

Gender Equity in Higher Education: Challenges and Celebrations

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Celebrations

- Participation rates for women in higher education have increased between 1999 - 2005 in all regions of the world.
- Global Gender Parity Index of 1.05.
- There are now more undergraduate women than men in higher education (UNESCO, 2007).

Feminisation of higher education?

- Women's participation rates are higher than those of men in North America and Europe.
- Participation rates for men continue to outstrip those for women in East Asia and the Pacific, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Women are globally under-represented in science and technology disciplines.

Questions

- Is gender equality just about quantitative change?
- What are women accessing in higher education?
- How are gender differences relayed and constructed in higher education today?

Gender as a verb

- Gender is not a given, but is in continual production.
- We 'do' gender in:
 - ✓ processes of knowledge production and distribution;
 - ✓ opportunity structures;
 - ✓ social and pedagogical relations.

Challenges

- **Gender insensitive pedagogy** (Welch, 2006);
- **Sexual harassment** (Townsend and Geist, 2000);
- **Gendered micropolitics** (Morley, 1999);
- **Limited opportunities for promotion and professional development** (Knights and Richards, 2003);
- **Gendered curricula and subject choices** (Morley *et al*, 2006).

Gender characterised as under-representation of women in...

- **Senior academic and administrative positions** (Blackmore and Sachs, 2001);
- **High-status disciplines** (Bebbington, 2002);
- **Prestigious institutions** (Dyhouse, 2003).

Gender and knowledge

- Women are entering the academy as consumers, rather than as producers of knowledge.
- Gender
 - ✓ structures relations of production and reproduction;
 - ✓ is linked to knowledge construction, research opportunities and dissemination.

(Mama, 1996; Stanley, 1997; Spivak, 1999).

Voice, silence and participation

- Do increasing numbers of women in higher education mean more discursive space for gender?
- Is gender equality included in policy, pedagogy and planning?
- Are women talking - in classrooms, boardrooms etc (Evans, 2008)?

Chilly climate

- Sandler *et al*'s study in the USA (1996:1) found:

‘some thirty ways in which faculty members often treated women students differently in the classroom’.
- This ‘chilly climate’ impeded women’s full participation in the learning process.
- Is the temperature rising, with the ecology, culture and climate changing for women?

Interventions for Gender Equality

- Studies have revealed how liberal and strategic interventions for change such as:
 - ✓ equality policies (Bagilhole, 2002; Deem *et al.*, 2005)
 - ✓ gender mainstreaming (Charlesworth, 2005; Morley, 2007)
- are poorly conceptualised, understood and implemented.

Why worry about gender and higher education?

- Higher education is a major site of cultural practice, identity formation and symbolic control.
- There are significant public and private social and material returns on investment in higher education.



Empirical findings

Gender equity in Commonwealth higher education

- The study explored gender equity in higher education in:
 - ✓ Nigeria
 - ✓ South Africa
 - ✓ Sri Lanka
 - ✓ Tanzania
 - ✓ Uganda

An aim was to identify, via interviews with students and staff and observations, key sites of gender differentiated experiences of the academy (Morley *et al*, 2006).

Femaleness irreconcilable with intellectual authority

And I mean the guys... think we are absolutely useless. I mean we might score high marks you know in courses, but it is just the fact that they think we are stupid. And even our lecturers, I mean, I have a particular lecturer, who just thinks I am an idiot, and I have no reason, I have given him no reason to think that (South African student).

Not taking women seriously

- *There are some who try to put the women down by asking a question and then laughing at us when we can't answer it, or ask something just to put us down (Sri Lankan student).*

Horns and halo effect

There was a situation when two students (a female and male) handed in the same piece of work, the lecturer awarded marks to the male student and cancelled the work of the female student on assumption that the female student had cheated. This in my view was not fair (Ugandan student).

The gendering of ability

- *[Men] hardly attend class. But get their notes from women. I know of several incidents where the boys have copied the tutorial and given it in and they've got higher marks for the same thing (Sri Lankan student).*

Implications: gender and academic identity

- **Dealing with quotidian examples of sexism and discrimination can have a detrimental effect on women's self-confidence and career aspirations.**

(Morley, 1999; Seymour and Hewitt, 1997).

