Open Research Online

Citation

Agbaire, Jennifer (2023). De/Centring Gender in Higher Education Access Policy: Lived Experiences of Admission Practices in Nigeria. In: Cohen Miller, Anna; Hinton-Smith, Tamsin; Mazanderani, Haeri Fawzia and Nupur, Samuel eds. Leading Change in Gender and Diversity in Higher Education from Margins to Mainstream. Oxon, UK and New York, USA: Routledge, pp. 7–28.

URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/87080/

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from Open Research Online (ORO) Policies

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

1 De/Centring Gender in Higher Education Access Policy

Lived Experiences of Admission Practices in Nigeria

Jennifer Jomafuvwe Agbaire

Introduction

This chapter presents a gender analysis of higher education (HE) admission practices and outcomes, drawing on a study of HE access in Nigeria. It focuses on young women's conditions and describes their experiences in relation to three key findings of the study. First is the use of sexual activity as a relevant "capital" for HE access although this framed women as "beneficiaries" rather than victims of sex-for-admission. Second, there is the interface of the admission processes with the social expectation of marriage. Participants in the study highlighted the pressure to get married within a socially acceptable time frame and the ways that persistent unsuccessful attempts at HE access intensified this pressure and produced a further barrier for young women in low socioeconomic status (SES) groups. Third, deeply entrenched patriarchal values surfaced as a potent factor that mediates different forms of agency for women in the study from different parts of Nigeria.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, global attention to gender inequalities has intensified because of growing evidence of the links between gender and development. Present-day development discourses have constantly foregrounded concerns for gender equity (Dunne, 2007). International policy frameworks, from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have included the need to eradicate gender inequalities in societies (United Nations 2000, 2015). Despite being highlighted for policy action, many contemporary feminist scholars are pessimistic about the potential of modern equity discourses to disrupt the status quo of gender relations, embedded as these discourses are often within the constraints of patriarchal rationality (Morley, 2006). This is more so as there is the argument that "little sustained attention globally" has been paid "to the role that HE plays in challenging and reproducing gender privileges and disadvantages" (Morley, 2005, p.209). This chapter develops this argument and addresses the concern of how HE access policy and processes contribute to widening gender inequalities in Nigeria.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003286943-3

Gender is not considered in Nigeria's national quota-based policy for equitable HE admissions even though there are strong indications that this is an important domain of inequalities. The discussions in this chapter are against this backdrop of an explicit absence of a gender category in the country's HE admissions policy. In this chapter, I explore gender intersections and distinct access choices and experiences among women in the study. I further examine the women's responses to discrimination and their expressions of agency. The chapter thus problematises the policy's silence to persistent gendered patterns of HE access, demonstrating that this silence often intersects with institutionalised processes and entrenched practices within the admission system. It argues that this in turn produces discrimination, advances gender-based exclusions and sustains access inequalities. In light of these, the chapter identifies gender as an important social category deserving a reconceived policy and practice attention specifically in relation to equitable access to HE.

Context

Nigeria is estimated to have a population of 193 million people (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018), making it to rank in the top ten of the world's most populous countries. Most of the population live in poverty despite the country's large economy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). There are over 250 identified ethnicities with over 500 indigenous languages (Kraxberger, 2005; Suberu, 2001) practicing various denominations of Christianity, Islam and traditional African religion. It is the country's rich linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that perhaps constitutes one of its most significant features in addition to its colonial history, contentious post-independence politics and persistent inter-group tensions and often-violent conflicts (Kraxberger, 2005; Mustapha, 2007).

Geographically segmented into two broad regions (North and South), distinctions are often drawn along these lines in terms of widely differing value systems. This includes that Islam is much more predominant in the northern region (Nwaoga et al., 2014) than in the south which has a greater number of practicing Christians. These differences in religious composition are easily apparent in the everyday aspects of life in communities in these regions and in institutions. For example, the dress code is significantly different and more seriously enforced in institutions including universities, in the north, with women required to cover most body parts. The differences between both regions are additionally often represented by significant inequalities in educational participation, with national records historically showing higher rates for the south (Fafunwa, 1968; Mustapha, 2007). This disparity has persisted across all levels of education in the country, fuelling existing tensions. With regard to HE in particular, it has strongly contributed to the introduction of a national quota-based policy for admissions to public institutions which includes location-based quotas.

One of these quotas is for applicants from 21 of the 36 states in the country which have been categorised as educationally disadvantaged. All 19 states of the northern Nigerian region are included in this category (Imhabekhai, 2006; Musari, 2016).

Further to regional disparities, however, are high levels of gender differences in university access across both regions of the country (Agboola & Ofoegbu, 2010). Figure 1.1 is a portrayal of the percentage of male and female admissions between 2011 and 2015. It reveals that each year, access of female applicants was correspondingly lower than those of male.
This gender gap exists in the context of various indications of gender as a significant space for social inequality in the country, including national HE admission statistics that continues to reflect unequal gendered patterns of access (see Table 1.1) and reports that issues around gender norms are culturally ingrained in the society (Onwuameze, 2013).

