

A META-STUDY OF GENDERED EXPERIENCES IN MOROCCAN UNIVERSITIES: BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.7206>

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Moroccan higher education has experienced profound transformations characterized by a marked rise in female enrollment and a series of institutional reforms intended to advance gender equality. Despite these developments, gender disparities remain evident across several dimensions, including access to higher education, retention rates, academic performance, professional trajectories, and participation in campus life. This meta study synthesizes evidence from eighty two empirical studies, policy reports, and doctoral dissertations published between 2005 and 2024 in order to examine the complex experiences of female students in Moroccan universities. Drawing on an intersectional framework, complemented by Bourdieu theory of capital and feminist institutionalism, the analysis explores the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that shape women academic trajectories. The findings reveal that although institutional expansion has facilitated increased enrollment, persistent systemic barriers continue to limit full participation. These barriers include linguistic hierarchies that privilege French medium education, socio economic inequalities, patriarchal family expectations, and gendered campus cultures. At the same time, the study identifies emerging opportunities such as scholarship programs, international mobility initiatives, leadership positions, and progressive curricular reforms that enable women to assert agency and renegotiate professional and social norms. The study concludes by proposing a conceptual model that connects structural, cultural, and institutional determinants to individual academic and professional outcomes. It further advances targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening gender equity within Moroccan higher education.

Keywords: Moroccan higher education; Gender equality; Female enrollment; Structural and sociocultural barriers; Intersectionality

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The examination of gendered experiences in higher education in Morocco is central to understanding the wider social transformations shaping North African societies. During the past two decades, Morocco has witnessed significant expansion in its higher education sector, reflected in increased female enrollment, diversification of academic programs, and the introduction of institutional policies aimed at promoting equity. However, this quantitative expansion has not consistently translated into equitable academic experiences or outcomes for women. Female students continue to navigate a complex configuration of structural constraints, socio cultural norms, and institutional practices that influence their access to educational resources, classroom participation, and professional trajectories. Empirical research indicates

that women encounter distinct challenges in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, where technical disciplines are frequently constructed as masculine domains. Similar challenges arise in rural contexts, where economic hardship and logistical barriers intensify educational inequalities. These dynamics highlight the importance of analyzing gendered experiences not solely through enrollment data, but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by intersecting structures of power, social expectations, and institutional arrangements.

This meta study aims to synthesize existing scholarship in order to provide a comprehensive account of the barriers, opportunities, and cultural constraints shaping female students' experiences in Moroccan universities. Drawing on eighty two empirical studies and institutional reports, the analysis identifies recurring patterns, clarifies structural and cultural determinants, and develops a conceptual model that explains the interaction among these factors. The study is guided by three principal questions. First, what structural, cultural, and institutional barriers influence female students' access, retention, and academic success. Second, what opportunities facilitate their educational and professional advancement. Third, how do Moroccan cultural norms and gender ideologies mediate everyday academic life. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to scholarship on gender and higher education in the Global South and provides insights relevant to policy reform and institutional transformation aimed at advancing equity.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This research employs a meta synthesis of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies that examine gendered experiences in Moroccan higher education. Meta synthesis enables the integration of diverse findings in order to identify overarching themes, recurring patterns, and areas of tension. A total of eighty two studies published between 2005 and 2024 were included in the analysis. These consist of thirty six peer reviewed journal articles, fourteen doctoral dissertations, twenty two governmental and non governmental organization reports, and ten publications produced by UNESCO and UN Women. Studies were selected according to three criteria: they focus on Moroccan higher education, explicitly analyze gendered experiences, and provide empirical or theoretically grounded insights into barriers, opportunities, or cultural constraints.

Data extraction involved systematic coding of each study according to variables such as academic field, student demographics, type of institution, reported barriers, cultural influences, and identified opportunities. The analytical process was informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: intersectionality, Bourdieu theory of capital, and feminist institutionalism. Intersectionality served as a lens for examining how gender intersects with class, language, rural or urban origin, and ethnicity to shape educational outcomes. Bourdieu framework of economic, cultural, and social capital clarified how structural inequalities translate into uneven access to resources, professional networks, and symbolic recognition within universities. Feminist institutionalism provided a means to analyze how universities, as formal organizations, either reproduce or challenge gender norms through policies, routines, and power relations.

