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Global Trends in Gender Inequality in Higher Education: A Bibliometric Analysis (1993–2024)

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Gender inequality in higher education remains a persistent issue that hinders the equitable access and participation of both women and men in the academic field. This study aims to analyze global research trends in gender inequality in higher education from 1993 to 2024, focusing on how these trends are reflected in publications indexed on the Scopus database.

Materials/methods. A bibliometric analysis was conducted, encompassing 380 documents published in Scopus. The review identified the main trends in scientific production on gender inequality in higher education and its evolution over the past decade.

Results. The findings revealed an exponential increase in scientific production on the topic, particularly since 2017. The United States and the United Kingdom were identified as the most productive countries, with a high concentration of publications in specialized journals. Furthermore, the social sciences field represented the most significant scientific output.

Conclusion. The study concludes that, despite the increase in research on gender inequality in higher education, significant challenges remain in promoting gender equality. This highlights the need for more effective educational policies and a more inclusive approach to future research to advance toward achieving equity in the academic realm.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality in higher education is a complex phenomenon studied across various disciplines, including sociology, education, and gender studies. Since 1993, there has been growing interest in analyzing how social and cultural structures perpetuate this inequality and identifying global trends affecting women in academia.

Gender equality in higher education has become a critical issue, gaining increased attention over the past decades, particularly in the context of the rising participation of women in academia. According to Myers and Griffin (2019), understanding gender inequality in international education can help institutions and policymakers develop programs that remove barriers to women's full participation, contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all. Gender inequality in developing countries manifests in various dimensions, particularly education, employment, and leadership. Several studies have highlighted these disparities, often rooted in structural and cultural factors hindering equity progress.

Regarding education, women's access to higher education remains limited in many developing nations. Chatterjee and Banerjee (2023) emphasize that although gross enrollment rates for females decline significantly after primary education, higher education attainment for women often fails to translate into better employment opportunities, contributing to one of the lowest female labor force participation rates globally. Similarly, Siyez and Beycioglu (2020) point out that gender inequality in education is perpetuated by policies, curricula, textbooks, and teacher expectations, creating unequal opportunities for boys and girls to access quality education.

In STEM fields, Perez-Felkner et al. (2020) reveal an intriguing pattern: the STEM gender gap tends to be smaller in less developed nations. In Cambodia, for instance, women's enrollment in STEM and related fields, such as information technology and health, is higher in less urbanized areas. However, these patterns are influenced by socioeconomic development and gender equity indicators, which complicate straightforward progress toward gender equality.

Leadership opportunities for women in higher education are also a concern. Maheshwari (2023) identifies barriers such as lack of mentorship and persistent societal expectations that limit women's advancement in academic leadership roles. In Vietnam, however, family support has emerged as a key enabler, suggesting that cultural factors can influence progress toward gender equity in leadership. These studies collectively highlight that while education, employment, and leadership are crucial for reducing gender inequality in developing countries, progress is often uneven and influenced by regional, cultural, and economic factors.

Additionally, Lee and Ellemers (2015) emphasize that implicit biases often influence gender policies, promoting the advancement of women in research and funding evaluations. This suggests that gender equality is a matter of academic access recognition and valuation. Loots and Walker (2015) argue that, despite the opportunities provided by higher education, traditional gender norms continue to reproduce inequalities, underscoring the need for education that challenges these conventions.

Despite progress, significant challenges remain in promoting gender equality in higher education. Şanli and Karakus (2023) highlight that training future educators is crucial to raising awareness about gender education, which can positively influence their perceptions and practices. However, Kong (2023) notes that although women's admission rates to higher education have increased, inequalities persist, particularly in rural areas with limited educational opportunities. This underscores the need for more effective educational policies that not only aim for numerical parity but also address the underlying structures perpetuating gender inequality in academia.