Northern Nigeria is particularly noted to have higher levels of gender inequality in university participation, and this has been claimed to be perhaps consequent of more restrictive religious and cultural values generally held in the region (Biraimah, 1994; Ololube et al., 2013). However, it is also notable that the gender situation applies to over 90% of all the universities in the country (JAMB, 2018). Especially in science-based institutions such as the Federal Universities of Technology, northern and southern Nigeria do not seem to vary widely in terms of gender access disparities. Table 1.2 presents admission information of selected science-based universities in the country to illustrate this point. This suggests that there remains a great gender imbalance in terms of disciplinary destinations and supports the observation that

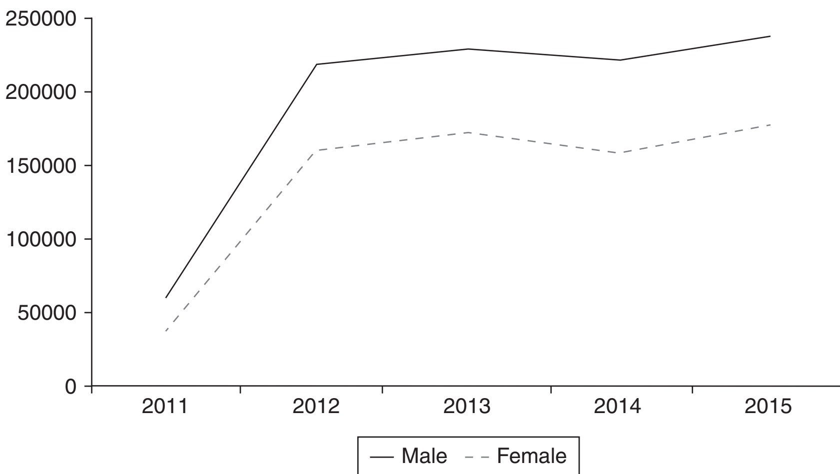

Figure 1.1 Gender Gap in University Access across Nigeria.
Source: Adapted from JAMB (2018).

Table 1.1 Higher education gross enrolment rate by gender in Nigeria

Year	*Total Admissions*	*Proportion of Male Admissions*	*Proportion of Female Admissions*
2017	566,719	315,678 *55.7%*	251,041 *44.3%*
2018	549,763	302,183 *55.0%*	247,580 *45.0%*

Source: Adapted from National Bureau of Statistics, NBS (2019).

Table 1.2 Admissions by gender in selected Nigerian science-based universities (2014)

Institution	*Region*	*Approximate Percentage of Total Admissions*	
		Male (%)	*Female (%)*
Federal University of Technology, Akure	South-West	77	23
Federal University of Technology, Owerri	South-East	76	24
Federal University of Technology, Minna	North-Central	77	23
Federal University of Technology, Yola	North-East	77	23

Source: Adapted from JAMB (2018).

many more women nationwide are taking up spaces in "less valued" courses than males and vice versa (Adeyemi & Akpotu, 2004; Mukoro, 2014).

It has been argued that gender affects both university access and students' aspirations once admitted to the university in Nigeria (Biraimah, 1994). The unequal access patterns highlighted above make it even more striking that gender is totally absent from the national policy framework for equitable admissions. Echoing this and observing significant gender gaps in the nation's university enrolments, Adeyemi and Akpotu (2004, p.366) had asserted that it is disheartening that despite several quotas to ensure fair representation, the national admissions policy does not include any special consideration for women who they describe as "culturally and religiously constrained".

Understanding Gender in Education

"Young" people are typically referred to as "girls" or "boys" in Nigeria, particularly when they are students and unmarried. Indeed, "women" is often

conventionally reserved in this context for those that are either married or "clearly" middle-aged if unmarried. I have opted to use "female" or "women" in this chapter to move away from such rather presumptuous "othering". However, I use the term "gender" with an appreciation of different feminist standpoints, and in my understanding of the term, I use group identity markers such as "female" or "women" for example, with a sense of their own limitations (Spivak, 1987).

The discussion of gender inequities in this chapter focuses on the conditions of women essentially because in Nigeria as elsewhere, women have historically, culturally and statistically been marginalised within both educational and wider social practices (Adeyemi & Akpotu, 2004). My analysis employs feminist thinking on the socially constructed nature of gender (Thomas, 1990; Butler 1993, 1995). It locates this in a post-colonial context and recognises the heterogeneity of women's conditions (hooks, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Oyěwùmí,1997; Spivak, 1987) and multiple differences in their responses to those and their sense of agency (Mahmood, 2005). Feminist theory offers an important critical lens on the linkage between sex and power in society and in education (Beasley, 1999; Dunne, 2007; Thomas 1990; Weedon, 1999). At the same time, it highlights the need to conceptualise and explore the differences *among* women, especially in such contexts as Nigeria with wide ethnic, religious, economic and other social diversities. This is supported by an anti-essentialist position which also acknowledges the meaning of gender as always related to other terms in context (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Mama, 2001). As Mohanty puts it,

> To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being "women" has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. But no one "becomes a woman" ... purely because they are female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex.
>
> (1991, pp.12–13)

My experience of the Nigerian context is that "womanhood" inescapably remains a huge aspect of people's sense of social identity in this "modern" world. Yet, "'[f]emininity' is constantly devalued" (Thomas 1990, p.20) not just in the wider society in general but also particularly in education systems. From stereotypical and distorted discourses by education practitioners (Bernstein 1996; Rasool & Morley, 2000), sexist assumptions in curricula and biased classroom practices (Dunne et al., 2005; Thomas, 1990) to misrecognition in education policy (Tsolidis, 1996), the potential of education to build and maintain hierarchical gender relations has been evidenced in a range of academic scholarship. Stereotypical notions of the male and female genders do not only shape students' schooling experiences but influence their HE trajectories and choices (Morley 1997; Thomas, 1990). My concern in

this chapter about the inattention to gender in the Nigerian access policy is thus not just about the production of hierarchical gender identities but also of associated learner identities.

