), and to identify and develop further key areas for future research collaboration.

Team members employed review strategies appropriate to their fields of study and geographical contexts, employing a narrative literature review approach (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Academic journal articles were surveyed relating to gender and HE that specifically focus on members' national contexts, and related material from further African countries, utilising search facilities such as the ERIC research database and the Taylor & Francis and SAGE journal websites. Because of the volume of material this review concentrates on articles published from 2000 onwards. In addition, some members have gathered relevant statistical and policy information from the HE institutions within which they work, and have provided reflections based on their own specific experience within HEIs in their countries.

From our initial review, a number of key thematic areas of interest emerged, as follows:

1. Issues affecting **admission** into HE for women students, including issues of support and encouragement; the importance of role models; the influence of wider gendered expectations as to the appropriateness of certain subjects/study for girls and women; and the implications of affirmative actions on student academic confidence
2. Issues affecting women students' ability to **maintain** their studies, including issues of financial support and interaction with existing academic/institutional cultures
3. Issues affecting the success of **women graduates,** including **women academics** and their experience within existing academic/institutional cultures
4. The importance of looking at participation and success for **different groups** of women, for example differences relating to age, socio-economic status and geographical location
5. Patterns of similarity and difference **comparatively across countries**
6. A specific focus on these issues in relation to **women taking STEM subjects**

This policy briefing collates some of the main findings in relation to themes 1, 3 and 4. Separate policy briefings focus on, respectively, theme 2, theme 5, and theme 6.

## FINDINGS

### Admission into HE for women students

In the sub-Saharan African countries under review, there is a consistent pattern of under-representation of women students entering HE institutions. UNESCO's (2017) gender parity index for tertiary enrolment by country showed that a large proportion of sub-Saharan African countries fell below 0.8 GPI (where a score of 1.0 indicates parity and a score higher than 1 indicates women in a numerical majority). The figures for the African countries so far figuring in our scoping exercises are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| The Gambia | 0.45 (in 2014) |
| Ethiopia | 0.48 (in 2014) |
| Tanzania | 0.51 (in 2013) |
| Ghana | 0.69 (in 2015) |
| Kenya | 0.70 (in 2009) |
| Rwanda | 0.78 (in 2015) |
| Uganda | 0.78 (in 2014) |

These national figures of course mask differential patterns within countries and types of institution. For example, in Rwanda as of 2016 women represent only about one third of the student population at public universities, 31.9% against 68.4% men. Yet, this is not the case when it comes to private universities, where girls represent the majority of the student population, that is 52% (MINEDUC, 2016).

Some policy changes have been implemented by HEIs in a number of sub-Saharan African countries to try and address the under-representation of women students, including affirmative action policies. For example, since 1990 the Ugandan government has implemented an affirmative action where female A level applicants are given an extra 1.5 points to gain entry into all public Universities. However it is difficult to quantify the contribution of this policy in terms of increasing numbers of female students in Ugandan universities because over time a number of changes have happened such as opening public universities to privately-sponsored students. The affirmative action in Kenya has seen a general increase in women's participation at university, yet research suggests more is needed in relation to ensuring retention rather than just a focus on access (Onsongo, 2009). Moreover, the impact of the affirmative action on completion or participation in quality courses such as STEM programmes is under-researched. In Western Europe, UNESCO (2012) notes that whilst men formed the majority of undergraduates in 1970, women are as of 2009 outnumbering men in HE – a situation shared with North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Central and Eastern Europe. UNESCO's gender parity index score for the UK in 2014 was 1.31. The latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for UK universities show that a total of 794,900 female and 640,225 male students were enrolled for the year 2015/16.

So what are the factors underlying such statistics? UNESCO (2012) notes that **national wealth** is a key factor in relation to women's participation in HE. Women are more likely to enrol at university in countries with relatively high income, and have lower participation in low income countries.

Patterns of admission at tertiary level can only be understood with reference to **patterns at primary and secondary level.** Over the years global primary education enrolment rates have increased, for instance, from 52% in 1990 to 78% in 2010 in sub-Saharan Africa. However, in this region girls continue to lag behind boys particularly at secondary and tertiary levels (UNESCO, 2014).