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The theoretical foundations of this study focus on the intersection of gender and education, emphasizing how social norms and institutional structures influence women's participation and academic success. Campos-Martínez et al. (2022) argue that the commodification of education has exacerbated gender inequalities, disproportionately affecting women in academia, where productivity is prioritized over equity. Similarly, Leigh et al. (2024) emphasize that wage gaps and job satisfaction disparities in higher education indicate deeper issues affecting women, suggesting that social norms and economic structures limit their participation in high-paying sectors. Finally, the work of Scarpino and Johnson (2021) highlights the importance of life narratives in understanding women's academic experiences, shedding light on the barriers they face.

Over the past five years, significant research has contributed to understanding gender inequality in higher education. For example, González-Cid (2024) addresses gender inequities in STEM fields, revealing that female academics face unique challenges that hinder their professional advancement. Additionally, Suárez et al. (2023) analysis of higher education inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a critical perspective on how crises can exacerbate existing inequalities (Suárez et al., 2023). Lastly, the work of Concha and Mujica (2021) examines gender education policies in both international and Chilean contexts, highlighting the need for structural changes to promote equality. These studies not only enrich current knowledge but also underscore the urgency of addressing gender inequality in higher education.

Despite advancements in research, significant gaps remain in the current literature. For instance, while women's experiences in academia have been documented, a comprehensive analysis of how these experiences are reflected in global trends and academic publication indices is still lacking. According to Alvarado Urízar et al. (2022), gender protocols in Chilean universities have been unevenly implemented, suggesting that policies do not always translate into effective practices. Moreover, Valera et al. (2024) indicate that socioeconomic gaps continue to affect access to higher education, exacerbating gender inequality. These gaps justify the need for a systematic analysis that not only identifies trends but also evaluates how they are reflected in academic output.

2. Methodology

This bibliometric analysis is descriptive in nature, aiming to explore trends in scientific production indexed in Scopus between 1993 and 2024. The study period begins in 1993, which marks the year of the earliest publication on the subject found in Scopus. Bibliometric methods were employed to present both qualitative and quantitative findings, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolution and characteristics of scientific output during this time frame.

The sample was derived from publications indexed in the Scopus database, encompassing a broad range of academic disciplines. The PRISMA method was employed to identify documents to be reviewed (Ekundayo et al., 2024). As part of the search strategy, the terms "gender inequality" AND "higher education" were used in the fields of title, abstract, and keywords. Specific filters were then applied, including publication year (1993–2024) and document type, enabling the extraction of relevant metadata.

Initially, 506 documents were identified. After applying the filtering parameters, the selection was reduced to 393 documents. Subsequently, during the data cleaning process, 10 documents were removed, resulting in 383 documents. Further refinement excluded three additional documents, culminating in a final selection of 380 documents for analysis (Figure 1).

A co-occurrence analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between keywords and other relevant categories in scientific production. Additionally, the bibliometric analysis was standardized using key indicators in an international context, focusing on gender inequality in higher education. These indicators included the year of publication, authors, institutions, countries, sources

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or journals, document types, subject areas, and keywords. For data processing and visualization, VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20) was used, complemented by Microsoft Excel for creating tables.