The subsequent analysis in this chapter explores how women aspiring to HE may experience conflict between personal goal and societal expectation through HE access policy and practices. This is important for understanding the dimensions of agency and for mapping mainstream equity policy directions. Such analysis is particularly relevant for the Nigerian context where the social expectations of femininity are more generally reported to mostly include passivity, submission and "marriageability" (Onwuameze, 2013). The thrust of my argument in this chapter about the absence of gender in the Nigerian HE policy aligns with the need to reverse the traditional hierarchy of (masculine) social privilege by revaluing the feminine (Beasley, 2005). However, it is also about appreciating the potential error in hinging gender equity struggles on the "sameness" of all women. I argue that recognising context-specific – economic, religious, ethnic and intranational or international – experiences that might account for important differences among women would equally provide valuable insights to gendered conditions.

Research Design

The research study from which this chapter draws was predominantly qualitative and informed by an interpretive tradition that emphasises subjectivity, reflexivity and contextualisation in procedure and findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Whitley, 2012). A key aim of the study was to understand the operation of gender in the Nigerian University admission system and to explore how gender is included in access within this context.

Employing an embedded case study design (Yin, 1989), the study included current students and applicants in two federal universities respectively located in the south and north regions of Nigeria and henceforth referred to as Southern University and Northern University. Gender was a criteria for the selection of participants. This was not just because it is a key axis of equity policy globally but also because this reflected my initial reviews of national HE data. Gender as a key selection criteria also reflected my personal experience and professional observations as a lecturer in a Nigerian University for several years. Location was also a key selection criteria as both regions embody major opposites in Nigeria's social and political terrain. Communal identities and cultural values within the south-west widely differ from those of the north-west. These influence the features and preoccupations of social categories like gender and family background and indicate that a region-specific exploration was important as a useful way of understanding whether people under contrasting regional conditions might have similar admission experiences and how these conditions might also relate to different patterns of gendered access.

A total of 12 applicants were interviewed while 29 current students participated in focus groups. Of the 41 participants, 20 were female and 21 were male. The current students were mostly in their first year of university and the applicants had all previously undergone the university application process at least once without gaining admission. The participants were all aged 18 or above, and several steps such as informed consent, freedom to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity were taken to ensure an ethical research practice. The focus groups were regionally homogenous and gender-specific to protect participants from harm that may arise from gender or other conflict and tensions. The research was considered to be ethically low-risk and with sufficient ethical provisions by the University of Sussex's ethics committee after review.

I approached the interviews and focus groups using a feminist framework, exploring participants' lived experiences with a view to representing the often-silenced voices of those that feel excluded or marginalised (DeVault & Gross, 2006). I also took a view to actively co-producing knowledge together with the participants (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

University Access Experiences as Gendered – Unpacking the Evidence from Nigeria

Evidence from the research shows that university admission experiences in Nigeria are highly gendered. Through three key findings related to sexual activity, marriage and agency, gender emerged as significant to exclusionary HE admission experiences and access inequalities, underscoring the need for policy and practice attention. I will proceed to expand on these findings.

"They Want to Sleep with Me" – Sex as Capital?

The accounts of the research participants indicate that economic and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of money and connections are crucial in the admission process to the highly sought-after federal universities in Nigeria. This manifests through unaccountable practices and conventions that result in favouritism, discrimination and exclusion. Connected to this are narratives of sexual activity and favour which featured prominently in participants' accounts as a "capital" to be used for university access. Several female students across the sample shared personal stories about their experience of demands from lecturers for sexual favours in return for "guaranteed" admission:

> all the people I met … they cannot help me. They want to sleep with me. That's all they want … They would want to sleep with a girl first before they help. They ask me to go and meet them in a hotel before they can be of help.
>
> (Maimuna, aspiring to Northern University)

> the man … that wanted to help me, he's asking me out. He thinks if he can help me with admission, I would give in to him and since I wasn't "playing ball" and giving him assurance, he decided I wasn't important.
>
> (Faith, aspiring to Southern University)

Wide-ranging literatures (Bagihole & Woodward, 1995; Bajpai, 1999; Bakari & Leach, 2007; Britwum & Anokye, 2006; Chan et al., 1999; Kaplan, 2006; Omale, 2002; Shumba & Matina, 2002; Morley, 2011; Nwadigwe, 2007) have examined sexual harassment and transactional sex in the Nigerian HE system and in various other country contexts. However, how this might be involved in admissions and what implications there are for access policy have often not been critically interrogated. All the female participants in my study voiced at least three separate issues in the operation of transactional sex. These concerned the elaborate and money-intensive nature of the application process, the poor accountability in admission decisions and the intersection with SES. These three features of the admission system leave women vulnerable.

In this regard, an important cause-and-effect connection between money-for-higher-grades and sex-for-admission was described. This indicated that women's exposure to sexual harassment is often a result of the workings of economic capital. Widespread entrance examination malpractices in Nigeria (Orji et al., 2017) support subscribers to achieve higher scores for university access. These are, however, only available to those who are financially solvent. Given the fixed number of university places, this works to the detriment of those who cannot afford these services. This includes women from a less advantaged background. The exclusion based on finances is compounded by the challenges of sexual advances. Indeed, transactional sex could be viewed as an access alternative "forced" on women who have no material resources or connections.

> I know some people that can hardly spell their names but they are now in the university because they know big people or they agreed to sleep with one lecturer. But me who puts in all my effort to read my books from morning to night, I've got nothing from there. Only what they want is … my money that I didn't even have and to sleep with me … I'm tired!
>
> (Maimuna)

This illustrates how different capitals work together in complex ways but also how gender becomes a heightened factor within these exclusions. In Maimuna's case above, her SES intersects with her gender in a complicated way. In her full narrative, she explained that she had done menial jobs to raise money for a bribe but because her family had no relevant social connections, even her bribe money had not been effective. Instead, she was defrauded. Like several participants, she added that finding the money for a

bribe is one thing and getting a positive outcome is another. This is because strong social connections are also very important. With no relevant social capital to combine with some economic capital, sex as capital was her only other alternative. She was frustrated by her admission predicament as her refusal to use sex as capital has left her outside the university after two applications in two years.

