

Mapping Meritocracy: Intersecting Gender, Poverty and Higher Educational Opportunity Structures

Professor Louise Morley and Dr Kattie Lussier, Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER), University of Sussex, UK

Contact Author: Sussex School of Education, University of Sussex, Falmer, East Sussex BN1 9QQ. Email L.Morley@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

Widening participation in higher education can be a force for democratisation. It can also map on to elite practices and contribute to further differentiation of social groups. Those with social capital are often able to decode and access new educational opportunities. Those without it can remain untouched by initiatives to facilitate their entry into the privileges that higher education can offer. 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). Meritocratic discourse infers that individual achievement is the most important principle determining access and success in higher education. However, meritocracy implies selection and exclusion. The project is statistically and discursively deconstructing merit. We are mapping meritocracy in order to identify if the most marginalised communities are being included in the widening participation agenda. In this paper, we demonstrate how current opportunity structures reflect traditional beliefs about meritocracy and reproduce privilege and exclusion. We argue that when gender is intersected with socio-economic status, participation rates of poorer women are seen to be extremely low in both African countries.

Global Gender Equity?

The international policy world constructs higher education as a global 'good' (UNESCO, 1995, 1998; World Bank, 2000). As such, there are questions about who participates, where, what they study and how raising participation rates in higher education can contribute to societies' economic and social development and reduce poverty (World Bank, 2002; Commission for Africa, 2005). These are all contentious connections, often underpinned by contradictory discourses. Meritocracy involves inclusion and selection. As such, it needs to be mapped in order to identify if the most marginalised communities are being included in the widening access agenda.

Internationally, women have been identified as a group in need of inclusion into the private and public goods that higher education can offer. The World Declaration on Higher Education identified equitable participation for women as an urgent priority for the sector (UNESCO, 1998, Article 4). It is still questionable whether gender gains have been a victory for democratisation or if they have reinforced social privilege. Widening participation initiatives can map on to elite practices and contribute to further differentiation of social groups.

It is important, however, to celebrate the marked gender gains. 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). Yet there has been little international research attention paid to how gender intersects with other structures of inequality e.g. socio-economic status. Hence the gender gains might be masking more persistent inequalities in higher education access, particularly in relation to poverty. Women's participation in higher education is unevenly distributed across national, disciplinary and institutional boundaries. In 2005, participation in higher education was greater for women than for men in some regions of the world. Yet, in East Asia and the Pacific, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, participation rates for men continue to outstrip those for women and the GPI in each region remains below one (UNESCO, 2007).

Who Gains?

International debates on the ideology of widening student participation question whether such policies are a force for democratisation or differentiation (David, 2007). Initiatives are perceived as a form of meritocratic equalisation and/or as a reinforcement of social stratification processes. Those with social capital are often able to decode and access new educational opportunities. Those without it can remain untouched by initiatives to facilitate their entry into higher education. There has been scant research into the motivations, subjectivities, educational trajectories and experiences of people from socially disadvantaged groups trying to enter in higher education systems in low-income countries. The twin questions of who is participating and where demand close analysis.

There is little theory of difference in higher education policy. Policy discourses often prioritise one structure of inequality, or treat each 'group' of disadvantaged students as a monolithic category. International policy (UNESCO, 1998; World Bank, 2000) on widening participation draws attention to 'women', or 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds' or 'rural students'. Yet, there are multiple markers of identity that inter-relate. While gender has received some policy and research attention it is rarely intersected with other structures of inequality in low-income countries. Within social relations of systemic inequality, differing forms of oppression may be mutually reinforcing.

Having discussed the wider gender map of higher education, we would now like to focus on our current research project. Working with a public university and a private university in both Ghana and Tanzania, this project is providing a statistical overview of participation patterns in the two African countries. The project is developing Equity Scorecards to measure access, achievement and retention of socially and economically excluded groups in four case study institutions. The statistical data are being illuminated by the multiple voices from interviews with stakeholders who are rarely included in international policy arenas *i.e.* academic staff, policy makers and students in selected programmes in each country.

Intersecting Structures of Disadvantage: Developing Equity Scorecards

Central to our inquiry are Equity Scorecards (Bensimon, 2004). Equity Scorecards examine how diversity is translated into equity in educational outcomes (Bensimon and Polkinghorne, 2003). In this project, we are developing Equity Scorecards that measure intersections between social variables e.g. gender, socio-economic status (based on deprived schools indicators), age and educational processes in four programmes of study in four universities. Central to the development of the Equity Scorecards are datasets on key education indicators disaggregated by age, gender and school attended. Whilst data are available on each of these indicators at all the institutions involved in the study, such data have not yet been brought together to illustrate complex patterns of participation.