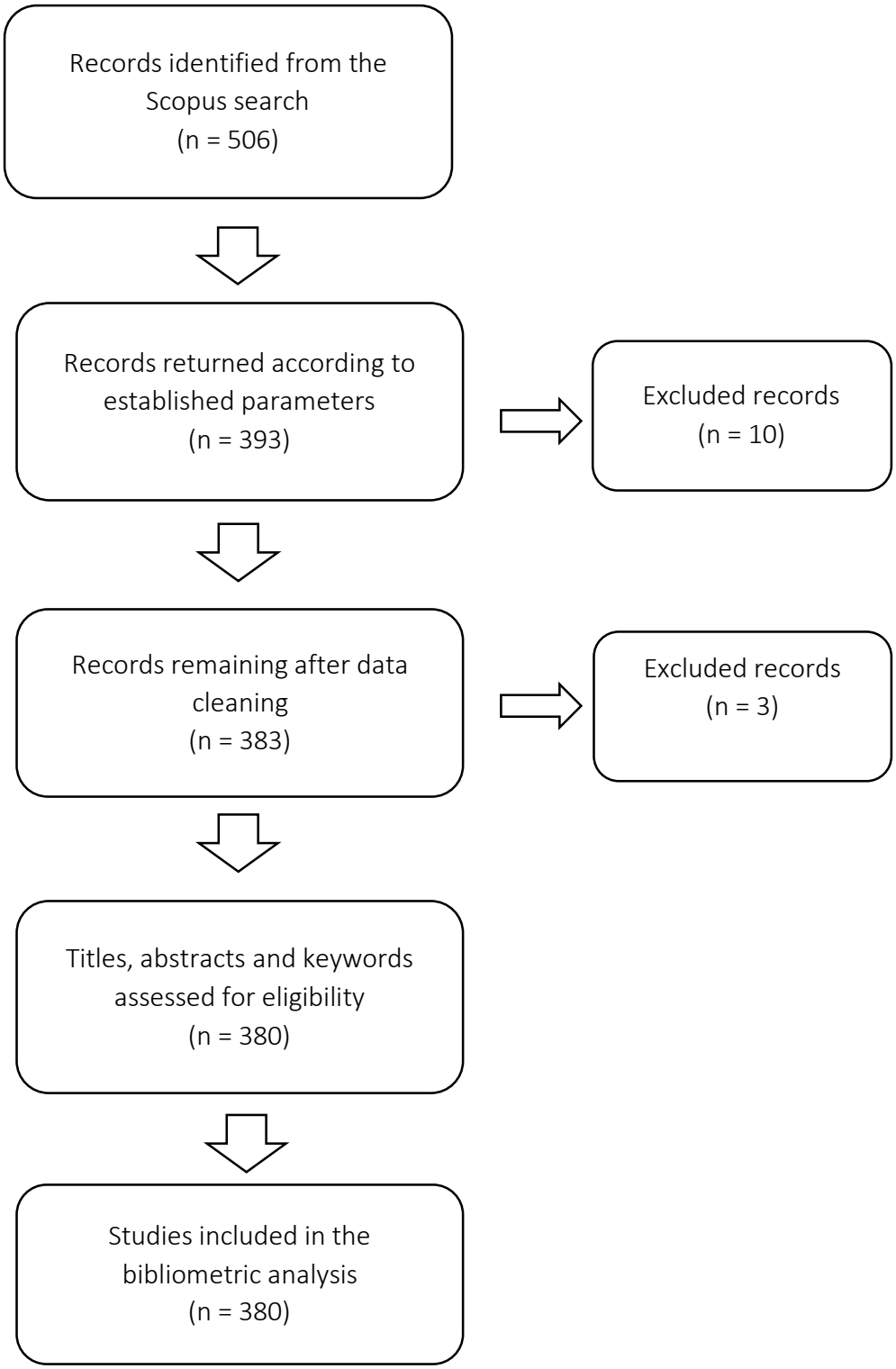

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart: Identification and Selection Process for Bibliometric Analysis

3. Results

The bibliometric analysis was based on 380 documents from the Scopus database on gender inequality in higher education published between 1993 and 2024. Figure 1 illustrates that the number of published scientific works increased exponentially, with slight fluctuations, from 2017 to 2024,

representing 76 % (n = 289) of all selected documents in the sample. Moreover, the three leading publication years were 2022 (n = 50), 2023 (n = 54), and 2024 (n = 46), accounting for 40 % of all publications during the selected period worldwide (Figure 2).