The forms of exclusion voiced by the participants are troubling. Because of the pervasiveness of sexual advances, some female participants expressed that they felt excluded even before they applied. They never even attempted to apply to certain universities as a result:

> I don't have anybody in that university. No connection … and the money for bribe is much. The next thing, they would want to sleep with me first and I don't want to use my body for such. God forbids! So, I did not just bother to apply.
>
> (Joy, aspiring to Southern University)

These narratives resurface questions around the admission policy's contribution to an application process that appears not to reflect a nuanced consideration of complex intersections – in this case, that of SES and gender – in affecting access. The narratives are important because not only is sexual harassment evidenced to be widespread, but it is also portrayed as contributing to stratification among women themselves. For example, Maimuna had observed above that some applicants might perform poorly in the entrance examinations yet gain access through gratifying the sexual demands of lecturers that can influence admissions. Another story echoed this when the lecturer involved stated that female applicants who succumbed to his request for sex did not need to do well in the entrance examinations:

> This thing is very rampant! My friend went to [name of a university] to write the PUTME [Post Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination.]. She didn't know anybody there. So, someone directed her to one lecturer to stay with. She said the lecturer kept telling her that her admission is sure as long as she gives him what he wants. He said she didn't need to score high – that all she needed to do was give him her body … that he has helped some of her mates like that. Hmm! He did not help her because she refused … She even ran out of his house. Now, we are applying together again.
>
> (Faith)

The operation of gender is even more important in a context where sexual harassment and transactional sex might be framed as an advantage or *help* to women rather than as a disadvantageous product of male domination. Because it may lead to access for some, sex-for-admission was quite a controversial issue among participants. Various students held different but

equally strong views about whether sexual appeal could be regarded as a gender advantage or not. For instance, some male participants expressed indignation to the claim that women are less advantaged than men in university access. This contrasted with those female participants that recounted their experience of sexual demands and described themselves as victims in the process. Many male participants were reluctant to classify women as victims of sexual harassment in this regard – women were rather seen as "beneficiaries":

> I think if I were a female, I could have been given admission in the university of my choice more easily. The reason is that I had many opportunities of meeting many male lecturers in the department and if I were a female, there would have been means of seducing them ... Seduction would have worked – it's common in this country – and I wouldn't have had to apply again.
>
> (Famous, Northern University student)

In the above comment for instance, Famous voiced a direct objection to the idea that young women who apply to university often stand a lower chance of getting in. For him, the opposite is the case as women can "take advantage" of their "sexual appeal" to men. Curiously, this was not viewed from the perspective of women being vulnerable victims but as a case of them using all their "capitals" (which the male applicants do not have) to get what they want. Similarly, other male participants had mapped the notion of gender as an advantage by reflecting on how women might become better prepared for university admission processes than men:

> if I were a girl, I would have got into university earlier … because when I was attending [preparatory] tutorial, I had these friends … they were girls. The head of the tutorial was always coming to help them with stuff on their admission and I would be like, "Sir, what about me? I'm a human being!" He would say, "Okay, I will help you" but he never really came because of course, I cannot give him any sexual gratification. Those girls, they got the courses they wanted and got admitted that first year too. I wouldn't want to say it's because they are girls but it definitely crossed my mind that they must have attracted such help because they are girls.
>
> (John, Southern University student)

The above reflection includes the assumption that female students get more attention and support because male staff get sexually attracted to them – suggesting that male students do not get an equivalent treatment. It also implied that women may do better because of this male attention and not necessarily because they can. This is evocative of Morley's (2011) observation that women's academic successes might be positioned as resulting

from transactional sex even when they are not. Through such discourses, the serious issue of making women use their bodies in illicit ways to gain university access is framed either as a desirable thing or an acceptable norm. Especially in a male-dominated society, failure to address them may reinforce hegemonic conditions of gender (mis)representation and misrecognition where even women themselves may consider sex-for-access as an advantage. In this connection, a female participant had also agreed with the male participants' position that sexual demands benefitted women:

> Yes, the girls are at an advantage. Whoever is handling the admission can just say, "Let's just push her in because she's a lady. She has something to offer". Then, there is the aspect of the men saying to the lady, "Use your body to pay me" and [*pause*] well, the lady gets in!
>
> (Daisy, Southern University student)

For Daisy above, the end justified the means. She considered being made to "pay" with "your body" not as an abuse of power by men but as a development that puts girls at an advantage. Her acceptance of this is perhaps an indication of how hegemonic discourses around circumstances of application and admission might shift policy focus from unfavourable access conditions that they embed. This is essential because women's vulnerability in these conditions is misrecognised. Ultimately, this echoes feminist thinking that socially constructed gendered processes advance male privileges, suppress women and produce specific ways of being in education (Thomas, 1990; Butler 1993, 1995).