The Equity Scorecard works with analytical categories to study inequalities. It interrogates changing configurations of inequality along multiple dimensions, including disciplinary and institutional location (McCall, 2005, 1772). Inequalities are deconstructed with statistical evidence provided for different categories. The relationship between the different categories at different educational stages is then made more visible. This approach enables meritocracy to be mapped by definable, and indeed measurable, inequalities in the relationships between social groups (McCall, 2005). The Scorecards measure and examine both advantage and disadvantage simultaneously.

Figure 1: Equity Scorecard 1: Access to 4 programmes at a private university in Tanzania, by gender, socio-economic background and age, 2007/8.

Programme	% of all students on programme		
	% Women	% Deprived School	% Aged over 30
B Ed Maths	13.02	12.56	68.84
MD (Medicine)	25.00	6.03	12.26
B Business Admin	42.06	10.28	18.87
LLB (Law)	42.81	13.42	9.90

Source: Access Datasets: Enrolment in Year 1, 2007/8.
Date of Scorecard: 14 May 2008

Figure 1b: Access to 4 programmes at a private university in Tanzania in 2007/8.

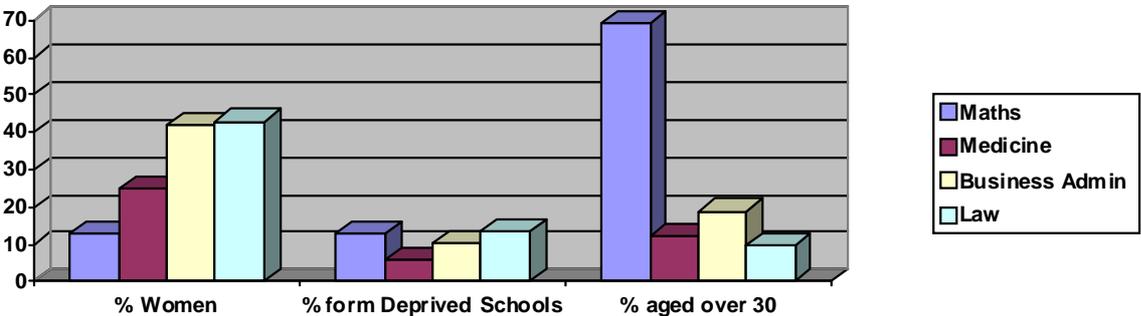
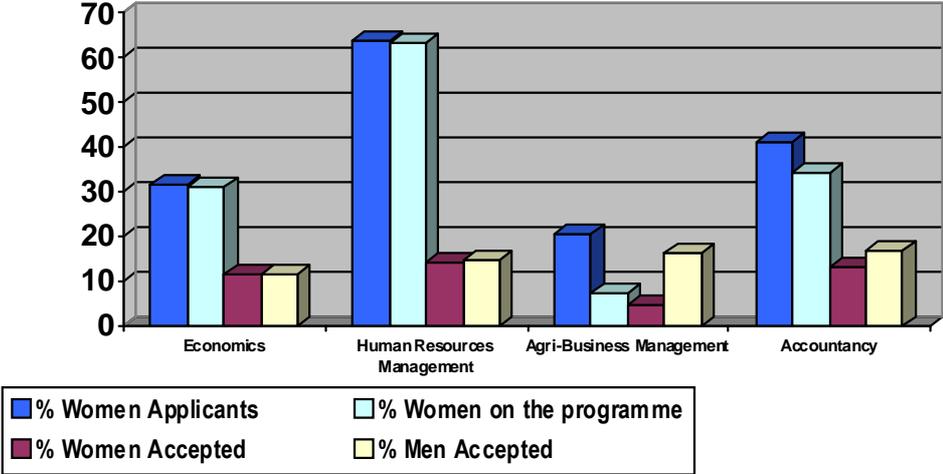


Figure 1 shows that women’s access is greater in Business Administration and Law, but lower in Medicine and B Ed Maths. The B Ed Maths has high participation rates for older students as it offers an access route to higher education for mature students, and employed teachers can take a sabbatical to improve their qualifications. It appears that mainly men are taking advantage of this route. Students from deprived schools have low participation rates in all programmes, particularly in the high status disciplines of Law and Medicine.

Figure 2: Equity Scorecard 2: Women’s application and access at a private university in Ghana, 2007/8.

Figure 2b: Women’s application and access at a private university in Ghana, 2007/8.



