



Beyond Inclusion: Deconstructing the Privilege Paradigm in Gender Equality Initiatives within Higher Education and Research



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Abstract

Despite widespread gender equality initiatives in higher education, systemic disparities persist. Traditional inclusion policies often fail because they overlook entrenched privilege dynamics that sustain institutional inequities. This study critically analyzes how privilege paradigms undermine gender equality efforts in higher education and research, and offers actionable recommendations for dismantling these structural barriers. Employing a qualitative thematic analysis, this study synthesizes peer-reviewed journal articles, books, institutional policies, and organizational reports. The analysis integrates intersectionality, critical theory, feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory to examine the invisibility of privilege, the role of institutional culture, and the limitations of inclusion-focused policies. Findings reveal four dominant themes: (1) patriarchal and cultural norms persistently restrict women's access and leadership; (2) systemic barriers in hiring, promotion, and STEM fields perpetuate gender bias; (3) legal milestones like Title IX show uneven benefits across race and class; and (4) privilege awareness remains low, with men's engagement often reinforcing rather than challenging gender hierarchies. Intersectionality proves essential for understanding how race, class, and gender compound inequality. Moving beyond token inclusion requires systemic interventions: institutionalizing intersectionality into policy, fostering critical reflective pedagogy, and reframing privilege as a structural rather than individual issue. Future research should incorporate empirical case studies to further illuminate privilege dynamics across diverse cultural contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, gender equality initiatives have gained significant traction across higher education institutions worldwide, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers and create inclusive academic environments. Despite these efforts, persistent disparities highlight the inadequacies of traditional inclusion policies. As noted by Risman (2018), understanding gender through a multifaceted lens, encompassing individual, interactional, institutional, and intersectional perspectives, is essential for driving meaningful change. This research seeks to explore the often-overlooked dynamics of privilege that can undermine these initiatives, revealing how entrenched biases may hinder progress toward true equity.

Understanding privilege is crucial in advancing gender equality because it allows us to identify and challenge the structural inequities that persist within educational settings. Recent studies, such as those by Pirtle (2020) and Pirtle and Wright, (2021), emphasize the importance of recognizing how privilege operates at various levels, shaping experiences and opportunities across different groups. So far, very little attention has been paid to the role of gender equality. By examining these dynamics, we can better understand the complexities of gender equality and develop more effective strategies to foster inclusivity. Therefore, this current study has two purposes; first, to analyze the interplay between privilege and gender equality initiatives in higher education; and second, to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and educators that can foster a more equitable academic landscape. By engaging with and integrating diverse perspectives, this study aims to enrich ongoing discussions in the field and inspire transformative change in higher education institutions worldwide. Furthermore, this present study is guided by several key research questions:

1. How do privilege dynamics affect gender equality initiatives in higher education?
2. What are the implications of these dynamics for policy and practice?

By addressing these inquiries, this research aims to illuminate the nuanced relationships between privilege and gender equity, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how to achieve genuine parity within academic environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural Education Theory

This study is anchored in two interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, Multicultural Education Theory, as articulated by Banks (2016) and Gorski (2009), posits that education must actively challenge systemic inequality and integrate diverse perspectives across five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture. Second, Islamic Ethical Tafsir interprets the Qur'an not merely as a legal text but as a source of moral and pedagogical guidance. Key concepts include *birr* (comprehensive righteousness extending beyond ritual piety to social welfare), *'adl* (general justice), and *qisth* (equitable fairness, often associated with proportional distribution and legal integrity) (Esposito, 2021). The integration of these frameworks allows the analysis to move from exegetical detail to educational application.

METHODS

The method used in this study was qualitative with a thematic analysis approach. The main data sources were journal articles, books, institutional policies, and organisational reports on gender equality in higher education and research. Thematic analysis is a crucial approach for unravelling the privilege paradigm in gender equality initiatives within higher education and research, and is essential for moving beyond inclusion to address it. It allows for a deeper understanding of the complex issues surrounding gender management and equality beyond mere inclusion (Medina, 2023). In addition, it allows researchers to identify prevalent practices and synthesize them into themes, such as flexible working arrangements, inclusive culture, and strategic commitments (Yan et al., 2024). This approach also highlights the need to balance constructions of gender with the high variability of gender norms and practices in the Global South when designing policies (Xu et al., 2024), ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of gender equality in higher education and research.