"I will Go and Marry" – Women's Responses to Pressure and Experience

The research data shows that when gender intersects with patriarchal values as well as SES, university access challenges almost certainly result in unsuccessful access attempts for some female applicants. This sustains social exclusion. The data further indicates that this is not only because some women might be pushed to give in to sexual demands from male admission officers. An added issue is that when they constantly face admission hurdles, others might give up their aspiration to university altogether. They rather settle for the role of a wife as socially prescribed for women in the society:

> Yes, I have to get married! Most of my friends are already thinking of it too and saying it's better to get married … and just forget about studying further.
>
> (Talatu, aspiring to Northern University)

Talatu, for instance, had bitterly complained about her application experience while telling her story. Caught up in socio-cultural norms, she quite decided on simply getting married soon and entirely abandoning her pursuit

of a university education like many of her friends. This was the stance especially of female participants who thought that they were living in the context of stricter stereotypical religious and cultural understandings of gender. For example, like Talatu, Maimuna had also been quite certain about quitting if the challenges persist in her next attempt:

> Honestly, if my application fails again, I'll go and marry. I have a fiancé but it's not like I'm the type of girl that doesn't want to further her education. I love to go to university but I don't want to lose my opportunity [to marry] because soon people here would start saying maybe this girl is "walking up and down" and before you know it, people have said so much bad about you.

In her above remark, Maimuna alluded to the idea that women who fail to marry early enough by Nigerian society's standards are often assumed to be involved with multiple sex partners or "sleeping around" – something Nigerian society frowns at for women. She remained constrained by difficult application processes that have contributed to unsuccessful admission attempts. These experiences have intensified the pressure to quit and marry.

The operation of gender in these access circumstances cannot be overemphasised. The decision to marry by Talatu and Maimuna can be linked not just to the social expectations from women but also to the absence of institutional support to alleviate the pressure of such expectations – for example, through gender-specific policy criteria and gender-sensitive policy processes. For people like Talatu and Maimuna, the marital clock is ticking, and every year they attempt and fail to gain access to university, they are trading their opportunity to fulfil the social expectation or obligation (as it were) to "settle down" in marriage, start a family and be admitted into the social circle of "decent, responsible Nigerian women". The longer they remain single in pursuit of an education that they are even uncertain of accessing, the lesser their chance of getting married. Their non-traditional status of singlehood at a certain age would be interpreted by society to mean they are living indecent lives. This can in turn mean further exclusion, especially among ethno-religious groups in northern Nigeria where such ideologies appear to be more prevalent (Onwuameze, 2013).

All the female participants' accounts indicate that undoubtedly access experiences represent a lot of different shades of exclusion to and for different vulnerable groups of women in Nigeria. To emphasise this, for instance, both North and South participants pointed out that essentially because of marital expectations, the financial status of the family becomes an even bigger barrier to women's access to university in the context of unaffordable application processes. For example, Betty in the south recounted,

> My daddy does not have a problem with me going to university anyway but he said no money to pursue admission for me again because he has

> to focus on my brothers. Me, I'm a woman. Last, last, I will get married but they are men. So, they need it more.

This strikingly resembles Maimuna's story in the north:

> It has not been easy for me at all. Sometimes, my daddy will tell me he doesn't have money because he has to pay for my brothers. So, sometimes, my friends or my fiancé help me. But even now that I insist I must get admission, my fiancée refused to help me because he thinks that if he gives me the money, it's a waste. Nobody wants to give me money for [the entrance] exam again … Ah, I feel very sad! Now, I just wish they would just admit me anyhow to any course. Otherwise, I have to just go and marry.

Both Betty and Maimuna had previously mentioned that they thought of themselves as lucky to have a father and fiancée respectively that let them pursue their dream to study at university at all. But they explained that such luck is often unstable and short-lived because of daunting and expensive application processes that have ultimately yielded negative outcomes. At the time of this research, they had become no longer so concerned about studying their choice course but more interested in at least getting into university, irrespective of whatever course they were offered. They were aware that as women, time was fast running out. There were no financial means to keep trying as every failure had made it more difficult to convince anyone to help fund the process over again. All of these further implicate policy processes and silence on gender in the resultant exclusions.

Performing Gender – Agency in Context

The research participants' stories largely show that gendered patterns of access relate to complex connections between socio-cultural values, including stereotypical notions of gender roles and economic conditions. Against this background, there was the expression of some resistance by women:

> People are saying, "You should go and get married soon" because you know, the decent woman thing … but I will not stop my application …! I believe that my ambition and destiny are tied to education, not marriage. So, no matter the rubbish they are saying – plus the stress and everything – I believe my passion and zeal will remain.
>
> (Joy, aspiring to Southern University)

> The stratification such that when you're in certain professions as a woman, there's a way people look at you like you shouldn't be there, I resent it! The fact that you are a boy and people think that you can do

> something better than me shouldn't stop me from doing what I want to do.
>
> (Essy, Southern University student)

Female students from both south and north constantly referred to gender social norms and their efforts or intent to circumvent these:

> You know, our men, they don't care. All they want is to marry many wives and have children … As a female, it is very good to be educated. After I finish university, I could find a good job and be supporting myself and my children from the pay even if my husband is not there.
>
> (Maimuna)

> You know, people don't kind of believe in the female child as such. So, I have to like – not only me – we female children, we have to like prove them wrong and do what we really want. We have to show our parents and the whole society that male children are not better than us. Then we can also talk where men are talking and people will value us more.
>
> (Faith)

Illustratively, Maimuna in the above comment challenges the idea that a husband can and will provide for the family. Faith above strongly expressed the need to trouble entrenched gender hierarchies. For several participants like Faith, their pursuit of university access was more explicitly rooted in an ambition to change the dominant social perspectives about women and improve their relative standing with men. They argued that to do this, they must succeed in accessing and possibly surpassing males in male-dominated courses and beyond.

