



The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 13

Gender, Misrecognition & Access to Postsecondary Education

Penny Jane Burke

*Global Innovation Chair of Equity & Director of the Centre for Excellence in Equity in Higher Education
University of Newcastle, Australia*

We know that girls and women are doing well as a group when we look at academic achievement levels and numbers of women now accessing higher education. However, we are too often confronted by crude analyses that distort women's achievements into simplistic claims, such as the notion that men might now form an equity group in higher education, which overlooks how inequalities play out in subtle ways. We need to avoid simplistic narratives that are reminiscent of a battle of the sexes and think about gender equity in all its complexities. This includes an understanding that gender is multi-dimensional. Men and women negotiate multiple forms of masculinity and femininity as they move across and between different (gendered) spaces such as education, work and family. Furthermore, different formations of gender intersect in intricate ways with other social differences and inequalities (such as age, class and ethnicity, for example). We need to be mindful of these intersections and how they can reproduce gendered inequalities, sometimes at the level of our taken-for-granted everyday practices.

Statistics show that gender continues to structure social inequality. For example, women holding a bachelor degree earn on average 58% of what men with a bachelor degree would earn over their **lifetime**. Furthermore, UNESCO data shows that worldwide, women represent about half of all undergraduates enrolled, but women only represent about 21% of enrolment in engineering, manufacturing and construction. A degree in engineering will return on average \$3 million over a lifetime, but [more than 91% of enrolments](#) are men.

Bringing insidious gender inequities to light helps us to work together towards greater gender equity for all women, across different fields, communities, and contexts. Although we need to keep sight of the wider statistical picture, we urgently need to pay closer attention to the more subtle ways that gender inequalities are lived, felt and embodied.



Certain traits have historically been coded as masculine or feminine. These are tied to space and time but there remain enduring ones. For example we often associate 'power' and 'authority' with masculine characterizations such as strong, tough, active, independent, taking up space, being strategic and having voice. Traits associated with femininity have historically been passivity, quietness, silence, weakness, being emotional and intuitive, being caring and nurturing and other such traits. Constructions of potential and capability are deeply entangled with such gendered characterizations, which are also tied to different social, cultural and disciplinary contexts and expectations.

Arguably higher education should produce graduates with strong feminine qualities, such as compassion and empathy, as well as masculine ones, such as being rational and independent. This point is reinforced with the shocking levels of bullying, harassment and abuse that have emerged as endemic in institutions with 'alpha-male' cultures. Such forms of hyper-masculinity are damaging for all of us – men and women – although the effects are experienced in gendered ways. We need to better understand gender, not only at the level of the person but also at the level of practice; what we do and why and how it relates to historical constructions that are coded as masculine or feminine attributes. It is important to note that men are able to take up those traits associated with femininity just as women are able to take up those traits associated with masculinity.

However, we also need to pay attention to how gender is always embodied. Thus, it is more difficult for a woman to be recognized as powerful and authoritative; it is of course *possible* but it is more difficult. This makes it more challenging for women to be recognized, and recognize themselves, as potential students in those subjects that have been historically coded as masculine, including Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. This also makes it more difficult for men to imagine their futures as nurses or primary school teachers, those subjects historically associated with femininity.

Research has helped shed light on the significance of material inequalities, which impact directly on gender equity. This points to the need for social and institutional policies that ensure equitable distribution of resources and a comprehensive program of social welfare for those who experience material forms of inequality.



In my book, [The Right to Higher Education](#) (Burke, 2012), I analyze my autobiography to show that more than individual determination, I benefited from the social, economic and cultural structures that were in place to support my achievements. This included a full-time Access to Higher Education program, where my son had a nursery place while I studied, and a full-time degree with financial support that enabled me to gain my degree as a mature student with three small children to care for.

However, we also need to understand how inequalities are not only material but also produced at the cultural and symbolic levels, which feed into notions of potential and who is seen as a capable person in different social, disciplinary and cultural contexts. I draw on the sociological concept of 'misrecognition' in my analyses to bring such symbolic inequalities to light. For example, potential and capability are often understood as innate qualities a person has. Yet, potential and capability are deeply gendered, so that historically and socially embedded constructions of the scientist, the surgeon, the judge, the leader and so forth are tied in with an imagined gendered-subject. This is shifting over time, but gender continues to shape self-understanding, as well as the ways we might be or might not be encouraged or mentored by significant others in relation to the ways our potential or capability might be subjectively judged.

Indeed, at times we have erroneously confused material poverty with flawed notions of poverty, leading to problematic deficit perspectives that tend to place blame on individuals for social inequalities. So for example, we might blame individual women for 'lacking confidence', or lacking leadership skills, without paying attention to the gendered nature of notions such as 'confidence' and 'leadership'. We need to better understand how masculinity and femininity are differently but also relationally constructed – that is - to be a boy is to *not* be a girl and *to be associated with being a girl* is often seen as a form of denigration – being called a 'sissy', 'pussy' or even a 'girl'. In this way, boys *and* girls learn at an early age that being called a 'girl' is often seen as a form of negation, belittlement and humiliation. Gender is learned through such cumulative and taken-for-granted processes. We need to challenge such constructions as part of a broader strategy for gender equity, understanding that there are multiple forms of masculinity and femininity and some are deeply damaging to a project of gender equity.