By 2012, according to the Education For All Report (UNESCO, 2015), 63% of countries with data had yet to achieve gender parity in secondary enrolment. In some sub-Saharan African countries the rate of girls' participation in secondary education is extremely low which has obvious implications for HE progression – for example Lestrade (2012) reports that only 4% of secondary students in Ethiopia are female.

In Rwanda there is now near equality in terms of net enrolment by gender at primary and secondary level. However, more boys than girls sit for Advance level (A' Level) examination, which shows that girls are more likely than boys to drop out in secondary schools for reasons such as financial constraints, pregnancy or early marriage (MINEDUC, 2016, UR 2017).In terms of pass rates, boys are still outperforming girls: 89.7 percent of boys against 85.1 percent of girls passed lower secondary examination in 2015 and 91.8 percent boys against 86.1 percent of girls passed S6 final exams in 2015 (MINEDUC, 2016).

The degree to which girls and women have access to **female role models** has repeatedly been cited as a factor in both participation in HE overall and in relation to the study of STEM subjects in particular (e.g. Morley et al., 2009, 2010; Lestrade, 2012; Plan, 2012; UNESCO, 2012; Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2016). The argument for such role models relates to the challenges of prevalent socio-cultural stereotypes as to 'appropriate' and desirable activities, careers, or future goals for girls and women (World Economic Forum, 2016). Johnson's (2011) study in Tanzania concluded that women in rural areas have a harder time finding female role models because there are fewer women in positions of power or authority. Role modelling is arguably not limited to those of the same gender – however the readiness for HE instructors to take up such assignments is another under-researched area.

**Parental concerns** over issues such as their daughters becoming pregnant or marrying whilst away at university were cited as a possible factor in the lower enrolment of women in HE in Tanzania (Johnson, 2011).

An increase in the number of female teachers in secondary and further/higher education could play a major role in terms of changing perceptions as to what is achievable and desirable for girls and women. **Higher numbers of female teachers** have been shown to increase the rate of girls' enrolment and help sustain their participation in education (Plan, 2012).

## Success as Graduates, Postgraduates and Academics

Gender disparities continue in relation to student ratios at postgraduate level, and especially in relation to academic staff. This pattern occurs both in the UK and in the African countries in our review.

For the UK, even whilst there is a slight overall majority of female students at undergraduate level, this is not the case at postgraduate level – for example a Universities UK report shows that in 2013-4 women comprised 55.1% of undergraduates but 47% of postgraduates (albeit improving from 44.5% in 2004-5).

These figures are much more marked in the African review countries, for example in Kenya less than 2 percent of the graduate students are women (CUE, 2017).

At Makerere University, the largest and oldest university in Uganda, 1461 academic staff are employed - out of these 373 (26%) are female. In the Gambia male lecturers outnumber

female lecturers, and women make up less than 10% of administrative staff. In Gambia College there is only one female member of 10-strong senior management team. In relation to academic qualifications less than 10% of female staff at Gambia College have a PhD, while less than 25% have a Masters degree.

The Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA) argues that in the structures of many Africa Universities remain deliberately masculine, in terms of their representational structure, decision making procedures and the culture of their members (see also Morley, 2006). CODESRIA gives an example of a lack of women representatives during the 2008 Dean's Conference which was held in Yaoundé as part of the General Assembly. Out of the nineteen deans from different African countries representing the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences who took part in the conference only one was a woman.

In the UK women's overall numerical majority at undergraduate level is eroded at postgraduate level and in all but the more junior/part-time and temporary academic positions. In 2014/15 women comprised 45% of full-time academic staff in the UK and 63% of part-time staff. 34% of senior academic staff were women, and only 23% of professors were women (HESA, 2016).