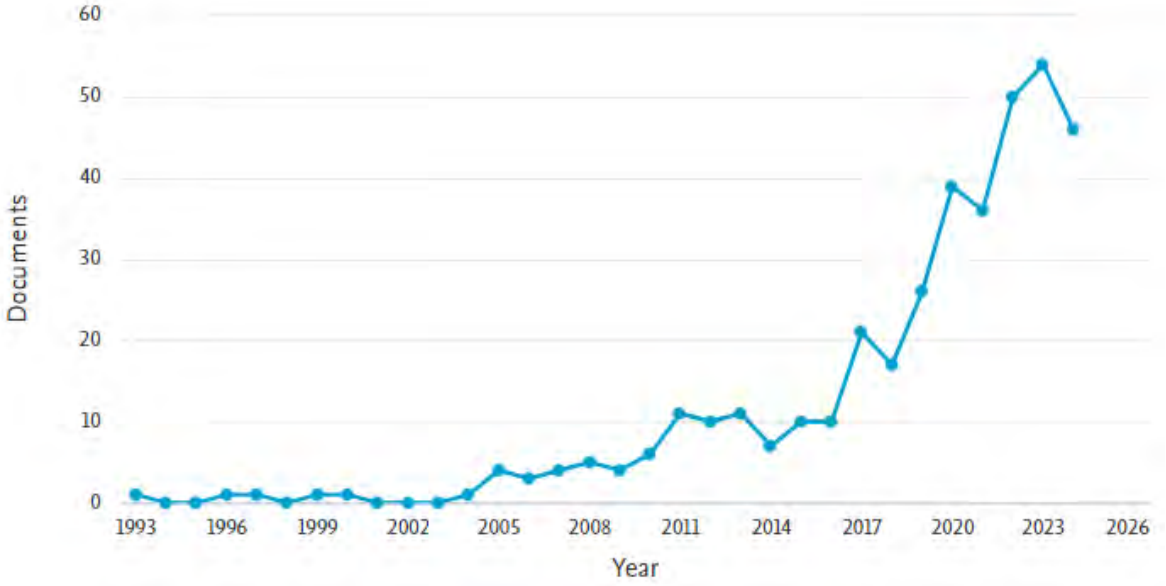

Figure 2. Documents Published Per Year (Source: Scopus Data (2024)

Regarding the countries with the highest productivity on the study topic, the United States stands out with 69 publications, representing 18%, followed by the United Kingdom with 14 %, Spain with 7 %, Australia with 6 %, and Germany and Russia with 5 % each. Other countries had lower percentages (Table 1).

Table 1. Top 20 Most Productive Countries in the Field of Gender Inequality and Higher Education

Country	Number of scientific articles	%	Country	Number of scientific articles	%
Estados Unidos	69	18 %	Francia	11	3 %
Reino Unido	55	14 %	Canadá	9	2 %
España	26	7 %	Israel	9	2 %
Australia	23	6 %	Portugal	9	2 %
Alemania	19	5 %	Suecia	9	2 %
Rusia	18	5 %	Suiza	9	2 %
Sudáfrica	15	4 %	Turquia	9	2 %
Irlanda	14	4 %	Italia	8	2 %
Brazil	13	3 %	Chile	7	2 %
China	13	3 %	Otros	13	3 %
India	13	3 %	No definidos	9	2 %

The top ten journals publishing articles on gender inequality and higher education are primarily based in the United Kingdom, with two from the Netherlands and one from Switzerland. Of these, 13 articles (21 %) were published by Higher Education, 11 articles (18 %) by Gender and Education, and six articles (10 %) by Gender, Work and Organization. Additionally, journals such as Administrative Sciences, Higher Education Quarterly, Social Science Research, and Women's Studies International

Forum each had five publications (8 %). Higher Education Research and Development, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Innovative Higher Education each had four publications (6 %) (Table 2).

Table 2. Top Ten Most Productive Journals in the Field of Gender Inequality and Higher Education

Journal	TA	CS2023	Q	H	Country
Higher Education	13	10.7	Q1	127	Netherlands
Gender And Education	11	5.2	Q1	75	United Kingdom
Gender Work and Organization	6	11.5	Q1	95	Reino Unido
Administrative Sciences	5	4.8	Q2	35	Swiss
Higher Education Quarterly	5	4.5	Q1	49	United Kingdom
Social Science Research	5	4.3	Q1	112	United Kingdom
Women S Studies International Forum	5	2.5	Q2	71	United Kingdom
Higher Education Research and Development	4	7.3	Q1	91	United Kingdom
Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion	4	4.5	Q1	38	United Kingdom
Innovative Higher Education	4	4.3	Q1	55	Netherlands

TP: Total number of articles; CS: Cite Score 2023; Q: Quartil, H H-Index.

