

**Louise Morley, Kattie Lussier**

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

## **1. Sex, Grades and Power: Gender Violence in African Higher Education (0068)**

**Programme number: A1.1**

### **Research Domain: Higher Education Policy**

The putative feminisation of higher education has become a global discourse. However, quantitative increases only tell a partial story about women's participation. In some cases, this is impeded by symbolic violence in quotidian gender relations. Women students' reporting of sexual harassment has been widespread in our study of widening participation in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania ([www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation)). The hierarchical power relations within universities appear to have naturalised a sexual contract in which some male academics consider it their right to demand sex for grades. These practices are contributing to social pressures for women students to reflexively minimise their visibility and academic performance, and the construction of negative female learner identities. For example, if women fail, this is seen as evidence of their lack of academic abilities and preparedness for higher education. If they achieve academically, this is attributed to prostitution, and women's 'favoured' position in the gendered academic market.

## **1. Sex, Grades and Power: Gender Violence in African Higher Education**

### **Paper**

Globally, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education (HE) was 1.08 in 2007 suggesting that participation rates are slightly higher for women than for men (UNESCO, 2009: 15). While this is unevenly distributed across academic disciplines and geographical regions, gender equality gains have produced a crisis discourse of feminisation (Leathwood and Read, 2008). Women's successes are recoded into problematisation of men's underperformance (HEPI, 2009). Quantitative increases tell a partial story, and gendered power continues to be relayed via quotidian practices.

Our study of widening participation in HE in Ghana and Tanzania reveals sexual harassment as a discursive and actual practice in all case study universities ([www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/wideningparticipation)). In addition to collecting statistical data on how gender intersects with poverty and age in four programmes of study in one public and one private university in Ghana and Tanzania (Morley and Lugg, 2009; Morley and Lussier, 2009), the project conducted 200 interviews with academic staff and policymakers and 200 life history interviews with students.

An academic manager from the public Ghanaian university articulated the *doxa* of sexual harassment:

*Sexual[0] harassment is a way of life at this university ... and people don't like to talk about it ... the female students are very vulnerable to lecturers... and the girls think that's a legitimate way to get*

*marks. Boys think the girls have an advantage because they can get marks that way and the men think if the girl comes to me and she's a grown up she's asking for it ...*

The Tanzanian public university has a policy context and committed feminists implementing gender mainstreaming. This is undermined by power relations that have naturalised a sexual contract in which some male academics consider it their entitlement to demand sex for grades. A female student reports a gender surcharge for women:

*Being a girl costs sometimes...There are some things in which people can take advantage of you because you are a girl...There are corrupt staffs... Certain staffs like if you want help they say you have to do this or that or somebody, it is not your fault but he does that so that he can get you... get sex.*

A woman in the Tanzanian private university describes predatory behaviour:

*the problem is teachers.... they are not good.... So they are not good, they approach girls ...*

Sexual harassment marks out the territory as male, and regulates female agency and visibility. Rumours of sexual exchanges also serve to denigrate women's academic achievements. A female student from the private Ghanaian university constructed the exchange as women's strategic agency:

*We do have a lot of females who come to this place with a mind to learn do well, get their grades and go out. And we have those who have come with the mind that they are doing everything to get what they want. ... so if you are the type of person who really wants to compromise positions in terms of having sex with lecturers to get grades, you will get it. The avenue is there, you will get it...if you want to compromise that much I would say it will definitely favour you.*

A male in the same university attributed a woman's success to favouritism:

*Sometimes we, we marvel you know... Because I remember in level 100 we wrote certain exams and a particular lady was not in the class but when the results came she had an 'A' and you know some of us said we wished we were ladies, you know, it's like they get special favours.*

A male student in the Ghanaian public university also cast doubt on female entitlement to HE:

*Sometime you will see a woman or a lady in a class or maybe in a group discussion...you wonder how she got admission? But when the paper comes she performs better than you. ...Sometimes some women have been favoured.*

The sex for grades exchange is a form of symbolic violence reported in other studies. Nwadike's study of Nigeria (2007) codes it as a 'phallic attack', with serious consequences on the victim's learning and health. Omale's (2002) study of Kenya and South Africa identifies sexual harassment as a factor impeding women's participation. Also researching in South Africa, Simelane (2001) confirms frequent incidences of sexual harassment on campus. A theme in the literature is fear - both of the violence itself and of reporting it (Eyre, 2000; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997). In Zimbabwe, Zindi's study (1998:46-47) discovered that every student surveyed knew lecturers who 'use their influence to exploit female students sexually', and 93 per cent of respondents reported that they 'would not report sexual harassment to any authority' fearing further victimisation. Bajpai (1999) notes that the taboo meant that many women refused to participate in her study on sexual harassment in Mumbai. One of the consequences of silence is data on the scale of the problem. Bacchi (1998) believes that institutions are inactive because they separate the institution from the problem of sexual harassment. A woman from the public university in Tanzania discussed this powerlessness:

*It is personal stuff and so most of them do not talk but I guess there is a problem there?...There is nobody to be told . {The women staff} ...They are not close to us students ...people may fear going to them ...These female lecturers ...should show us the way and listen to our problems because at least we will know that there are people whom we can turn to when we have problems...Otherwise we are alone here; we do not have parents here.*

Gender violence is undermining policy interventions for gender equity and making a nonsense out of feminisation discourses. Sexual harassment pressures women students to reflexively minimise their visibility and academic performance, and constructs negative female learner identities. The *doxa* of sexualised pedagogical relations means that if women fail, this is evidence of their lack of academic abilities and preparedness for HE. If they achieve, this is attributed to prostitution or feminisation, and women's 'favoured' position in gendered academic markets.

## **References**

Bacchi, C. (1998). Changing the Sexual Harassment Agenda. Gender and Institutions. Welfare, Work and Citizenship. M. Gatens and A. Mackinnon. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Bajpai, A. (1999). "Sexual Harassment in University and College Campuses in Mumbai." The Indian Journal of Social Work 60(4): 606-623.

Eyre, I. (2000). "The Discursive Framing of Sexual Harassment in a University Community." Gender and Education (12): 293-307.

Higher Education Policy Institute (2009). Male and Female Participation and Progression in Higher Education. Oxford, Higher Education Policy Institute.

Leathwood, C. and B. Read (2008). Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A Feminised Future? Maidenhead, McGraw-Hill/ Open University Press.

Morley, L. and R. Lugg (2009). "Mapping Meritocracy: Intersecting Gender, Poverty and Higher Educational Opportunity Structures." Higher Education Policy(22): 37-60.

Morley, L. and K. Lussier (2009). "Intersecting Poverty and Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania." In press. International Studies in Sociology of Education

Nwadiuwe, C. E. (2007). "Unwilling Brides: 'Phallic Attack' As a Barrier to Gender Balance in Higher Education in Nigeria." Sex Education 7(4): 351-369.

Omale, J. (2002). Tested to Their Limit: Sexual Harassment in Schools and Educational Institutions in Kenya. No Paradise Yet: the World's Women Face the New Century. J. Minsky and M. Radlet. London, Zed Books.

Simelane, N. O. (2001). Sexual Harassment: A Case Study of the University of Natal, South Africa. 10th General Conference of the Association of African Universities. Nairobi.

Thomas, A. M. and C. Kitzinger, Eds. (1997). Sexual Harassment: Contemporary Feminist Perspectives. Buckingham, Open University Press.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2009). Global Education Digest 2009. Montreal, UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Zindi, F. (1998). "Sexual Harassment in Zimbabwe's Institutions of Higher Education." Perspectives in Education 17(2): 39-48.