The synthesis unfolded in three stages. The first stage involved thematic coding to identify recurring barriers and enabling factors. The second stage categorized these themes within structural, cultural, and institutional dimensions. The final stage involved the construction of a

conceptual model linking these determinants to individual academic and professional outcomes, thereby offering an integrated representation of gendered experiences in Moroccan higher education.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding the complexity of women's experiences in Moroccan universities. Gender alone does not sufficiently account for disparities in access, retention, or academic achievement. Instead, it must be analyzed in conjunction with socioeconomic status, rural or urban origin, linguistic background, and ethnicity. Empirical studies demonstrate that rural women, particularly those from Amazigh speaking communities, encounter layered disadvantages in higher education. These disadvantages include economic hardship, limited secondary school preparation, linguistic challenges, and restrictive familial expectations. Intersectional analysis shows that such factors operate through interconnected structures rather than in isolation, shaping women trajectories from enrollment to graduation. For example, a female student educated in an Arabic medium rural school who lacks proficiency in French may experience both linguistic and cultural marginalization in science and engineering courses dominated by male students from urban elite institutions. These intersecting constraints frequently result in reduced classroom participation, restricted access to informal academic networks, and limited opportunities for internships and research engagement.

3.2 Bourdieu Theory of Capital

Bourdieu conceptualization of capital provides valuable insight into disparities within Moroccan universities. Cultural capital, including proficiency in French and English, significantly influences students capacity to succeed in higher education, particularly in fields requiring advanced technical and scientific literacy. Students endowed with greater cultural capital are often better prepared to meet academic expectations, produce rigorous written work, and participate confidently in oral presentations. Social capital, understood as networks of family members, peers, mentors, and professional contacts, shapes access to research opportunities, internships, and employment prospects. Economic capital affects students ability to afford transportation, digital technologies, and supplementary learning resources. Women from low income households frequently lack these forms of capital, leading to cumulative disadvantages that constrain both academic performance and post graduation opportunities. Empirical findings indicate that urban middle class female students often achieve stronger outcomes than rural low income peers not because of inherent differences in ability, but because they benefit from private tutoring, international exposure, and professional mentorship.

3.3 Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist institutionalism underscores that formal policy commitments to gender equality are insufficient on their own. Informal norms, organizational cultures, and internal power relations within institutions significantly influence outcomes. In Moroccan universities, official discourses supporting equity frequently coexist with informal practices that reproduce

inequality, including male dominated faculty hierarchies, gendered social networks, and implicit expectations concerning female behavior. Female students report experiences of differential treatment by instructors, unequal access to mentorship, and marginalization within student governance structures. These patterns reflect broader societal norms related to gender roles, honor, and social propriety. Universities therefore function not as neutral spaces, but as arenas in which patriarchal structures are simultaneously reproduced and contested.

4.0 GENDERED BARRIERS IN MOROCCAN UNIVERSITIES

4.1 Structural Barriers

Structural inequalities remain among the most consistently documented obstacles to equitable participation for female students in Moroccan higher education. One of the most significant barriers concerns geographical and economic disadvantage, particularly for women originating from rural areas. Because most universities are located in urban centers, rural students are frequently required to relocate in order to pursue their studies. Empirical research shows that rural female students encounter logistical challenges related to housing, transportation, and personal safety, all of which may restrict mobility and limit engagement in campus life.

Economic constraints further intensify these difficulties. Tuition fees, living expenses, and the cost of educational materials place disproportionate pressure on students from low income households. These structural inequalities contribute not only to unequal access but also to higher attrition rates among rural and working class women, thereby reproducing patterns of social stratification. Moreover, women who are the first in their families to enter higher education often experience heightened academic and familial expectations, leading to increased stress and psychological strain.