Many, however, continued to reproduce stereotypes in their agency. These participants clearly expressed no intention to access traditionally male academic spaces:

> To say the truth, I still look at myself as not very good academically – that is, to do all those hard courses. It's just normal for girls to be Arts students and so on. So, when I applied to university, I just wanted something that would be easier for me to gain admission. Later, I thought that maybe if I had tried harder to get into a harder course, I may have gotten in but I was also then thinking about how I would have struggled to cope with the course academically all through my years of studying it. So, no way.
>
> (Habibah, Southern University student)

Their agency operated within some acceptance of the confines of the age-long patriarchal definition of women as often powerless and intellectually

subordinate compared to men (Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Sayers 1982). This was more explicit in some responses where agency was primarily expressed in terms of obtaining economic independence and mostly to "survive" women's lower social positioning:

> As far as you are going to give birth to children … you need to go to university as a woman. I can't fight with my husband because he's the man but at least, I can use the job I get to take care of myself and my children.
>
> (Maimuna)

Maimuna had challenged the notion of husband-as-provider, but she accepts her role as "respectful" (in the sense of no intent to "fight" male "superiority") future wife and mother. She seeks to overcome the effect of this kind of gender "profiling" by obtaining a university degree. For her, the degree is not to contest the inherent hierarchy but to hopefully more "progressively" adapt to it by gaining more economic capital from better-paid employment.

While the different expressions of agency highlight the heterogeneity of women within different socio-religious contexts (Mahmood, 2005; Oyěwùmí, 1997), they also re-echo the power of patriarchal discursive formations to continuously shape women's notions of their subjectivity (Dunne et al., 2017; Weedon, 1997). Put differently, the distinct ways that the female participants responded to gender discrimination and expressed their agency remind us of Mahmood's (2005) argument for women's voices as crucial for deeper insights into gender-based subjugation and a nuanced understanding of resistance. This also connects with the significance of context in the performance of gender and agency (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Mama, 2001; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Across the research's sample, assumptions about family, culture, religion and dressing within context made a difference in applying to university as well as to specific disciplines/courses. For example, many female participants in Northern University did not like to study a course like Theatre Arts because they considered that it exposed them to too much physical contact with males and to a career in the quite public entertainment industry:

> as a girl born and bred in this part of the country, I don't think I can participate in most of the dancing and drama they do in the course. And even all the other stuff in the profession. That's why I want to study something else.
>
> (Rahmah, Muslim aspiring to Northern University)

The same course was considered a very high-demand one by female participants in Southern University, with many in the Humanities wishing that they were studying it because it is one of the relatively prestigious ones:

> if I had the chance to apply again, I would certainly go for Theatre Arts. It's highly rated here by girls because at least, it is a leading Arts course.
>
> (Daisy, Christian Southern University)

The participants' viewpoints and contrasting preferences are consistent with national enrolment statistics (JAMB, 2018) that suggest that while male students generally out-numbered female students across Nigerian universities, more females from southern Nigeria are participating in university and in specific courses than those from the north. The differing preferences of female participants in the research are striking as these speak to feminist arguments that the meaning or enactment of "womanhood" has as much to do with other aspects of identity like race (or in this case, region and perhaps, religion) as it has to do with sex (Mohanty 1991, 2003).

In addition to similarities in access experiences, the female participants referred to important differences in their accounts that they assumed to be region- and/or religion-related. Some concerned simple references to appearance such as dressing:

> There are cultural and religious differences between most of us here and girls in the north. My mum actually went to university in the north and she used to tell us you couldn't wear these kinds of clothes I'm wearing now to many places there and all that stuff. All of these did not make me even think about going to university there at all because for one, I love sleeveless clothes and I don't like to be restricted in that way. I don't think it's indecent.
>
> (Essy, Christian in Southern University)

Others involved a complicated distinction between religion and culture, showing how region is crucial in the way that they intersect and impact on views and women's education differently in both regions:

> The mistake we always make is mixing religion with culture. Actually, Islam would not say the girl-child should not be educated. It is the northern culture that feels the girl should be restricted. Islam says, "Train a girl child and you train a nation". Unlike the south, most people in the north are Muslims. That's why there is the idea that not training the girl child is an Islamic thing.
>
> (Habibah, Muslim in Southern University)

These female participants' comments suggest that responses to similar access challenges or admission conditions may vary among young women in Nigeria depending on wider issues of context related to (the intensity of) their specific religious and/or socio-regional values. They also reveal the complexity of gender-based exclusions and agency.

The potency of regional context to shape assumptions was demonstrated in the below excerpt from one female focus group discussion comprising both Muslim and Christian students at Northern University. Noteworthy is that during the discussion, I had to keep probing because my identity – not just as a woman from southern Nigeria but as one born, bred and living in the south – clearly seemed to make the participants hesitant to be more specific and detailed about their view:

AMINATU: You know all those stories of how if you go to the south, you'd just change [*General laughter. Crosstalk*]

ME: Tell me about it. [*Laughter. Pause*]

HALIMAH: It's easy to see …Their life there is so kind of different. [*Crosstalk*]

ME: Is it that they are not as good or decent or …? [*Pause*] You can tell me.

GRACE: Well, even when you watch all these Nigerian films, you'd see how maybe a village girl or one from the north that left for let's say Lagos now … She would just come back very different!

HALIMAH: Exactly.

ME: How?

AMINATU: Over exposed. And … ready to do anything.

ME: Okay. Too exposed. How?

GRACE: Like the way I'm dressed now covered up and decent, it's very different from how they dress there. And the way they behave – they are more, you know, disrespectful of the rules and even their religion more than we are over here.