As with statistics on student entry, researchers have aimed to investigate what underlies such statistical patterns. In the UK, feminist researchers have explored gendered cultural issues underpinning continued inequities in levels of senior academic appointments and conceptions of leadership (e.g. Burkinshaw, 2015), in applications for research funding and in relation to

research performance indicators (see e.g. Knights and Richards, 2003; Harley, 2003); and practices of speaking, writing and 'presentation of self (Francis et al., 2001; Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Moreover, gendered forms of harassment and intimidation continue to be problematic (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2014).

Moreover, women's success as academics in the UK is still affected by sociocultural expectations in relation to caregiving: despite changes in recent decades, women still undertake a disproportionate amount of care of children and other family members, whist academic culture still implicitly assumes a 'norm' of the academic as a mobile, time-rich individual without significant caring responsibilities (Leathwood and Read, 2009). Research conducted in African countries points to similar gendered issues in relation to academic culture. For example, research by Morley (2006) indicated a range of discriminatory practices faced by female academics in five African countries (Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Uganda) that ranged from lesser career development opportunities to negative perceptions about their academic abilities and stigmatization related to affirmative action programmes – much of this was intangible and difficult to pinpoint concretely, making it harder to challenge. Our network has identified a focus on gender and academic cultures and practices in our focus countries as a currently under-researched area and a priority for future research by network members.

## Participation and Success for Different Groups of Women

Studies in all of the countries under review so far show a particular problem in relation to the representation of women from low socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, Lestrade (2012) notes that in Ethiopia 71% of university students come from families in the top income quartile from urban areas (see also Atuahene, 2013 for a similar pattern in Ghana).

Morley et al.'s (2009, 2010) study in four universities in Tanzania and Ghana showed a similar marked disparity in participation rates for women from low socio-economic backgrounds. For example, in Management Studies women students made up 42% of entrants in a public Ghanaian university in 2006/7. However only 1.4% of the total entrants in this year were women who had attended schools in deprived areas. For the BSc in Physical Science this drops to 15.3% women students, and only 0.6% women from schools in deprived areas.

They also highlighted disparity in terms of representation of mature women students (Morley et al., 2010). This was the case even in subject areas that globally tend to attract higher numbers of women and mature students. For example, the Ghanaian university first year entry rates for 2007/8 in Primary Education show that women made up only 22% of first year students, of whom 19% were aged 30 and over. In Commerce women comprised 22% of first year students, and only 3% of these were aged 30 and over (Morley et al., 2010).

Women increase their numerical majority in terms of proportion of mature students in the UK – in 2014-5 they comprised 63.4% of students aged 36 and over (ECU, 2017). The number of mature students entering the country's HEIs has seen a relative decline in the last decade, particularly in students aged 36 and over on entry, which fell from 21.3% of all students in 2003-4 to 12.9% in 2014-15 (ECU, 2017). This ECU report notes that students aged over 21 on entry were more likely to drop out of university without qualifying and to achieve lower degree results than students under 21 (ECU, 2017). For example, 12.5% of students aged 22-25 who enrolled at university in 2013-14 had dropped out by 2014-15, compared to only 6.3% of younger students.

Moreover, In the UK differences in entry rates, progression and success by both men and women are substantial in relation to socio-economic background and this remains a key pressing problem (Crawford, 2014). For example, men from the bottom fifth of the population in terms of socio-economic status are 40.1% less likely to go to university than men in the top fifth – and for women the equivalent figure rises to 44.2% (Chowdry et al., 2013, cited in Crawford, 2014).

**Box 3:**
**Participation and Success for Different Groups of Women**

Socio-economic background plays a crucial role not only in terms of entry to HE but also the types of institution accessed.

Mature students and those with caring responsibilities are often disproportionately challenged by the needs to balance academic, work and personal life.

An intersectional study of gender and student experience in combination with factors such as age, ethnicity and socio-economic background is particularly under-researched in sub-Saharan Africa.

What are the reasons behind these patterns? A study conducted by the University of Rwanda (2017) found that, next to performance, funding also plays a key role in determining students' entry into higher education in Rwanda. **Socio-economic background** not only effects decisions to enter university but also plays a role in the types of institutions that women access. In general, Rwandan public higher learning institutions tuition fees are noticeably higher than in the majority of existing private universities. Therefore, when students do not get government sponsorship and fail to find other sources of sponsorship, they would rather pay to join a cheaper private institution. This has implications, for example, much as some of the private higher learning institutions may be more affordable, flexible and not strict, the quality of education is sometimes compromised (UR, 2017).

