"Most of Them Do Not Quit:" Exploring Gender Norms and Student Persistence at a Tanzanian Teachers College

Middlehurst, Molly
Grants Officer, Aidlink, Ireland, mmiddlehurst@gmail.com

A 2014 UN Women report on envisioning women's rights post-2015 defined gender norms as "the beliefs and rules, in a given community or institution, about the proper behavior of men and women" (Connell & Pearce, 2014, p.7). Although gender norms may differ based on the context and location, and are themselves evolving and mutable, norms can impact all aspects of daily life. Educational institutions can be a space for young minds to learn, reinforce, challenge and disrupt these norms. However, the formal education sector does not inherently act as a disruptive or empowering setting, and contextual and theoretical analysis is necessary to better understand the social construction of norms.

This paper presents findings from qualitative and quantitative data gathered at a Tanzanian teachers college to better understand some of the existing gender norms and stereotypes at the tertiary level that may affect female students' lived experience. Though literature on gender norms and narratives in the Tanzanian education sector exists, very little has been written at the higher education level, particularly using a mixed methods approach that seeks to elevate students' voice and participation. This paper seeks to answer the question: How do male and female staff and students at Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE) perceive and discuss barriers and opportunities for female retention and completion?

Through inductive research and investigation, the following gender norms emerged as key areas of concern: A. Pregnancy among female students leading to drop out or discontinuation of their studies; and B. Girls "shyness" or lack of confidence prohibiting their participation in class and their ability to seek help. This paper hypothesizes that though these narratives are discussed often by staff and students anecdotally, ultimately data at DUCE may not support that these have a significant negative impact on female students to the point that they disproportionately affect discontinuation and dropout.

The findings demonstrate a gap between staff and students' perceptions of norms and other challenges to female student's retention and completion versus the lived experiences and persistence of these women. Ultimately, further data is needed in the higher education sector in Tanzania and beyond to better understand these gaps and assess the ability for tertiary education to be a space for female empowerment and deconstruction of harmful gender norms. This paper recommends a policy agenda "anchored to the African reality" (UNESCO, 2000, p.30) driven by local researchers who are best positioned to gather and analyze these robust and contextually relevant data.