In this discussion, Grace referred to dressing which Essy had mentioned in her earlier comment above although they clearly expressed opposite views about what "decent" dressing should be. Yet, Grace and Essy are both Christians. A key difference between them is that they are from northern and southern Nigeria, respectively. On the other hand, Grace agreed with Aminatu and Halimah who are both Muslims but also from the north like her. This appears to indicate that regional culture strongly influences how religion is enacted. It also seems to indicate that this intersection impacts gendered actions and reactions to conditions of university access differently. Grace suggested this in her comment that women in the south tend to be more inclined to resisting prescribed gender social norms than those in the north. Aminatu's comment that the former group of women are "ready to do anything" can be read in the Nigerian context as an insinuation that they are more open to "alternative" ways of pursuing university access, such as transactional sex. These insinuations may be mere "perception". Nevertheless, they add to the argument that while gender is essentially an important factor for policy consideration, gendered experiences and women's reactions need to be investigated from differing ethnic, regional and religious standpoints.

Implications and Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken a gender analysis of the important gaps missed by policy in/attention to unequal HE access, drawing on evidence from a study in the Nigerian context. It has set the scene by outlining a conceptualisation of gender inequalities that uses a poststructural feminist approach which allows for plurality and applies to a "range of theoretical positions" (Weedon, 1997, p.19).

The evidence in the chapter portrays that women are constantly excluded from access because of admission processes that contribute to their vulnerability and policy absences that appear to normalise their conditions. Complex gender dimensions and intersectionality underscore the veracity of the issues. These indicate that admissions for women applicants remain inhibited even despite mobilisation of considerable individual agency, because the admission system does not explicitly address process challenges nor recognise gender differences and discrimination. My analysis suggests that it cannot be assumed that gender-based access challenges will be adequately covered within other policy categories – access policy must specifically and actively include gender parity in its agenda for fairness. When evidenced gender gaps and intersections are not addressed in policy and gender is not considered as a key category for fair access, the gaps are sustained and gender hierarchies are consistently reproduced.

For policy reform, the analysis in this chapter further suggests however that simply instituting a gender admission quota is also not enough as this is likely to remain located within entrenched patriarchal discourses (Morley, 1997). With reference to the Nigerian case, for instance, it is imperative to constantly monitor and investigate the operation of any gender quota and to enforce clear-cut strategies that would encourage and support female applicants to access the available places. For example, the application and admission processes should be more gender-sensitive in such ways that women applicants benefit without intimidation or victimisation. One important step towards this is to incorporate effective reporting and sanctioning mechanisms for cases of sexual harassment and transactional sex. Policy strategies will also need to clearly direct how discourses that circulate around sex or sexual appeal and gender constitute the subjects, particularly the victims of abuse. Gender inequalities training for HE staff and enforcement action where positions are abused are further recommended useful strategies.

Further research is also needed. Specific projects may, for example, more extensively explore the impact of patriarchal structures on female students' agency. One criticism of Western feminism is its "oversimplified theorisations" in which complex gender relations and differentiation among women are not fully unpacked (Humphreys et al., 2008, p.7). This criticism is more often with comparative reference to the contexts of African women and those in the West. Evidence from the study in this chapter

suggests that even among African women and within national boundaries, experiences of and responses to gender norms might vary according to distinct permutations involving region (linkable to ethnicity), religion, SES and so on. Building on the discussions in this chapter, further research should pay greater attention to the varying ways that gender is experienced and performed in such different micro contexts and what comparative implications there are for HE participation and for development. In the specific case of Nigeria, this chapter has evidenced that women's responses differ, but there remain questions to explore. Future research should give closer attention to exploring what contextual differences and conditions are most significant to women's responses to discrimination and why, as well as how these intersect in complex ways to impact women's expression of agency.

References

Adeyemi, K., & Akpotu, N. (2004). Gender analysis of student enrolment in Nigerian universities. *Higher Education, 48*(3), 361–378.

Agboola, B. M., & Ofoegbu, F. I. (2010). *Access to university education in Nigeria: A review*. Benin City: University of Benin.

Bagihole, B., & Woodward, H. (1995). An occupational hazard warning: academic life can seriously damage your health. An investigation of sexual harassment of women in a UK university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *16*(1), 37–51.

Bajpai, A. (1999). Sexual harassment in university and college campuses in Mumbai. *The Indian Journal of Social Work, 60*(4), 606–623.

Bakari, S., & Leach, F. (2007). Hijacking equal opportunity policies in a Nigerian college of education: The micropolitics of gender. *Women's Studies International Forum, 30*(2), 85–96.

Beasley, C. (1999). *What is feminism?: An introduction to feminist theory*. London: Sage.

Beasley, C. (2005). *Gender and sexuality. Critical theories, critical thinkers*. London: Sage.

Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic controls and identity*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Biraimah, K. (1994). Class, gender and societal inequalities: A study of Nigerian and Thai undergraduate students. *Higher Education, 27*, 41–58.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). Forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood.

Britwum, A., & Anokye, N. (2006). *Confronting sexual harassment in Ghanaian universities*. Ghana: Ghana Universities Press.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1995). Contingent connections. Feminism and the question of "postmodernism". In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Feminist contentions: A philosophical exchange* (pp. 35–58). London: Routledge.

Central Intelligence Agency (2019). The World Fact Book. Retrieved May 30, 2020, from www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html

Chan, D., Tan, C. S. K., & Chan, W. (1999). Sexual harassment: A preliminary analysis of its effects on Hong Kong and Chinese women in the workplace and academia. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 23,* 661–672.

