Gender Disparities in Ghana's Tertiary Education System

Kimberly Christel
New York University

Introduction

This paper will examine gender disparities in Ghana's tertiary education[1] system and make the case that, while a great deal of progress has been made, gender inequality remains an issue that must continue to be monitored. The author of this paper had the pleasure of participating in a short-term, faculty-led, study abroad experience in Ghana in March of 2019 as part of a 3-credit course that examined global perspectives in higher education. The purpose of the course was to learn how higher education is structured in Ghana and some of the challenges and innovations surrounding higher education. During this study abroad course, the author, along with a group of their peers, visited five universities – two public, one technical (also public), and two private. The author and their classmates met with administrators to learn about the administrative processes and challenges in tertiary education in Ghana and also had opportunities to speak to students.

During their time in Ghana, the author decided to examine women's issues, particularly gender disparities that exist in tertiary education. This was inspired by some research the author found prior to the trip that focused on gender-based affirmative action, a lack of female figures as faculty, and the phenomenon of treating sex for grades as a quid pro quo. The purpose of this paper is to present a review of literature synthesized with the author's observations and experiences visiting universities in Ghana. While the author's observations are subjective and limited by their own paradigm and biases, it is nonetheless worth including alongside the literature, as a way of complimenting the limitations of research. For example, despite the claims in research that women face many disparities in tertiary education, the author met several women in high, administrative positions, such as deans and directors. The author also spoke to a few female students who shared their own positive experiences attending tertiary education. Certainly, the few interactions the author had with students and administrators cannot accurately represent tertiary education in Ghana, nor should it be used to refute any of the existing literature. However, the decision to include the author's experiences may help to give a fuller, more holistic interpretation of gender disparities in Ghana.

This paper will first, briefly explore the sociocultural factors that affect women's participation in tertiary education in Ghana. It will then discuss the problems women face when they enter tertiary education, how different types of institutions are serving women, and the progress that women have made. This paper will end with an overview and predictions for the future.

Background: Sociocultural Factors that Affect Women

Before examining tertiary education, it is worth briefly exploring the larger roles women play in Ghanaian society. Women in Ghana have largely participated in more traditional gender roles, such as childrearing, cooking, and maintaining the home, while men have been viewed as The head of the house and are expected to work and provide for his family. However, it should be noted that despite this traditional role imposed upon women, they do not just stay home, but are "highly visible in activities involving sales or trading and constitute 89 percent of workers in this sector" (Prah, 1996, p. 412). Indeed, the author saw many women wading through traffic to sell pastries and other street foods, and visited a few markets in which many women were selling art, textiles, and household supplies.

Although women are largely present in the market and are considerably powerful players, this does not mean that they have achieved equality or that they could not benefit from tertiary education.

In “Women’s Studies in Ghana” Mansah Prah (1996) discusses the need for women’s studies in tertiary education, pointing to the status of women in Ghana as one reason:

Ghanaian law recognizes women’s rights to their separate property and their freedom to enter into transactions of their own. Yet this de jure equality does not reflect reality for the majority of Ghanaian women. Compared to men, women in Ghana suffer heavier time burdens and enjoy fewer productive resources…Because they lack education, training, and skills, the majority of women remain in agriculture and selling. Women in Ghana are disproportionately concentrated in the informal sector of the economy, where they are generally self-employed (p. 412).

What Prah describes highlights the obstacles women have faced in the workforce. However, since 1996, there have been some changes. For example, Bosak, Eagly, Diekman, & Sczesny (2018) discuss the changing of social and labor force trends based on gender. Between 1960 and 2010, women’s participation in the labor force has increased from 54.5% to 70% (Bosak et al., 2018). In addition to changes in the labor market, perceptions of gender roles and stereotypical traits have been shifting as well. There has been a noticeable shift in women’s adoption of masculine personality and cognitive traits and a small shift in men’s adoption of more feminine personality and physical traits (Bosak et al., 2018). These changes are important to note and suggest that the role for women in tertiary education is also changing. In fact, the percentage of women who have never attended school has decreased significantly from 83% to 28.3% (Bosak et al., 2018). Despite the increased participation in the labor force and tertiary education, gender disparities still exist, and they have an impact on women’s access to and experience in tertiary education. The next section of this paper will illustrate such disparities by examining how women are accessing education and who is being left behind.