Programme	Number of Women Applicants	% of Women Applicants	% of Women on the Programme	% of Applicants Accepted		
				All	Female	Male
B. Sc. Economics	124	31.71	31.11	11.51	11.29	11.61
B.Sc. Human Resources Management	1,008	64	63.44	14.41	14.29	14.64
B. Sc. Agri-Business Management	21	20.59	7.14	13.73	4.76	16.05
B. Sc. Accountancy	430	40.99	34.38	15.25	12.79	16.96
Four programmes combined	1,583	50.77	47.98	14.31	13.52	15.12

Source: Enrolment data, year 1, 2007/2008 Private University, Ghana
Date of Scorecard: November 11th 2008

The Equity Scorecard in Figure 2 illustrates how women’s application patterns vary from one programme to another. In Human Resources Management (HRM) for example, there are far more women applicants than men. In contrast, programmes traditionally associated with ‘men’s work’ have significantly fewer women applicants. Perhaps more interestingly, Equity Scorecard 2 reveals that while the proportion of male and female applicants

admitted in programmes such as Economics or HRM is similar, the proportion of male applicants selected is disproportionate in comparison with women.

Figure 3: Equity Scorecard 3: Gender inequity increases within under-represented groups at a private university in Tanzania, 2007/8

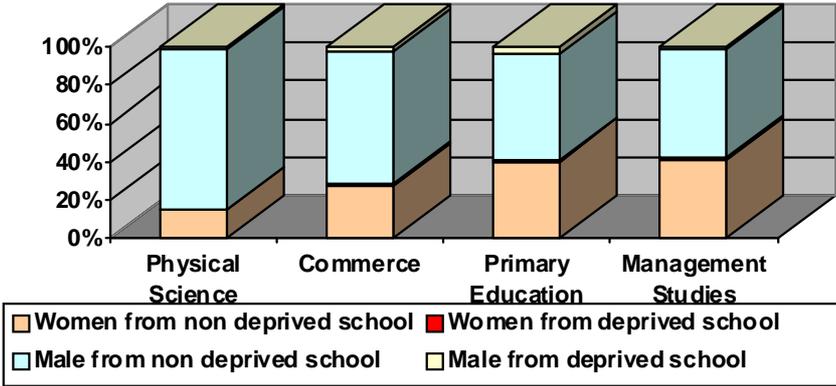
Programme	% Women			Gender Equity Index	
	All Students	Students over 30 yrs	Deprived school	Mature students	Low SES
B Ed Maths	13.02	6.76	11.12	0.519	0.854
MD (Medicine)	25.00	15.58	0.0	0.615	0.0
B Business Admin	42.06	40.00	36.36	0.951	0.864
LLB (Law)	42.81	26.19	25.81	0.612	0.603
Gender Equity Index: Percent Women in group population / Percent Women on programme					
<i>Source: Access Datasets: Enrolment in Year 1, 2007/8. Date of Scorecard: 14 May 2008</i>					

Figure 3 shows that in all subjects, the Gender Equality (GE) Index is less than 1. This means that in this private university in Tanzania, gender inequality is greater within groups that are already under-represented. Gendered exclusion is weakest in combination with age in the Business Administration programme, but greatest in B Ed Maths. Scorecards reveal that some forms of inequality arise within contexts that reduce others.

Figure 4: Equity Scorecard 4: Participation on 4 programmes at a public university in Ghana by gender and socio-economic background, 2006/7

Programme	% Women Students	% Students who attended a Deprived School	% Women who attended a Deprived School
Physical Science	15.3	2.2	0.6
Commerce	28.9	3.3	1.0
Primary Education	41.4	4.6	1.2
Management Studies	42.0	2.8	1.4
<i>Sources: Enrolment on levels 100-400; Enrolment of students from disadvantaged schools, 2006/7</i>			
<i>Date of Scorecard: January 2008</i>			

Figure 4b: Participation on 4 programmes at a public university in Ghana, 2006/7



In Ghana, percentages of women’s participation in some programmes e.g. Management Studies look promising on first sight. However, when gender is intersected with socio-economic status, participation rates of poorer women are seen to be extremely low. The above Equity Scorecards raise questions about how gender intersects with educational opportunities. When meritocracy is systematically mapped, patterns of disadvantage and exclusion soon emerge. Poor women seem to have the most difficulty accessing higher education in both countries. To help illuminate the statistics, we are conducting life history narrative interviews with 100 students in each country.

STEMMING the Flow

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths are collectively known as STEM subjects in many of today’s higher education policy documents (HEFCE, 2005). There are strong beliefs that a country’s future development, wealth creation and competitiveness rests on the quality and quantity of STEM graduates. Some African countries e.g. Nigeria, have allocated 60 percent of its higher education admissions to the STEM disciplines (Morley *et al.*, 2006:82). The identity and social position of STEM disciplines appear to be fixed as high status domains. The privileging of male-dominated disciplines could be seen as an indirect form of sex discrimination. Hence there is a global movement to encourage more women to enter STEM areas (Huyer, 2006). A range of structured interventions exist. For example, in Tanzania, there are funded pre-entry programmes for women to enter Engineering.