In terms of disparities in relation to **mature** students, Morley et al. (2010) and Johnson (2011) both looked at the challenges which married female students face in Ghana and Tanzania, for example in negotiating the balance between academic work and their expected duties in the home. In Johnson's study married female HE students benefited from husbands who had attained high levels of education themselves and were supportive of women's rights. Moreover, FAWE's (2010) report shows that whilst private universities across Africa have shown greater flexibility in terms of the needs of women with work or childcare commitments, the fees for such institutions put them beyond the reach of the majority of women (FAWE, 2010).

A range of in-depth qualitative work in the UK has highlighted the complexities of the experience of working-class female students in UK institutions, particularly in relation to their experience of navigating academic 'cultures' in institutions that continue to reflect what was once the historical norm of the student (and academic) as white, middle- or upper-class, and male (see Leathwood and Read, 2009; Reay et al., 2010).

In the UK whilst most HEIs are public, working-class and mature students often choose institutions that contain more students 'like them' in order to attain a greater sense of belonging and 'fitting in'. In order to do so, such students are more likely to choose HEI's that are less prestigious. Whilst the academic quality in such institutions rival the more elite institutions, qualifications from such institutions hold lesser degrees of cultural capital in the eyes of employers (Leathwood and Read, 2009; Reay et al., 2010).

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Gender-specific strategies that encourage and support participation from family, primary/elementary level, and especially through secondary education and the 'bridge' to HE.

- Gender-specific strategies within HEIs in all disciplines relating to the revision/ development of curricula, teaching and learning practices, and other support/social policies relating to staff and student life, to facilitate gender equitable cultures and practices in the academy

- Development of activities, events and curricula designed to question or challenge prevalent, essentialist sociocultural views on gender 'appropriate' activities and careers, including access to role models. We recommend an inclusion of strategies designed to enlist men as allies who will explicitly support efforts 'on the ground' and act as role models for both genders in relation to gender equality, for example the activities of the HEFORSHE movement – **www.heforshe.org**

- Ways in which to also address issues relating to subtle issues such as 'unconscious bias', for example in selection procedures for educational and career appointments and awards, and ways to make sure female (and male) students make fully informed subject choices, including appropriate discussion and support when students are considering opting out programmes that may be traditionally viewed as less 'appropriate' for their gender.

- An urgent need for disaggregated data in relation to gender. For example, in an address in 2016 the UNESCO Director General pointed specifically to the lack of disaggregated data as a barrier to our understanding of the dynamics influencing women's participation in STEM subjects globally (Bokova, 2016)

- A sharing of strategies (e.g. alternative networking and cooperative practices by women and, and with pro-feminist male academics) and ways to challenge discriminatory policies and practices in academia internationally

- Ways in which to ensure the support of female students whilst at HE, particularly those from further under-represented groups (e.g. flexibility in terms of class hours for working women and those with childcare or other care commitments). This could be achieved through having specific Gender Policies in place as well as 'engendering' all other existing policies, regulations and programmes.

# References

Atuahene, F. and Owusu-Ansah, A. (2013) A Descriptive Assessment of Higher Education Access, Participation, Equity and Disparity in Ghana, *SAGE Open*, 3, 3. Accessed at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013497725.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1997). Writing Narrative Literature Reviews, *Review of General Psychology*, 1, 311–320.

Bokova, I. (2016) Message from Ms Irina Bukova, Director-General of UNESCO. Press Release DG/ME/ID/2016/04, 11 February 2016 (Paris: UNESCO). Accessed at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002436/243667E.pdf.

Burkinshaw, P. 2015. *Higher Education, Leadership and Women Vice Chancellors*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Commission for University Education (CUE-Kenya, 2017). *Status of Higher Education in Kenya*. (Nairobi: Ministry of Education, Kenya).