Higher education must provide the pedagogical spaces to engage such important discussions about the ongoing impact of gender on our lives, relationships, aspirations, choices and experiences.

Misrecognition involves processes in which a pathologising gaze is projected on to those persons that are constructed as the problem – so for example, the idea that the problem lies with individual women who lack aspiration or confidence to be leaders. This completely overlooks the ways that leadership is constructed in relation to particular forms of masculinity – so to be recognized as a potential leader often relies on performing particular attributes associated with masculinity (whether male or female). It also relies on conforming to particular values and ways of being that might be experienced as contradictory to one’s sense of self. Of course, gender works with other differences such as age, class and ethnicity to shape who might be recognized as the right kind of person in a range of pedagogical contexts.

One of the most striking examples of misrecognition comes from my research [Art for a Few](#) (Burke and McManus, 2009), which involved observations of actual selection interviews for Art and Design undergraduate courses across the UK. The case of Nina (pseudonym), a young black woman from a poor inner city area applying for a BA Fashion course, helps to illuminate the subtle processes of misrecognition, which play out in selection processes that appear to be fair and equitable.

At the start of her selection interview, Nina was asked about the influences on her art, and Nina explained that she was influenced by hip-hop. Nina’s interview was cut short, and she was also denied the opportunity to complete her admissions test. After the interview, we observed the admissions tutors discussing how they would formally record their decision. They decided to claim that Nina’s portfolio was weak. However, we had also observed the assessment of her portfolio before the interview and it had not been judged as weak. They additionally claimed that Nina lacked “fashion flair” although she was dressed almost identically to the other white female candidates we had observed being interviewed earlier. They were also disappointed with her desire to stay home while at university, claiming that this reflected her lack of maturity.



Yet the male, white, middle class candidate interviewed immediately after Nina was accepted. He cited famous contemporary artists as his influences, and said he would “definitely be leaving home as it’s all part of the university experience”. Despite having significantly poorer qualifications than Nina, including having failed Art at secondary school, he was offered a place. Nina’s case exposes how judgments about potential are implicitly informed by taken for granted values and assumptions, which often lead to the exclusion of young black women such as Nina.

Gender inequalities are often subtle, tied in with social differences of class, ethnicity and race. Education has a key role to play in challenging those formations of masculinity and femininity that sustain unequal power relations. We need to pay attention to gender in terms of how it effects both men *and* women and to understand the root causes of unequal patterns of access, participation and power in and beyond higher education. We need also to think carefully about the kinds of policies, strategies and mechanisms we put into place in order to provide *both* equitable distribution of resources *and* recognition of the experiences, knowledge and perspectives of those from historically marginalized groups.

This means that notions that women are simply an oppressed group – or that men and women are in opposition through a battle of the sexes– is deeply flawed. We need to recognize that men and women exercise power – but the exercise of power is tied in with deeply embedded and historical structures and relations of gender inequity. This reminds us that we are all situated within complex power relations and to struggle against inequality we must be reflexive about our own complicity in complex and gendered relations of power.

The [Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education](#) at the University of Newcastle, NSW brings together research, theory and practice in dialogic conversation to try to grapple with and tackle deeply embedded, intersecting and complex inequalities. Our work is dedicated to developing a deep inter-relationship between research and practice – in order to contribute to the project of gender equity. This requires collective, collaborative and inclusive processes, so that we work together, bringing insight and wisdom from a range of diverse perspectives and experiences, to understand and redress the interlocking inequalities that play out at the material, symbolic, cultural and political levels.



Penny Jane Burke is Global Innovation Chair of Equity and Director of the Centre of Excellence in Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Penny is passionately dedicated to developing methodological, theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that support critical understanding and practice of equity and social justice in higher education. Her research expertise includes gendered formations, higher education access and participation, pedagogical experiences and practices and student and professional identities. She has published extensively in the field of equity in higher education. After returning to study via an Access to Higher Education course, followed by a BA Honours and MA, Penny was awarded a full-time Economic and Social Research Council doctoral studentship from 1998-2001, which resulted in the publication of her book *Accessing Education effectively widening participation* (2002). Her most recent sole-authored book *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond widening participation* was published by Routledge in 2012. Her co-authored book *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions* (with Sue Jackson) was nominated for the 2008 Cyril O. Houle World Award for Outstanding Literature in Adult Education. Her book *Changing Pedagogical Spaces in Higher Education* will be launched in December 2016. Penny was recipient of the Higher Education Academy's prestigious National Teaching Fellowship award in 2008, is Editor of the international journal *Teaching in Higher Education* and she is the Access and Widening Participation Network co-Convenor for the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE). Penny has held the posts of Professor of Education at the University of Roehampton, the University of Sussex and Reader of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GAPS.