Regarding the ten institutions with the most publications on the topic, HSE University stands out with 11 (22 %) publications, followed by University College Dublin with 6 (12 %) articles and Tel Aviv University with 5 (10 %). Additionally, Stellenbosch University, Ohio State University, The University of Hong Kong, the University of Limerick, The University of British Columbia, Universitat d'Alacant, and the University of Leeds each contributed 4 (8 %) publications (Figure 3).

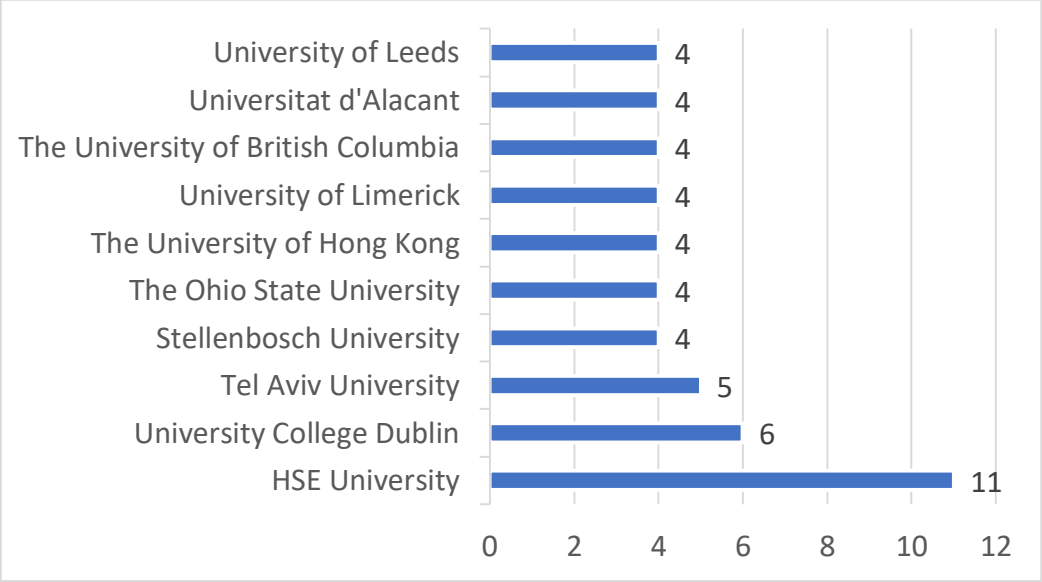

Figure 3. Top Ten Most Productive Institutions in the Field of Gender Inequality and Higher Education

Regarding publication by subject area, the Social Sciences domain accounted for 85.5 % (325) of scientific production. Business, Management, and Accounting represented 10.3% (39) of articles, followed by Arts and Humanities with 8.4 % (32) and Medicine with 7.6 % (29). Psychology contributed 6.1% (23), Economics, Econometrics, and Finance 5.8% (22), and Computer Science 3.2 % (12). Other areas such as Environmental Science, Health Professions, Biochemistry, Genetics, Molecular Biology, Engineering, Multidisciplinary, Agricultural and Biological Sciences, and Energy

each represented less than 2 % of scientific output. Disciplines like Decision Sciences, Earth and Planetary Sciences, Immunology and Microbiology, Mathematics, Neuroscience, Nursing, and Veterinary Science each contributed less than 1 % (Figure 4).