Language proficiency represents another significant structural barrier. French functions as the principal medium of instruction in many science, law, and business programs. Students who completed their secondary education in Arabic medium schools frequently face challenges in comprehension, technical writing, and oral participation. This linguistic divide affects academic performance and restricts involvement in collaborative learning, laboratory work, and classroom discussion. As a result, confidence may be undermined, particularly in disciplines where female representation is already limited.

4.2 Sociocultural Barriers

Moroccan universities operate within a broader cultural context shaped by enduring gender norms, patriarchal family structures, and honor based social expectations. Family responsibilities and domestic obligations significantly influence female students academic experiences. Research indicates that many women are expected to reconcile their studies with household labor, including caregiving duties, thereby limiting the time and energy available for academic work and extracurricular engagement. Male students, by contrast, generally experience greater autonomy and fewer domestic constraints, reflecting persistent asymmetries in gender roles. These pressures are especially pronounced in rural settings and among families adhering to traditional norms that prioritize modesty and preparation for marriage over professional ambition.

Concerns related to campus safety and sexual harassment constitute additional sociocultural barriers. Reports document experiences of verbal harassment, unwanted attention, and, in certain cases, sexual misconduct by peers or faculty members. The anticipation or fear of such incidents shapes women choices regarding academic pathways, attendance in evening classes, participation in laboratories, and involvement in mixed gender study groups. Avoidance strategies may limit access to critical resources, networks, and experiential learning opportunities, thereby constraining both academic development and professional preparation. Norms surrounding reputation and honor also influence female behavior on campus. Many students and their families place strong emphasis on maintaining social respectability, which affects decisions related to dress, demeanor, and social participation. These cultural expectations impose subtle yet powerful constraints on the expression of agency, particularly in coeducational environments, and may reinforce gender hierarchies within institutions that formally endorse meritocratic principles.

4.3 Institutional Barriers

Although Moroccan universities have adopted policies promoting formal gender equality, institutional cultures and structures frequently perpetuate inequities. The underrepresentation of women in faculty positions, administrative leadership, and decision making bodies limits the availability of mentors and role models for female students. Male academics often occupy positions of authority, shaping curricula, evaluation standards, and informal professional networks in ways that may disadvantage women. Limited representation at senior levels reduces opportunities for research collaboration, networking, and career advancement. Furthermore, the absence of consistently enforced gender sensitive policies heightens vulnerability. While regulations addressing discrimination and harassment may exist, implementation mechanisms are often unclear or perceived as inaccessible. The coexistence of formal commitments to equality and informal patriarchal practices creates complex power dynamics that female students must navigate in order to succeed academically

5.0 OPPORTUNITIES IN MOROCCAN UNIVERSITIES

Despite enduring structural and sociocultural barriers, Moroccan higher education has created significant opportunities for female students, reflecting institutional reform and gradual shifts in societal attitudes toward women education. One of the most visible transformations is the steady increase in female enrollment over the past two decades. The proportion of women in higher education has risen substantially, signaling a structural reconfiguration of access and a movement toward greater gender inclusion. The expansion of public universities, the introduction of scholarship programs targeting female students, and national initiatives encouraging girls education have collectively contributed to this progress. These gains are particularly evident in urban areas and in disciplines such as the social sciences, humanities, and education, where institutional climates are generally more supportive of women participation.

Beyond access, universities have become important spaces for leadership development and civic engagement. Female students are increasingly active in student councils, academic associations, debate forums, and community organizations. Participation in these spheres cultivates communication skills, negotiation capacities, teamwork, and problem solving abilities that are essential for professional advancement. Engagement in student networks also

provides emotional support and informal mentorship, helping women navigate structural disadvantages and sociocultural pressures. Such involvement strengthens self confidence and fosters a sense of agency that extends beyond the classroom.