Women in Tertiary Education: Who has Access and Where?

Women in Ghana have historically had less access to tertiary education than their male counterparts; it is such an issue that the government and universities have tried to intervene with policies and programs specifically catered to women, as Francis Atuahene (2014) explains:

> Realizing the existing gender-based disparities, successive governments, in collaboration with universities, have put in place several affirmative action policies to increase female participation at the tertiary education levels. For example, public universities have introduced affirmative action policies to close the gender disparity gap by relaxing admissions standards for female applicants. However, this policy has encountered considerable degree of opposition from individuals, who believe that relaxing admission standards for women gives the negative impression that female students are not academically as competitive as their male counterparts. Some groups of students have also expressed their opposition to the policy viewing it as reinforcing reverse discrimination. Regardless, the objective of this policy is to bridge the gender representation gap that has existed for several years (p. 227).

Atuahene (2014) further explains that although gender parity has not been achieved, there is data that shows that gender-based affirmative action has contributed to an increase in female participation rates in tertiary education.

Upon the author’s visit to University of Ghana (UG), the administrators stated that they practice gender-based affirmative action. When the author asked for more information on affirmative action, they were told that the goal is to admit 50% men and 50% women; however, it was not explained how close they were to achieving such a goal, nor were more details about the process given. Despite the efforts of public universities such as UG, the reasons behind the gender disparity in access are complex. In addition to the traditional gender roles placed on women, factors such as the quality of high schools,

geographic location, and socioeconomic status (SES) play a large role in access. Only 15% of high schools in Ghana manage to send their students to universities (ASHESI Counseling and Coaching team members. (2019, March 21) Personal Presentation). From the author's observation at UG, it appeared that students from well-endowed high schools were more likely to attend than those from less endowed high schools, despite university efforts to accept students from less endowed schools. In addition, upon asking a group of students why they chose UG, two answers emerged as a general consensus: reputation and location.

In regards to reputation, the prestigious University of Ghana is often viewed as the university to attend. Being the first university established in Ghana and offering a large number of programs in sciences and humanities, UG is the elite, Harvard of Ghana. Although the author did speak to students from other universities who expressed preference in attending their university over UG, it was not uncommon for UG to be mentioned when discussing university selections. In regards to location, UG is fairly easy to access for those in the populated capital of Accra. A few students shared that UG was the best option for them due to living in close proximity to the school. For a student living in a rural region outside of Accra, the reality of attending UG would strongly depend on their test scores for entry (which may also depend on the quality of their high school and how well it can prepare them) or their ability to pay fees, which would depend on their SES.

For students from a lower SES, they would not have to pay tuition to attend a public school such as UG; however, they would still need the financial resources to travel to their selected university and afford general living expenses. For students from a higher SES, even if they don't have the highest test scores, they could still gain admittance as fee-paying students. In summation, students who are attending public universities are mostly coming from privileged backgrounds, or have the right test scores and live in close proximity to their university. It is clear that despite the increase in the number of women attending universities, only a select group of the Ghanaian population are accessing tertiary education[2].

The role private universities serve in providing women access to tertiary education is a complicated one. Although public universities are much sought after due to their reputation and free tuition, they simply do not have the capacity or financial resources to serve the population that is seeking tertiary education. Private universities, therefore, can serve as another option for students who are not granted access to public institutions or are simply looking for a different experience. During their time studying in Ghana, the author was able to visit two private universities: Central University (CU) and ASHESI University. These two universities stand out for providing different experiences than public universities.