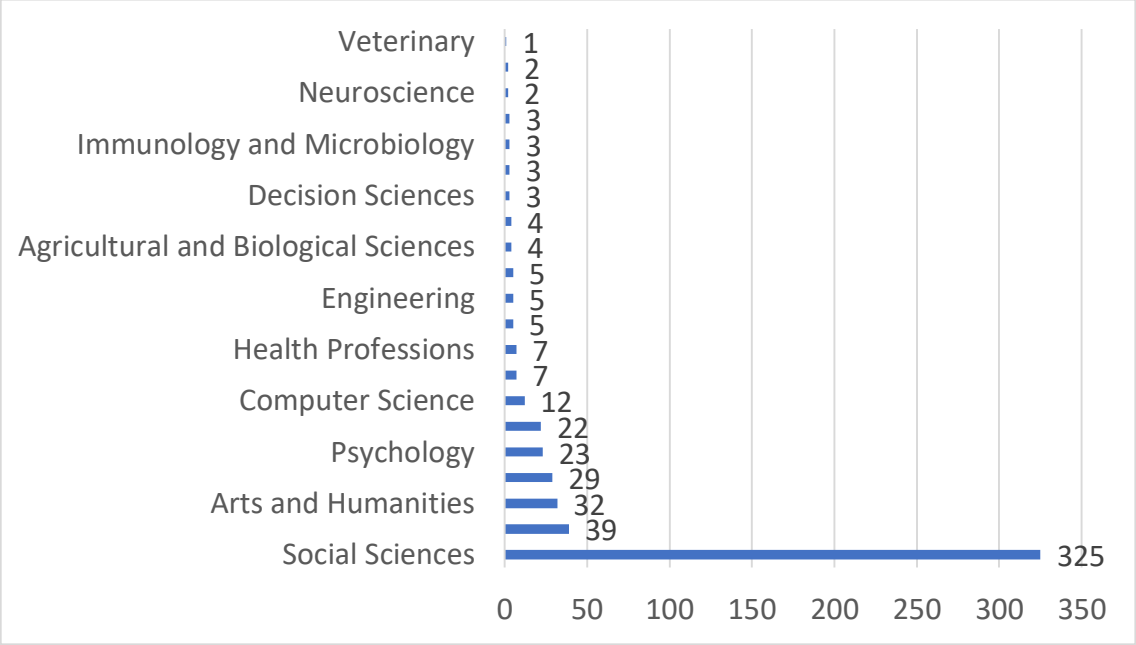

Figure 4. Publications by Subject Area

The total number of citations across all publications is 5,963, with an average of 15.69 citations per article. The h-index for the retrieved articles is 39. Table 4 shows that two articles received over 300 citations. The most cited article is What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching, with 505 citations. The two most cited articles were published in Innovative Higher Education (505 citations, Netherlands) and Annual Review of Sociology (343 citations, United States) (Table 4).

Table 4. Top Ten Most Cited Articles in the Field of Gender Inequality and Higher Education

Authors	Titles	Journal	Citation
MacNell et al. (2015)	What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching	Innovative Higher Education	505
Jacobs (1996)	Gender inequality and higher education	Annual Review of Sociology	343
Karamagi et al. (2006)	Intimate partner violence against women in Eastern Uganda: Implications for HIV prevention	BMC Public Health	165
Britton (2017)	Beyond the Chilly Climate: The Salience of Gender in Women's Academic Careers	Gender and Society	154
Courtois and O'Keefe (2015)	Precarity in the ivory cage: Neoliberalism and casualization of work in the Irish higher education sector	Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies	143

Authors	Titles	Journal	Citation
Van-Bavel (2013)	The reversal of gender inequality in education, union formation, and fertility in Europe	Vienna Yearbook of Population Research	132
Rivera (2017)	When Two Bodies Are (Not) a Problem: Gender and Relationship Status Discrimination in Academic Hiring	American Sociological Review	127
O'Keefe and Courtois (2019)	'Not one of the family': Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university	Gender, Work, and Organization	111
Ovseiko et al. (2017)	Advancing gender equality through the Athena SWAN Charter for Women in Science: An exploratory study of women's and men's perceptions	Health Research Policy and Systems	110
Becker and Hecken (2009)	Higher education or vocational training?: An empirical test of the rational action model of educational choices suggested by Breen Goldthorpe and Esser	Acta Sociologica	100

Figure 4 presents the most relevant keywords associated with research on gender inequality in higher education. Three clusters, differentiated by color, illustrate the relationships between concepts and co-citation networks. In the red cluster, "Higher education" (160 occurrences) groups keywords like "gender equality" and "gender inequality." The green cluster, "Female" (41 occurrences), includes terms such as "human," "sex difference," and "educational status." The blue cluster, "Women" and "Women Status" (17 occurrences), groups keywords like "leadership," "universities," and "attitude." The size of the nodes, along with their central or peripheral location, visually depicts the links between different concepts.