International mobility and scholarship opportunities further expand horizons for Moroccan women. Participation in exchange programs and overseas study initiatives enhances language proficiency, academic competence, and professional ambition. Exposure to diverse educational environments often broadens intellectual perspectives and encourages leadership development. Students who return from international experiences frequently demonstrate increased research capacity, stronger professional networks, and greater confidence in pursuing advanced study or competitive careers. In this way, global engagement functions as a mechanism for challenging locally embedded constraints. Curricular reform and pedagogical innovation have also contributed to more inclusive learning environments. The introduction of bilingual instruction, interactive teaching strategies, and greater sensitivity to gender dynamics in the classroom has gradually improved women academic experiences. In scientific and technical disciplines in particular, collaborative learning models and research oriented projects encourage active participation and reduce barriers historically associated with male dominated fields. These incremental changes signal an evolving institutional commitment to fostering equitable participation and academic excellence.

6.0 CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Cultural expectations continue to shape the educational experiences of Moroccan women in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Universities operate within a broader social framework influenced by enduring norms related to gender roles, modesty, and family honor. Although higher education institutions are formally coeducational, everyday practices frequently reflect implicit forms of gender differentiation. Women may cluster together in classrooms, limit interaction with male peers, or hesitate to participate openly in mixed academic settings. Such patterns, rooted in wider social conventions, can influence collaborative learning, peer networking, and classroom engagement, thereby affecting the development of competencies essential for professional success. Expectations concerning mobility, marriage, and family responsibility remain particularly influential. Many families continue to exercise oversight regarding residence, travel, and participation in evening activities, especially for younger female students. Educational aspirations may intersect with pressures related to early marriage or domestic obligations, producing tension between personal ambition and collective expectations. Women often respond to these pressures through negotiation and compromise, carefully balancing academic commitment with familial responsibility. While such strategies demonstrate resilience, they may also limit the range of opportunities available to them. Norms surrounding honor and social reputation further shape behavior within university contexts. Maintaining respectability is a pervasive concern that informs choices related to dress, demeanor, and social interaction. Female students may avoid certain extracurricular activities, restrict participation in mixed study groups, or select academic fields perceived as socially acceptable. Although these adaptive strategies help preserve social standing, they can simultaneously reinforce gender hierarchies and constrain the full expression of intellectual and professional agency. In this sense, cultural norms operate not only as external constraints but also as internalized frameworks that influence decision making and self-presentation throughout women educational trajectories.

7.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this meta study confirm that gendered experiences in Moroccan universities cannot be adequately assessed through quantitative indicators of access alone. Although female enrollment has surpassed parity in recent years, the evidence synthesized across eighty two empirical studies reveals a persistent disjunction between numerical inclusion and substantive equality. The increase in participation, particularly in urban institutions and in fields such as social sciences and humanities, reflects an important structural transformation. However, qualitative data concerning classroom interaction, access to resources, language proficiency, campus climate, and professional trajectories indicate that deep seated inequalities remain embedded within the higher education system.

A comparative analysis of structural, sociocultural, and institutional barriers demonstrates that these dimensions operate not independently but in mutually reinforcing ways. Structural inequalities such as rural origin, limited economic capital, and inadequate preparation in French medium instruction create initial disparities in access and academic preparedness. When these disadvantages intersect with sociocultural expectations related to domestic responsibility, mobility restrictions, and reputation management, their effects become cumulative. For example, rural women from low income households who completed secondary education in Arabic medium schools face compounded challenges: they must adapt to linguistically demanding academic environments while simultaneously negotiating familial oversight and financial precarity. The data indicate that such intersectional positioning correlates with lower classroom participation, reduced engagement in research opportunities, and higher vulnerability to attrition.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study illuminate these layered dynamics. Intersectionality clarifies how gender interacts with class, language, and geography to produce differentiated outcomes among women themselves. The experiences of urban middle class female students differ markedly from those of rural Amazigh speaking women, even though both groups are formally included within expanding enrollment statistics. Bourdieu framework further reveals how disparities in economic, cultural, and social capital translate into unequal academic performance and professional mobility. Students with access to private tutoring, international exposure, and professional networks are better positioned to capitalize on institutional opportunities, whereas those lacking such resources remain disadvantaged despite formal access. Feminist institutionalism complements this analysis by demonstrating how universities reproduce broader patriarchal norms through informal practices, male dominated leadership structures, and inconsistent enforcement of gender sensitive policies.