Implications: globalised micropolitics of gender

- Gendered power is relayed via everyday transactions that are difficult to capture and challenge (micropolitics / the hidden curriculum);
- Gender is reproduced in positionings, judgements and relations that occur on a daily and personal basis.
- Gender inequalities appear to be fairly globalised;
- Transnational feminism(s) is needed.

Widening participation in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania

- Study focusing on how gender, socio-economic status and age intersect and constrain or facilitate participation in higher education, utilising:
 - ✓ statistical data
 - ✓ life history interviews with 200 students
 - ✓ semi structured interviews with 200 staff
- in 2 public and 2 private universities.

www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation

Women and difficulty

- *You know that for example this question is tough and only boys can tackle it...a girl cannot and we have to look for a boy, who we think can tackle it (Tanzanian student).*

Gender appropriate academic disciplines

- *The Education Faculty has the highest proportion of females...even though we are getting more women than men, they are still moving into those areas that are known as traditional. ... The School of Agriculture ...has 143 students but the number admitted females applied which were qualified ...was 22 (Ghanaian professor).*

Women's under-representation

- *When it comes to gender, I think it's the girls who are not well represented particularly in some disciplines. Sciences is less than fifteen percent. ..When it comes to Physics, Mathematics, Geology there is huge imbalance between the girls and boys...In Mathematics it could be up to... you know between eighty and twenty percent. Even in Geology you know twenty percent girls, eighty percent boys (Tanzanian Dean).*

Gendering of confidence

- *The problem is always being talked in the newspapers, that the girls they don't have the confidence ...that's all ... they have high capability ... on starting .. the Form Ones and Form Twos they are certain who are very bright, very bright ... but as the days were going on their capability was decreasing and decreasing ... and perishing (Tanzanian student).*

Implications: gender and disciplines

- **Women are constructed as poor choosers of academic disciplines.**
- **Success criteria for gender equality relate to women's increased participation in male - dominated areas.**

Implications: psychic narratives

- **Affective explanations are offered e.g. women's lack of self-confidence.**
- **Women are constructed in terms of deficit and lack.**
- **Collective and social gender inequalities are reduced to the level of the individual.**
- **Cognitive, rather than organisational restructuring, is seen as the solution.**
- **The power relations that create structures and barriers, and that undermine women's confidence in their abilities, are overlooked.**

Negotiating Equity

- 6 case studies of higher education institutions across England, Scotland and Wales.
- The project explored staff experiences of equity issues and institutional equity policies.
- All 6 institutions had equal opportunities policies in place, not all the policies were comprehensive, completely up to date or easy to understand.
- Some policies seemed to have been constructed to comply with legislation rather than empowerment of the work force and enhancement of their working conditions.
- Staff were wary of utilising grievance procedures for fear of recrimination.
- The policies were not integrated into strategic management, and there was little action planning or pro-activity (Deem, Morley and Tlili, 2005).

Lack of action

- *Now on sex equality last year there was a round of promotions to principal lecturer and, it was noted that I think the proportion of women who applied, as compared to the proportion of women employed, and the proportion of women I think, was one out of six appointees. And the personnel office simply in their report, noted the numbers. But we tried to push them to think about what might they do about it but they were quite content to just note the disparity between the number of women employed in the academic role and the outcome of this round (Trade Union representative).*



Contradictory arguments

Women taking over/ holding back

- **Women are simultaneously accused of taking over the academy (feminisation) and not coming forward.**
- **Women's participation rates are increasing yet they are constructed as lacking confidence.**

Women as poor choosers

- **Women are constructed as strategically engaged with higher education, recognising the impact on their employability/ life chances.**
- **However, they are choosing the ‘wrong’ subjects to study, shying away from disciplines that would provide a greater return for their investments.**

Women and knowledge

- **Women are allowed to be consumers, rather than producers of knowledge.**
- **Women are succeeding educationally, yet constructed as intellectually/ academically inferior.**
- **Equity and excellence are oppositionally defined.**

Summary: what future do women want?

- **Feminist scholars critique, theorise and audit power and privilege in higher education.**
- **Do we have the opportunities to re-imagine the type of higher education that we want?**
- **Global policy discourses focus on quantitative change, wealth creation, innovation, human capital.**

Re-Imagining the University

- **I wish to invite an international feminist political imaginary to ask what would the gender equitable academy of the future look and feel like?**