Crawford, C. (2014) Socio-economic Differences in University Outcomes in the UK: Drop-out, Degree Completion and Degree Class, *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, IFS Working Paper W14/31.

Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2017) *Equality in Higher Education: Students Statistical Report 2016* (London, ECU).

Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE, 2010) *Strengthening Gender Research to Improve Girls' and Women's Education in Africa*. FAWE Research Series Volume 1.

Francis, B., Robson, J. and Read, B. (2001) An Analysis of Undergraduate Writing Styles in the Context of Gender and Achievement, *Studies in Higher Education*, 26, 3, 313-326.

Harley, S. (2003) Research Selectivity and Female Academics in UK Universities: From Gentleman's Club and Barrack Yard to Smart Macho? *Gender and Education*, 15, 4, 377-392.

HESA (2016) *Statistical First Release 225* (Cheltenham, UK: Higher Education Statistics Agency). Accessed at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/21-01-2016/sfr225-staff

Howe-Walsh, L. and Turnbull, S. (2014) Barriers to Women Leaders in Academia: Tales From Science and Technology, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41, 3, 415-428.

Jackson, C. & Dempster, S. (2009) 'I Sat Back on my Computer … with a Bottle of Whisky Next to Me': Constructing 'Cool' Masculinity through 'Effortless' Achievement in Secondary and Higher Education, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18, 4, 341-356.

Johnson, M. (2011) *Women's Access to Higher Education in Tanzania: a Qualitative Study*. Unpublished PhD thesis. (Iowa City, University of Iowa). Accessed at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1234/.

Knights, D. and Richards, W. (2003) Sex Discrimination in UK Academia, *Gender, Work and Organisation*, 10, 2, 213-238.

Leathwood, C., and Read, B. 2009. *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: a Feminized Future?* (Basingstoke: SRHE and Open University Press).

Lestrade V. (2012) Ethiopia: Gender Disparity in Higher Education. *University World News 89*. Accessed at: http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120219080946487.

Ministry of Education, Rwanda (MINEDUC, 2016). *Education Statistical Year Book*. (Kigali, MINEDUC).

Morley, L. (2006) Hidden Transcripts: The Micropolitics of Gender in Commonwealth Universities, *Women's Studies International Forum 29*, 6, 543-551.

Morley, L., Leach, F. and Lugg, R. (2009) Democratising Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Opportunity Structures and Social Inequalities, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29, 56-64.

Morley at al. (2010) *Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Developing an Equity Scorecard*. An ESRC/DFID Poverty Reduction Programme Research Project, Final Report. University of Sussex. November 2010.

Onsongo, Jane (2009) Affirmative Action, Gender Equity and University Admissions – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, *London Review of Education* 7, 1, 71-81.

Plan (2012) State of Girls' Education in Africa: Achievements Since 2000, Challenges and Prospects for the Future. Paper for the *Civil Society pre-COMEDAF V* meeting, Abuja, 20-21 April 2012, Eva Iversen, Plan West Africa. Accessed at: http://efc.idnet.net/publications/State%20of%20Girls'%20Education%20in%20West%20Africa_ENG.pdf.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., and Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting In' or 'Standing Out': Working-Class Students in UK Higher Education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36, 1, 107-124.

UNESCO (2010) *Global Education Digest 2010: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World*. (Oxford, UNESCO).

UNESCO (2012) *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education* (Paris, UNESCO). Accessed at: www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/unesco-world-atlas-gender-education-2012.pdf.

UNESCO (2015) *Education For All: Achievements and Challenges 2000-2015*. (Paris: UNESCO).

UNESCO (2017) *UNESCO eAtlas of Gender Inequality in Education*. (Montreal, UNESCO Institute for Statistics). Accessed at: http://www.tellmaps.com/uis/gender/#!/tellmap/-1195952519.

University of Rwanda (UR, 2017) *Understanding the Causes of Low Female Enrolment at the University of Rwanda*. UR Report 2017 (Kigali, Rwanda).

World Economic Forum (2016) *The Global Gender Gap Report 2016* (Geneva: World Economic Forum).