Chilisa, B., & Ntseane, G. (2010). Resisting dominant discourses: Implications of indigenous, African feminist theory and methods for gender and education research. *Gender and Education, 22*(6), 617–632.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DeVault, M. L., & Gross, G. (2006). Feminist interviewing: Experience, talk and knowledge. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.) *Handbook of feminist research: theory and praxis* (ch. 9). London: Sage.

Dunne, M. (2007). Gender, sexuality and schooling: Everyday life in junior secondary schools in Ghana and Botswana. *International Journal of Educational Development, 27*(5), 499–511.

Dunne, M., Durrani, N., Fincham, K. & Crossouard, B. (2017). *Troubling Muslim youth identities. Nation, religion, gender.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fafunwa, A. B. (1968). *Over a hundred years of higher education for Nigerians*. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information.

Haslam, N., & Whelan, J. (2008). Human natures: psychological essentialism in thinking about differences between people. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*, 1297–1312.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Humphreys, S., Undie, C., & Dunne, M. (2008). Gender, sexuality and development: key issues in education and society in Sub-Saharan Africa. In M. Dunne (Ed.), *Gender, sexuality and development: Education and society in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 7–38). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Imhabekhai, C. (2006). Widening access to university education in Nigeria: the open university option. In: A. Oduaran & H.S. Bhola (Eds) *Widening access to education as social justice. Essays in honour of Michael Omolewa*. The Netherlands: Springer.

Joint Admission and Matriculations Board, JAMB (2018). Statistics 2010–2016. www.jamb.gov.ng/Statistics.aspx

Kaplan, O. (2006). Awareness instruction for sexual harassment: Findings from an experiential learning process at a higher education institute in Israel. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 30*(3), 213–227.

Kraxberger, B. (2005). Strangers, indigenes and settlers: Contested geographies of citizenship in Nigeria. *Space and Polity, 9*(1), 9–27.

Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mama, A. (2001). Challenging subjects: Gender and power in African context. *African Sociological Review*, 5(2), 63–73.

Mohanty, C. T. (1991). Under western eyes. In C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, & L. Torres (Eds). *Third World women and the politics of feminism*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders. Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Morley, L. (1997). Change and equity in higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 18*(2), 231–242.

Morley, L. (2005). Gender equity in Commonwealth higher education. *Women Studies International Forum, 28*(2005), 209–221.

Morley, L. (2006). Gender equity in commonwealth higher education. An examination of sustainable interventions in selected commonwealth universities. Educational Paper No 65. London: DFID.

Morley, L. (2011). Sex, grade and power in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *4*(1), 101–115.

Mukoro, A. S. (2014). Gender participation in university education in Nigeria: closing the gap. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, 34*, 53–62.

Musari, A. (2016). Much Ado About Educationally Less Developed States. *The Guardian,* November 7. Retrieved April 14, 2018, from https://guardian.ng/features/much-ado-about-educationally-less-developed-states/

Mustapha, A. R. (2007). Institutionalising ethnic representation: how effective is the Federal Character Commission in Nigeria? *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE)*, Working Paper (43).

Nwadigwe, C. E. (2007). Unwilling brides: "phallic attack" as a barrier to gender balance in higher education in Nigeria. *Sex Education, 7*(4), 351–369.

Nwaoga, C. T., Nche, G. C., & Olihe, A.O. (2014). The national conference, ethno-religious pluralism and the challenge of national unity in Nigeria. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2*(3), 44–58.

Ololube, N. P., Dudafa, U. J., Uriah, O. A., & Agbor, C.N. (2013). Education for development: Impediments to the globalization of higher education in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Foundations and Management, 1*(2), 109–130.

Omale, J. (2002). Tested to their limit: sexual harassment in schools and educational institutions in Kenya. In J. Minsky & M. Radlet (Eds), *No paradise yet: The world's women face the new century* (pp.19–38). London: Zed Books.

Onwuameze, N. C. (2013). *Educational opportunity and inequality in Nigeria: Assessing social background, gender and regional effects*. PhD Thesis, University of Iowa.

Orji, O., Mando, P. N., & Ajaegbo, A. N. (2017). Examination malpractices as the bane of Nigeria education system: Implications for educational planning and management. *American Journal of Education and Learning*, *2*(1), 96–102.

Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The innovation of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Rasool, N., & Morley, L. (2000). School effectiveness and the displacement of equity discourses in education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 3*(3), 237–258.

Sayers, J. (1982). *Biological politics: Feminist and anti-feminist perspectives*. New York: Methuen Inc.

Shumba, A., & Matina, A. (2002). Sexual harassment of college students by lecturers in Zimbabwe. *Sex Education, 2*(1), 45–59.

Spivak, G. (1987). Feminism and critical theory. In G. Spivak (Ed.), *In other worlds; essays in cultural politics*. London: Methuen.

Suberu, R. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Thomas, K. (1990). *Gender and subject in education*. Buckingham, MK: SRHE & Open University Press.

Tsolidis, G. (1996). Feminist theorisations of identity and difference – A case study related to gender education policy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 17*(3), 267–277.

United Nations (2000). United Nations Millennium Declaration. United Nations General Assembly 55/2, September 8, 2000. www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_55_2.pdf

United Nations (2015). Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Retrieved March 14, 2017, from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.prg/post2015/transformingourword

United Nations Development Programme, UNDP (2018). *National Human Development Report. Achieving human development in North East Nigeria*. Abuja: UNDP Nigeria.

Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice & poststructuralist theory* (2nd Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory and the politics of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Whitley, A. (2012). Supervisory conversations on rigour and interpretive research. *Qualitative Research Journal, 12*(2), 251–271.

Yin, R. K. (2009). Case *study research: design and methods* (4th Ed.). London: Sage.