POLICY BRIEF

Challenging Inequalities: Which Capabilities Matter Most for Gender Equality?

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Which policy goals?

The broad transformative intent of policy goals is often overlooked in favour of measurable outcomes which rely on numerical parity data to track progress. In this approach gender equality at the undergraduate level in South African universities has been resolved as there are more women than men undergraduates (DHET 2014). Yet the Ministerial Report on Transformation (DOE 2008, 20) noted that sexism and homophobia were still widespread in universities, together with sexual harassment and 'subtle and insidious' forms of gendered discrimination in higher education institutions. Women were expected to study in conditions where the expectations, norms, values, traditions and ways of behaving are derived from masculinised conceptions of what is 'normal'. The research project on 'Gender Empowerment and Agency in Higher Education' (2013-2016) therefore sought to develop a richer approach to understanding the informational basis of gender equality and justice and the 'stickiness' of everyday life in order to contribute to policy dialogues. In particular, it investigated using normative human capabilities theory (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011) and empirical data to establish the functionings and capabilities which women have reason to value for their well-being, aspirations and choices in life.

Conceptualizing Gender Equality

The most common approach to measuring gender equality in education is based on numerical parity; equality means equal numbers of men and women in higher education. However, to address inequalities such as those stemming from gendered norms and stereotypes which numbers do not capture, we need an expansive approach to gender equality in education which may make use of numbers but would not interpret gender equality as a matter only of numerical parity. Rather gender norms which encourage women's compliance should be challenged. A capabilities-promoting approach allows for attention both to social structures, which hold gender norms in place, as well as individual factors by looking at interpersonal comparisons and intersecting personal and social conversion factors. This version of equality, suggests that gender roles and identities are shaped by the interaction between social arrangements, individual freedoms and agency. The approach includes opportunities for well-being (through enabling valued functionings), agency (enabling people to participate in their own development according to their own goals), and critically reflecting on one's own values and well-being (through inclusion in the development and policy process). In

this way, empowerment is also made possible through enabling people, and women, to shape their own lives for the better.

Methods

The aims of the project were: to understand the development of diverse women's well-being over time: to consider the specific contribution made by their university education; to examine women's agency and that barriers which stand in the way of their human development; and, to offer accounts of gender, race and social class informed by a feminist epistemology. The South African university selected for the inquiry is historically advantaged, with over 30 000 students, of whom in 2014 62% are women and 65% black (African) students. The project conducted 100 life grid interviews in 2013, 57 qualitative interviews in 2013 and 2014 with women and men, black and white, and 9 further follow-up interviews in 2015. It also surveyed 843 students at the University. The project did not assume that women (or men) constituted homogenous gender groups but expected to find differences across intersectionalities of gender, race and social class.

The table below selects seven women to show their non-homogeneity across just three dimensions.

Table 1: Biographical data

Name	Ethnicity	School type	Mother's occupation
Nadia	Afrikaans	Model C	Pre-school teacher
Relebohile	Sotho	Model C	School principal, Hons degree in education
Sarah	Afrikaans (but attended English school)	Model C	Teacher, now counsellor and studying towards psychology hons degree
Thandi	Pedi/Tswana but grew up in Sotho culture	Private, catholic	Accountant; step-mother a teacher
Jessica	Afrikaans	Model C,	Housewife, MSc Agriculture
Dineo	Sotho/ Tswana	Township	Domestic worker, Grade 2 education
Khetiwe	Swati/ Zulu	Township; private Catholic school from grade 10	Domestic worker, Grade 8 education
Thumi	Xhosa	Township	Domestic worker, Grade 10 education

Findings

Women, in particular, benefit from higher education through achieving economic independence, taking part in decision-making, and having increased control over their lives. The data reveals that women, particularly black women, place more value on higher education contributing to their independence than men do. Black students reported a greater value attached to knowledge and education. Higher education holds out the promise of breaking the cycle of disadvantage, given that unemployment among university degree holders is relatively low at just over 5%, compared to

general unemployment figures of 26%, of which 70.5% are between the ages of 15–34. Having a degree will greatly improve women's life chances and economic opportunities

Without exception all the women across all the data sets acknowledged the instrumental value of higher education, its intrinsic value in expanding their love of subject knowledge in itself, and for some also its social value in potentially improving the lives of their extended families. As one student explained:
'Getting an education, getting a life, getting established, starting your career and just being independent... you can stand up for yourself now.…The more you are educated the more liberated your mind is and you see things in a different way….you realise, my goodness, there's still more that I can do'

University enables women to reflect on their aspirations and in many cases to adjust these upwards. For working class black women – notwithstanding the constraints of their schooling and financial circumstances the mobility pathways are most dramatic. For example, from daughter of a cleaner with grade two education to a teacher; from a daughter of a cleaner with grade 8 education to an aspirant psychologist; from daughter of a cleaner with grade ten to a master's degree in business management. But the data also shows that they face steeper hurdles and less linear pathways as they struggle with finances and academic underpreparedness. Working class black women enter higher education with thinner resources (including less money, less economic security); their freedoms to take up development opportunities such as extracurricular activities, are more constrained. Key moments of support from lecturers makes a difference. For example, a Dean who enabled n unemployed student to come back to university for honours and then masters study ('I was sitting at home with no job').
However, university conditions do not seem to foster a widespread feminist consciousness or a critical awareness of gender inequalities among students so that the data shows that women tolerated everyday harassment (such as name-calling or sexist comments on their appearance) and other gendered microaggressions. In this way the university culture was complicit in maintaining and tolerating unequal everyday gender relations.

From the data we extrapolated seven multidimensional capabilities which women valued.

Table 2: Valued capabilities

Capability (normative)	Functioning example (contextually realized)
having a higher education	getting a degree
economic security	sufficient material resources for studies
voice	speaking out over injustices
affiliation	having relationships of respect, recognition and dignity; respecting others
aspirations	achieved aspirations
tenacity	bouncing forward in the face of challenges and setbacks; being resilient and determined
Gender awareness: a) bodily safety b) bodily integrity	being safe on and off campus and being free from sexual harassment

These seven capabilities are central for the operationalization of gender equality in higher education and for higher education which makes a difference to women's lives and achievements now and in the future.

Recommendations

1.   Higher education processes should develop critical agency so that students (men and women) do not accept beliefs as authoritative simply because they have been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, but rather traditions must survive critical scrutiny through inclusive and participatory public reasoning. University and policy actions should therefore expand capabilities for critical thinking, including self-reflection, practical reasoning and access to knowledge.

2.   Gendered norms and practices in higher education, influence women's experiences of higher education and their identities even as higher education also enables greater opportunities for women. These gendered disadvantages are not captured in the parity of numbers. A national gender equality policy is required which rather advances capabilities as the informational basis of gender justice.

3.   Universities should be required to implement this policy and develop gender awareness in all students. Universities should work to develop all seven capabilities in formal and informal learning contexts and transform institutional cultures. Thus universities need to pay careful attention to gendered cultures and norms which are shaping identities in subtle and not well– recognised ways but which nonetheless lay down or reinforce patterns of identity and acceptance, and which may not serve women's aspirations well in the future.

4.   Universities need to pay attention to resource-based inequalities and find ways to address both these and gendered identity formation together for gender equality and expanded opportunities for working class black women in particular in order to fracture intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

Useful References

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