After collecting the relevant literature, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns. This method allows for the examination of how privilege is discussed and conceptualized across various studies. Key themes included: the invisibility of privilege in

gender equality discourse; the impact of institutional culture on perpetuating privilege, and the limitations of inclusion-focused policies in addressing structural inequalities. Additionally, critical discourse analysis was applied to policy documents and case studies to examine how privilege is embedded in the language and strategies of gender equality initiatives. This helped to highlight areas where policies fall short of challenging systemic power imbalances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the selected literature reveals several recurring themes related to gender inequality in education across different contexts. These themes highlight the influence of cultural norms, institutional barriers, policy interventions, and emerging perspectives such as intersectionality and privilege awareness. The findings indicate that gender disparities persist not only due to structural and systemic constraints but also as a result of deeply embedded social and cultural practices. Additionally, while policy frameworks have contributed to expanding opportunities, their impact remains uneven across regions and groups. Summaries of the key themes, sub-themes, principal findings, and representative cases identified from the reviewed studies are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of patriarchal and cultural norms and systemic barriers in education

Theme	Sub-themes	Key findings	Cases
Patriarchal and Cultural Norms	Influence on education access	Restricts access and opportunities for women in higher education.	Traditional beliefs in Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, and Bangladesh limit women's roles, confining them to teaching and admin
		Cultural norms restrict women's participation, especially in research and leadership roles	Saudi Arabia (Hakiem, 2022), Cambodia (Tuy, 2019), Bangladesh (K. Chan et al., 2023)
Systematic barriers in education	Genders bias in hiring and promotions	Despite increased enrollment, women face barriers in STEM and leadership due to bias and systemic issues	US higher education (Gomez, 2020), STEM fields (Roper, 2019). Gender bias in hiring, grading, and promotion practices continues to limit progress. Women hold only 26% of leadership roles in U.S. universities, with similar trends globally (Gomez, 2020)

Table 2. Thematic analysis of legal and policy interventions, intersectionality and privilege awareness

Theme	Sub-themes	Key findings	Cases
Legal and policy interventions	Civil rights act Title 9	Increased opportunities for women, particularly in sports, but benefits are not equally distributed	Title IX's impact on sports (Stevenson, 2007), racial disparities (Pickett et al., 2012)
Intersectionality and identity	Identity formation and workplace impact	Intersectionality influences career outcomes and well-being, but its application varies across contexts	Latinx and African American experiences (Cerezo et al., 2020), career outcomes (Marcus, 2022). Limited adoption in disciplines such as geography in Taiwan (Chiang & Song, 2020)
Privilege awareness & men's roles	Reframing privilege and men as allies	Engaging men as allies is essential, but requires overcoming perceptions that gender equality is a threat. Reframing privilege narratives is essential to dismantle existing inequalities	Efforts in Turkey's education system (Cin & Karlidağ-Dennis, 2021), US male privilege studies (Schwiter et al., 2021). - Some men perceive gender equality efforts as a threat, requiring reframed strategies to involve them (Chen, 2023a; Liu, 2023; Van Laar et al., 2024b). - Privilege awareness is linked to better understanding of systemic advantages, though resistance remains (Austin et al., 2024)

Gender Inequality through Intersectionality and Critical Theory

Findings from the Tables 1 and 2 strongly align with intersectionality theory and critical theory, providing deep insights into how gender inequality and privilege intersect with cultural, economic, and racial identities. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, and Bangladesh, patriarchal norms significantly limit women's access to education and leadership, confirming intersectionality's emphasis on overlapping oppressions. However, critical theory adds another layer by explaining how these patriarchal structures are maintained through power dynamics,

suggesting that systemic inequalities are not just personal issues but rooted in institutional and cultural frameworks. For example, in a study conducted by Hakiem (2022) in Saudi Arabia, patriarchy and cultural values not only oppress women based on gender, but also through broader social structures involving religious norms and ethnicity.