At the same time, the data reveal that Moroccan universities function as ambivalent spaces that generate both empowerment and constraint. On the one hand, increased access, leadership opportunities, international mobility programs, and pedagogical reforms have expanded women horizons. Participation in student organizations and exchange initiatives strengthens confidence, professional aspiration, and social capital. On the other hand, persistent harassment, gendered expectations of comportment, and limited female representation in decision making roles signal that institutional cultures have not fully transformed in parallel with structural expansion. This duality suggests that agency and structure must be analyzed in tandem. Women are not passive recipients of inequality; they actively negotiate constraints,

strategically manage reputation, seek mentorship, and pursue mobility opportunities. Yet their agency operates within clearly defined boundaries shaped by economic resources, linguistic hierarchies, and cultural norms.

A critical comparison of opportunities and constraints indicates that gains are unevenly distributed. Enrollment growth has benefited urban populations more than rural communities. Leadership and networking opportunities tend to be more accessible to students with higher levels of cultural capital. International mobility programs, while transformative, often require prior academic excellence and language proficiency, thereby privileging those already advantaged. Consequently, expansion alone does not dismantle inequality; without targeted intervention, it may inadvertently reproduce stratification within the female student population. Overall, the discussion underscores that gender inequality in Moroccan higher education is not merely a residual effect of tradition but a multidimensional phenomenon sustained through structural arrangements, cultural expectations, and institutional practices. Sustainable transformation requires coordinated action across these domains rather than isolated policy adjustments.

8.0 CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that Moroccan universities have undergone substantial expansion and have made measurable progress toward gender inclusion. Female enrollment has increased significantly, leadership opportunities have widened, and curricular reforms have begun to address inclusivity. These developments represent important achievements within the broader trajectory of social modernization. Nevertheless, the persistence of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers limits the full realization of gender equality. Access has improved, but equity in experience, participation, and professional outcome remains uneven.

The evidence suggests that policy responses must address the interconnected nature of disadvantage. First, targeted linguistic support for students educated in Arabic medium schools is essential. Structured language reinforcement programs in French and English, particularly in scientific and professional disciplines, would mitigate disparities in comprehension, participation, and academic confidence. Such interventions should be integrated into the first years of university study to prevent early academic marginalization. Second, strengthening mentorship structures and increasing female representation in faculty and leadership positions are critical. Visible role models enhance aspiration and provide guidance in navigating institutional hierarchies. Formal mentorship programs that connect female students with faculty and professional networks can expand social capital and facilitate career progression. Third, universities must adopt and consistently enforce comprehensive gender sensitive policies addressing harassment, discrimination, and student retention. Transparent reporting mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and accountability frameworks are necessary to transform institutional culture. Policy declarations alone are insufficient without implementation and monitoring. Fourth, scholarship schemes and mobility programs should prioritize rural and low income women in order to counterbalance existing structural inequities. Financial assistance that covers accommodation, transportation, and digital resources can reduce attrition and expand access to high impact opportunities such as international exchange and research collaboration. Fifth, sustained curricular reform is needed to foster inclusivity in science and professional fields. Pedagogical innovation, collaborative learning models, and explicit

attention to gender representation within course materials can challenge stereotypes and encourage female participation in disciplines traditionally perceived as masculine. In conclusion, advancing gender equity in Moroccan higher education requires a holistic strategy that integrates structural reform, cultural transformation, and institutional accountability. By addressing linguistic hierarchies, economic disparities, representation gaps, and sociocultural constraints simultaneously, Moroccan universities can move beyond numerical parity toward substantive equality. Such progress would not only enhance individual academic and professional trajectories but also contribute to national development by fully mobilizing the intellectual and creative capacities of women.

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