Central University, for example, is a private, religious, open university. As an open university, it will not turn away students because of low test scores. Anyone can attend so long as they can afford the tuition[3] or qualify for scholarships and payments plans. In this case, a student from a less endowed school who did not receive high test scores and may come from a lower SES may be able to attend CU with financial aid. CU also offers a different classroom experience than a large, public university such as UG. A group of architecture students shared with the author that CU is the only other school (besides UG) that offers an architecture program. What the CU students appreciated about this architecture program, in comparison to UG, is that they get to attend small classes where they feel comfortable approaching professors when they do not understand the material.

Although CU has qualities that make it attractive to some students, the university also has many limitations which may still turn away a number of students, and therefore does not solve the issue of gender inequity. It should be noted, for example, that CU is categorized as a Christian school. While it is not a requirement for students to attend church or participate in prayers, and while the university does have a number of Muslim students attending, such an environment may be a deterrent for students who do not identify as Christian or do not want to attend a religious institution. For this reason, CU may only

appeal to certain students, and therefore, may not be serving much more of a wider population of women than public universities such as UG.

When it comes to other private institutions, such as ASHESI, access may be even more limited. Founded by Patrick Awuah, who spent a considerable amount of time in the U.S.[4], ASHESI is a very uniquely Americanized university that caters to the elite. Upon entering the campus for the first time, the author was immediately impressed by the facilities; the small grass quad in the center of campus cut with walkways, the stone ledges, and the academic buildings with large windows all were reminiscent of a small, American, liberal arts college. During the tour of the campus, the author and their peers were informed of the campus-wide green initiative to ban Styrofoam, use solar panels, and provide reusable water bottle filling stations. The author was informed by administration that ASHESI emphasizes career development with a 4-year career curriculum, complete with job shadowing, internships, and resume workshops. ASHESI was also the only school the author visited that discussed a mandatory health screening, as well as optional sex education which included providing condoms and having conversations about sexual harassment. Indeed, ASHESI stood out with its facilities, curriculum, and Westernized language.

While all of these services would do well to close the gender gap, ASHESI is not as accessible as the other universities the author visited. With tuition costing approximately $4,900 per semester, ASHESI appeals to and is more accessible for the elite. In regards to financial aid, ASHESI, with the assistance of outside funding, is able to provide some scholarships that cover full tuition or partial tuition, such as 80% and 50% of tuition. The administrators mentioned that there is an effort to recruit students from more rural areas as well. It is, therefore, quite possible for women from a lower SES to receive considerable financial aid to attend ASHESI and reap the benefits of the university, including career advisement that could lead to social mobility. However, ASHESI is a very small school of only 1,000+ students. With public schools already not having the capacity to take in all Ghanaians seeking tertiary education, ASHESI is hardly filling the gap in providing more access.

In review, while public and private universities do provide some balance in access to tertiary education, women who come from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to obtain access. Gender-based affirmative action has made a difference, but there are still disparities. However, access is only one issue for women. When women do enter universities, one must ask what their experiences are like. Do they face challenges that their male counterparts do not face?

Now What? What Issues Do Female Students Face and What Progress Has Been Made?

During the author's brief, one week stay in Ghana, it was difficult for them to notice any gender disparities. When they visited universities, they met women in positions of power in administration, such as the dean at Central University, and they met female students who seemed content and competent in their academic environment, forming bonds with their male and female peers. However, it can be difficult to recognize inequities within a country during such a short visit. Unfortunately, despite the positive roles the author witnessed women participating in, gender inequalities do exist in Ghana, just as they exist in other countries around the world, such as the United States. Louise Morley (2011) discusses gender-based issues in Ghana and Tanzania in the form of sexual harassment. "The most common form of sexual harassment cited was the quid pro quo or sex-for-grades exchange in which some male lecturers considered that they had a droit de seigneur, or patriarchal entitlement to the sexual favours of their female students" (Morley, 2011. P. 103).

When the author spoke to one of the students at University of Ghana about the experiences of female students, the topic of sex for grades did come up. The student told the author that sex for grades was almost an issue of the past. Although there may still be isolated incidents occurring, the student believed that such incidents could be reported at UG and that the administration would not stand for such behavior. It is encouraging that this student believed in the UG administration and felt that sex for

grades was a very rare issue at her university.