Critical Theory, on the other hand, analyses privilege as part of a broader social structure rather than at the individual level. Pease (2020) introduced the concept of “privileged irresponsibility” to explain how dominant groups maintain their status by ignoring the needs of marginalized groups. In a study of systemic barriers in higher education, such as gender bias in recruitment and promotion processes, the theory shows how existing power structures systematically hinder women’s advancement, despite their increasing participation in STEM fields.

Addressing Privilege in Gender Equality Initiatives

The discussion highlighted the need for systemic interventions rather than individual-focused strategies to address privilege in gender equality initiatives. The author observed that while men's engagement as allies is crucial, as seen in the Turkish and US contexts, involving men without reframing privilege risks reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. Therefore, privilege must be made visible and critically examined through frameworks such as critical theory and postcolonial theory, which explore how historical power dynamics continue to shape contemporary institutional structures.

Postcolonial theory also highlights the ongoing structural impacts of colonialism, which contribute to inequalities in higher education. Educational institutions, especially in former colonies, need to adopt a decolonizing approach to overhaul systems that have historically marginalized certain groups based on race and ethnicity. For example, patriarchal norms in countries such as Cambodia and Bangladesh, as outlined by Tuy (2019) and Chan et al. (2023), need to be viewed in the context of colonial influences and of how colonial cultures reinforce local patriarchal norms. In terms of policy recommendations, the author emphasizes the importance of dismantling systemic privilege within educational institutions. This can be achieved by promoting reflective practices and providing training programs that enhance awareness of privilege among stakeholders. Furthermore, implementing intersectional policies is essential, as these approaches address gender, race, and class as interconnected dimensions rather than as isolated issues. Evidence from STEM initiatives in countries such as Pakistan and ICT education programs in Saudi Arabia demonstrates that intersectionally designed policies are more effective in empowering marginalized groups. In addition, the author highlights the need to reframe gender equality initiatives so that they do not focus solely on women, but also critically address the structural conditions that sustain male privilege, particularly in leadership and STEM-related fields.

The findings underscore that addressing privilege within gender equality initiatives requires a shift from fragmented interventions to more systemic and transformative approaches. A key implication is the need to institutionalize intersectionality within educational policies, as gender inequality cannot be fully understood or addressed in isolation from race, class, and other social identities. This aligns with the broader literature emphasizing that overlapping structures of disadvantage shape unequal outcomes in education. Furthermore, the results suggest that universities must move beyond tokenistic diversity measures toward more reflective and critical pedagogical practices. By fostering empathy and confronting privilege blindness among students and staff, institutions can create more inclusive academic environments. This highlights the importance of embedding critical reflection within teaching and learning processes rather than treating diversity as a compliance requirement. Finally, while legal frameworks such as Title IX have contributed to expanding access and opportunities, their impact remains uneven. The findings indicate the need to strengthen and expand these policies

to address racial and socioeconomic disparities more explicitly. Without such reforms, gender equality initiatives risk reproducing existing inequalities rather than dismantling them. Collectively, these insights suggest that sustainable progress depends on integrating policy reform, institutional practice, and cultural change.

Furthermore, the present study is limited by its reliance on secondary data from existing literature, which may not capture the most recent developments in gender equality initiatives. Additionally, while the theoretical framework is broad, it may not fully address the nuances of how privilege and inequality play out in different cultural contexts beyond higher education. Future research could incorporate more empirical data from case studies and interviews with diverse stakeholders to further substantiate the findings.

CONCLUSIONS

To address gender privilege and inequality in higher education, a multi-theoretical approach involving intersectionality, feminism, critical theory, and postcolonialism is crucial. Policies should consider the interconnectedness of other social identities, and further research should explore inclusive educational institutions. Institutions should create inclusive environments through reflective practice, community engagement, and systemic reforms to promote equity at all levels.

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