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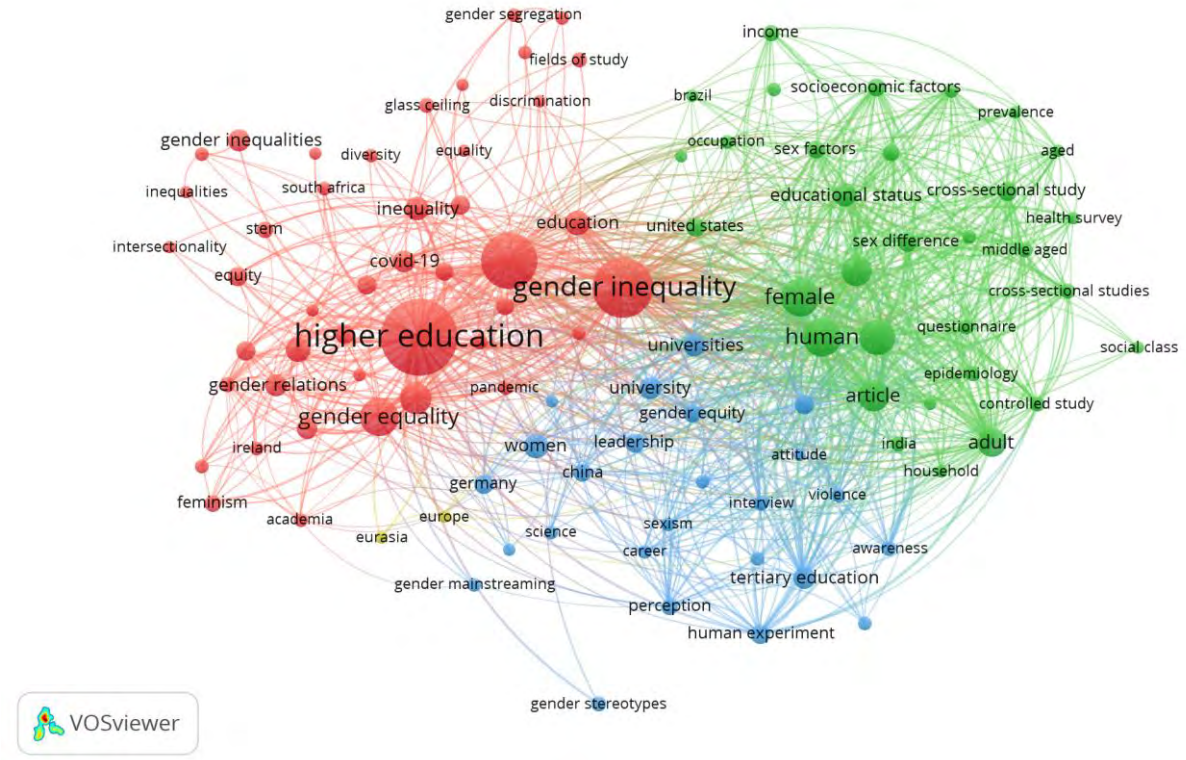

Figure 5. Co-occurrence Map of Keywords

4. Discussion

The bibliometric analysis of 380 documents related to gender inequality in higher education, published between 1993 and 2023, reveals an exponential increase in scientific production since 2017, with a notable peak in 2022 and 2023. This growth reflects a rising academic and social interest in gender equity in education, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education.