However, it is hard to say if this one student's impression of this form of sexual harassment is accurate or reflective of most students' experiences. Unfortunately, Morley (2011) points out that issues of sexual harassment are not always apparent and administration may be unresponsive to it:

> Sexual harassment can involve both actual and symbolic violence, but is often hidden, silenced and displaced. Difficulties with disclosure and the ongoing existence of sexual harassment raise questions about how gender continues to be formed and reformed in the discursive, spatial and temporal context of higher education. Management can often be complicit or dismissive, with sexual harassment simultaneously recognized and ignored. Practices still appear to be institutionalized despite the global policy architecture of gender mainstreaming – a strategy that purports to make women's and men's experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes (p. 103).

Morley (2011) further extrapolates that the lack of women in senior positions in tertiary education contributes to a masculinized environment that fosters patriarchal entitlement. As mentioned, the author of this paper did meet women in high positions in administration; however, they hardly met any faculty during their time there, and they do not recall meeting any female faculty members. According to Morley's own research on faculty, "women professors are below 10% and executive heads are below 5% in both countries [Ghana and Tanzania] (Singh, 2008)" (2011).

Although sexual harassment and an absence of female authority figures are serious issues in Ghana's tertiary educational system, governmental and institutional initiatives (in addition to affirmative action) are being made. According to Prah (1996), Ghana has had a National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) since 1975, and the University of Ghana has had the Development and Women's Studies Program (DAWS) at their Institute of African Studies since 1989. The University of Cape Coast Women's Caucus (UCCWOC) proposed the establishment of a women's and gender studies center in 1995 as well (Prah, 1996). Although the author did not get to learn much about women's studies when visiting UCC or UG, it is important to note that these initiatives were started decades ago. One may wonder if these initiatives contributed to some of the positive experiences current, female students shared with the author.

Conclusion

More women have access to tertiary education in Ghana than ever before, and this may largely be due to the changing of gender stereotypes and governmental and institutional initiatives such as gender-based affirmative action and women's studies. While they cannot represent the entire student experience, the author met several female students who were optimistic about their experiences in tertiary education, and they met confident, female administrators. Despite the progress that has been made, tertiary education in Ghana is most accessible to women from a higher SES, a well-endowed high school, or a central location in which a university is close by. While public and private schools may cater or appeal more to different women and offer benefits such as free tuition or scholarships and lower admissions standards, underprivileged women are still being largely underserved by universities in Ghana. Although the author did not get to meet many faculty, according to Morley (2011), here is a lack of female faculty. Sexual harassment, especially in the form of sex for grades, may still be a large issue that is difficult to measure due to the silence of victims and the response or lack thereof from administration (Morley, 2011).

These issues are rather similar to issues in higher education in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018), women still make up the majority of the college, student population;

however, issues of sexual assault on campus remain a continually discussed, topic of contention, and men continue to outnumber women in full-time, faculty positions (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The author predicts that Ghana will follow a similar pattern as the U.S.; women have and will continue to make progress in tertiary education. As more progress is made, gendered issues will continue to arise in different forms. Gender equity may never be fully attained, but women in Ghana will continue to make great strides in tertiary education which will lead to changes in their society. It is important that we continue to examine tertiary education in Ghana to see if such progress is made.

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Footnotes

[1] It should be noted that in Ghana, higher education is referred to as "tertiary education," so this term will be used.

[2] The information from this paragraph is a summary of what was provided by various speakers at UG. (University of Ghana administrators and students, (2019, March 18). Personal Presentation and discussions.

[3] Tuition at CU varies by each program. Some examples of approximate tuition per semester include Business -$400, Sciences - $700, Law - $700, and Theology - $400 (Chief Finance Officer, (2019, March 19). Personal Presentation).

[4] Patrick Awuah, founder of ASHESI University, received his Bachelor's from Swarthmore College, his MBA from U.C. Berkeley's Haas School of Business, and also worked as the Program Manager for Microsoft (ASHESI Foundation. (n.d.). retrieved from https://www.ashesi.org/about/our-teams/patrick-awuah-biography/).