While the participation rates for women in Engineering programmes is increasing in the University of Dar es Salaam (URT, 2006), there is still a widely held liberal feminist view that gender equality is just about allowing women into male-dominated disciplines and/or extending men’s education to women. Hegemonic codes of femininity and masculinity continue to influence subject choice (Lapping, 2005). In many narratives, women seem to be in antagonistic relationship with the STEM subjects that they are studying. There is often conflict between codes regulating performance of femininity and codes regulating successful STEM academic

performance. A Tanzanian woman student describes the liminality between her female social identity and the required male academic and professional identity:

It was the moment when I was working with the carpentry workshop. When we started working on the filling locks...Things were very tough, but it was too hard to hold the jerk plane which we use to make the plain surface for the wood. It was too difficult. But when I came to finish that one, that is where it gave me the courage that I can do men's work.

Success is constructed as crossing a gendered threshold to become more like a man, rather than removing the gendered code from the activity. It is also seen as being with the men, blending and assimilating into the dominant male cultures, as another Tanzanian woman student relates:

We don't have problem of them {the men}, they are just giving us a very, in fact, hundred percent cooperation, unless otherwise you just isolate yourself from them. But if you don't isolate from them no, no problem. We are making friends, we are studying together, we are discussing together, no problem.

Difference is highly problematic. In Ghana, a woman student explains how disciplines are embodied, and that certain body types are associated or disassociated with STEM disciplines:

Normally, when people see me, they ask me what course am I doing I say optometry then everybody laughs- like six years in this school! And moreover I'm a girl and I'm doing this course. They are surprised. They are very surprised because I'm also not that big. I'm smallish in nature and they are very surprised ...Because normally females read art courses and even in our class we are only four girls and the rest are males.

There is still a traditional view that STEM subjects require physical strength (Morley *et al*, 2006). Failing that, there is the imperative for cognitive strength. The hard/soft disciplinary binary (Martin, 2008) is a way of reinforcing gendered divisions, with a cultural script that suggests if a subject is 'hard' it is unsuitable for women, as a woman student in Tanzania explains:

Interviewer: And what, what has it been like to be a female student on Engineering, in general terms, because Engineering is well known to be a male dominated area?

Interviewee: Yaa, they are just claiming that the subjects in that field in fact it is difficult, so people have to fight. Maybe many females they don't want to work hard...to disturb their heads, maybe that is the reason for me to find that there few numbers of females in Engineering.

This 'blame the women' emphasis relies on agency rather than structures for explanatory power. Women's identity as inferior scholars, incapable of reason, abstraction and disembodied, cerebral endeavours, haunts the literature on women's history of higher education (Dyhouse, 1995). The pressures of under-representation and the cultural messages about women's inabilities in STEM subjects can be demoralising and a burden for women students. Minority status made an agriculture student in a private Ghanaian university feel like leaving the programme:

I decided to quit my course because I realized that in my class I am the only female for the evening school. So how come that I am the only female. Some people said it is so difficult and I couldn't take it but when I went to one or two people on campus and the staff, they encouraged me to go on with the course.

Drawing It All Together

We have seen that gender equity in higher education participation is being promoted at macro level in international and national policies for widening participation. While the correlation/causation dyad is problematic, it is a fact that women's entry into higher education as students has increased significantly in many regions in the past 10 years. At meso-level, higher educational organisations have achieved some successes in encouraging women to enter the academy. Interventions have included affirmative action programmes, quota systems, bursaries and pre-sessional training. However, poorer women are still under-represented as students in prestigious programmes such as medicine and law in low-income countries. Both these disciplines lead to dominant positions within social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1996).

Mapping meritocracy via interviews reveals that educational aspirations and outcomes are socially constructed according to gendered and socio-economic codes and norms, forms of capital and opportunity structures. Socio-economic and gender privilege are coded as academic merit. Opportunity structures are constrained by cultural constructions of gender differences. The higher educated woman is in antagonistic relationship to other discursive practices – especially in poorer communities. Data about familial and community influences and impediments reveal how gender inequalities are reinforced in terms of construction of academic identities, entitlements, resource allocation and messages about gender appropriate life courses.

We need to look in more detail at the gender messages that are being relayed via everyday practices at micro and meso levels. Quantitative targets to let more women into higher education can fail, or be utterly meaningless while femaleness continues to be socially constructed as second class citizenship, or when gender excludes consideration of other structures of inequality and women's widely dispersed socio-cultural experiences. Gender is both a noun and a verb and is in continual production. Women's entry into higher education still seems to imply

a cultural crossing, with ongoing quests for women's academic legitimacy. The question that remains to be answered is whether women's increased participation and achievement in higher education contributes to reducing poverty and democratising rights and choices for all women in wider civil society.

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