The predominance of publications in journals from the United Kingdom and the high productivity of institutions such as HSE University and University College Dublin indicate that these regions are leading research in this field. However, while the quantity of publications has increased, the quality and impact—measured by the h-index and citation count—must also be considered to assess actual progress in understanding gender inequality in higher education (Bhowmik, 2023).

Comparing these findings with other research areas, it is evident that gender inequality in higher education follows patterns similar to those in other academic fields, where women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and high-visibility disciplines such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Myers & Griffin, 2019). Despite advances in the inclusion of women in higher education, gaps persist, particularly in rural contexts and male-dominated disciplines. This suggests that significant efforts are still required to achieve true gender equality in education.

The limitations of this study include the absence of qualitative analysis exploring the individual experiences of women in higher education, as well as the need for deeper investigation into the structural barriers perpetuating inequality (Bendels et al., 2016). Future research should focus on the impact of specific educational policies and the implementation of programs that promote gender equity, as well as on evaluating their effectiveness in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

5. Conclusion

The results of this bibliometric study, based on 380 documents from the Scopus database on gender inequality in higher education, reveal a significant increase in scientific production since 2017, with 76% of the documents published in the past seven years. The years 2022, 2023, and 2024 stand out as the most productive, indicating a growing interest and commitment from the academic community to address this issue. The United States and the United Kingdom lead research production in this field, reflecting a concentration of resources and attention in these regions. Furthermore, influential journals such as Higher Education and Gender and Education underscore the relevance of research in this area, contributing to the visibility and impact of studies on gender inequality in higher education. The high citation rate, with an average of 15.69 citations per publication, indicates that these works are being recognized and utilized by other researchers, reinforcing their importance in the academic literature.

This analysis addresses the objective of investigating global trends in gender inequality in higher education from 2012 to 2024 and how these trends are reflected in Scopus metrics. As a bibliometric review article, the study provides a clear overview of the evolution of research in this field, highlighting not only the growth in the number of publications but also the diversity of subject areas and the geographical distribution of scientific output. However, it is essential to acknowledge that despite these advancements, significant challenges remain, such as the need to address structural inequalities that limit women's full participation in higher education, particularly in less advantaged contexts.

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to note certain limitations inherent to bibliometric methods. The reliance on Scopus as the sole data source may exclude relevant studies indexed in other databases or those published in non-indexed formats, potentially leading to a partial representation of the field. Furthermore, bibliometric analyses focus primarily on quantitative metrics, which may not capture the full depth of the qualitative aspects of gender inequality in higher education. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and planning future research.

In terms of future research directions, it is crucial to further explore the individual experiences of women in higher education and how educational policies can be improved to promote gender equality. Additionally, examining the impact of specific educational interventions and the effectiveness of implemented policies across different cultural and geographical contexts is recommended. This study not only contributes to the understanding of gender inequality in higher education but also lays the groundwork for future research aimed at closing existing gaps and fostering a more equitable and just educational environment.

6. Implications

It is crucial that governments and educational institutions implement more effective policies to promote gender equality in higher education. These policies should address structural barriers and cultural attitudes that perpetuate inequality, ensuring that both women and men have equal opportunities for access, participation, and academic advancement.

Despite the increase in scientific production on gender inequality, future research needs to explore more deeply the underlying causes of disparities and discriminatory practices, not only in terms of numerical representation but also in the context of women's experiences and achievements in the academic realm. Gender diversity in higher education research should be a priority focus.

It is recommended that studies related to gender equality be promoted to greater visibility in academic journals, especially those of high impact. Academic institutions can encourage the

publication of these topics by offering incentives to researchers working in this area, ensuring that contributions on gender are recognized and valued as much as those in other fields of study.

It is also recommended that international collaborative networks among higher education institutions working on gender equality be promoted, as well as that best practices, resources, and research findings be shared. These networks could help influence the development of more equitable academic and educational policies globally.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors contributed equally to the current study and have read and approved publication of the final version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval. No approval from the ethics committee was required.

Data Availability Statement. The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-4 for text revision and improvement. The authors declare that they reviewed and edited the final output as necessary and assume full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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