

## Gains and Pains: Intersecting Gender, Poverty and Higher Education Opportunity Structures

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### Abstract

It is important to celebrate the marked gender gains in terms of women's increased participation rates in higher education. Globally, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education is 1.05, suggesting that overall rates of participation are slightly higher for women than for men (UNESCO, 2007:132). However, this is unevenly distributed across geographical regions and disciplinary locations. Furthermore, while higher education is increasingly perceived as a global public 'good', the global gross enrolment rate is still only 24 per cent. Gender gains are often attributed to the success of affirmative action and access programmes (Morley *et al.*, 2006). Yet when gender is intersected with other structures of inequality, more persistent patterns of socio-economic privilege are revealed.

There are multiple markers of identity that inter-relate. Policy discourses often prioritise one structure of inequality, or treat each 'group' of disadvantaged students as a homogeneous *bloc*. While gender has received some international policy and research attention, it is rarely intersected with other structures of inequality in low-income countries. Intersectionality theory suggests that oppression and discrimination occur in differing configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Poor women fall into at least two socially disadvantaged groups and can become the invisible 'other' in audits of gender or social disadvantage (Morley *et al.*, 2008).

This paper is based on our ESRC/DFID funded research project on Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: Developing an Equity Scorecard ([www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation)). The project is exploring participation patterns in higher education, utilising statistical data and life history interviews with students and interviews with staff and policymakers in Ghana and Tanzania. Equity Scorecards are being developed in relation to how gender, socio-economic status and age intersect with access, retention and achievement in two public and two private universities. Life history interviews reveal multiple ways through which African women's participation in higher education is regulated and resisted. From our research evidence, we argue that when gender is intersected with socio-economic status, participation rates are extremely low for poorer women and struggles to access and achieve in higher education are intense in both African countries.

### References

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