Demographic Characteristics, Educational Background, and Challenges Faced by Female Undergraduate Students at Njala University, Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This study undertook an extensive investigation into the demographic characteristics, educational backgrounds, and gender-related challenges encountered by female undergraduate students enrolled at Njala University, Sierra Leone, based on data collected. It provides valuable insights into various dimensions, such as nationality, regional origins, family dynamics, academic qualifications, and sources of financial support for these students (Buchmann, 2008; England & Li, 2006). Additionally, it examines critical aspects including age distribution, academic achievements in examinations, secondary school backgrounds, disability status, academic repetition rates, and grade point averages, shedding light on the intricate interplay of factors shaping these female undergraduates' educational journeys (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sax, 2001; Smith et al., 2019).

Introduction: This study explores the issue of gender disparities in higher education in Sierra Leone, a developing country where women face various challenges and disadvantages in accessing and completing higher education. The study focuses on female undergraduate students at Njala University and examines their demographic characteristics, participation rates, key determinants of gender disparities, attitudes toward education, and gender-related challenges. The topic of gender disparities in higher education has been widely investigated by prominent researchers such as Buchmann (2008) and England (2006), who have analyzed the causes and consequences of unequal opportunities and outcomes for male and female students. Their research has provided valuable insights into the complex dynamics of gender and education

in different contexts. This study adds to the existing literature by offering a detailed account of the lived experiences of female students, revealing the specific obstacles they face in pursuing higher education (Wharton, 2012). It also addresses the issue of disability status and its impact on students' educational experiences and academic success (Schneider, 2010). Furthermore, by assessing academic performance and repetition rates, this study evaluates the various factors that shape the academic trajectories of female undergraduate students at Njala University, Sierra Leone (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sax, 2001).

Methodology: Data were collected through surveys administered to 700 female undergraduate students at Njala University during the 2019 academic year. The survey encompassed questions related to demographic characteristics, educational qualifications, family status, sponsorship, disability status, academic performance, and more. Statistical analysis techniques were employed to analyze the data.

Results:

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1.1 Nationalities of Female Students

Nationality of Female Students	Percentage
Sierra Leone	98%
Foreigners	2%
Total	100

Source: Field Data 2019

The table shows that 98% of female undergraduate students at Njala University were Sierra Leonean na

Table 1.2 Regional Distributions of female students

Region	Percentage
Southern Region	31%
Northern Region	26%
Eastern Region	19%
Western Region	2%
Total	**100**

Source: Field Data 2019

Regional distribution revealed that 31% came from the Southern region, 26% from the Northern region, 22% from the Eastern region, 19% from the Western region, and 2% from other parts of Africa.

Table 1.3: Family Status of undergraduate female students

Marital status of family		First to go to University		Family Employed		Occupation of parent		Expected monthly income	
Married	412	Yes	378	Yes	390	Civil Servant	294	Above minimum wage	332
Not married	86	No	322	No	310	Private	106	Below minimum wage	368
Divorced	202					Others	300		
Total	**700**		**700**		**700**		**700**		**700**

Source: Field Data 2019

Among surveyed students, 41% came from married households, 23% from divorced families, and 36% from families with other statuses. 55% had parents who were not employed, while 45% had at least one employed parent. Most employed parents were civil servants (38%), followed by those in private employment (15%).

Educational Background of undergraduate female students
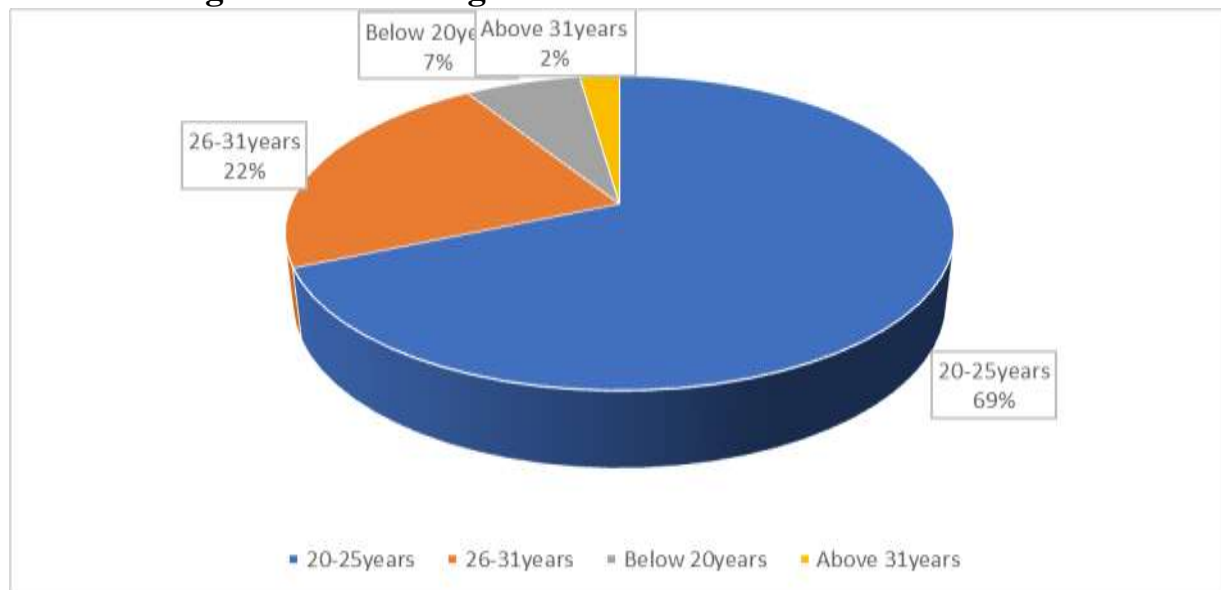
Figure 2: Age range of Female Undergraduate Students
Source: Field Data 2019

The figure shows that the majority (69%) of female students fell within the age range of 20-25 years, 22% of the students belonged to the age range of 26-31 years, while a smaller percentage of 7% were below 20 years of age. Furthermore, 2% of the female students were above the age of 31 years.
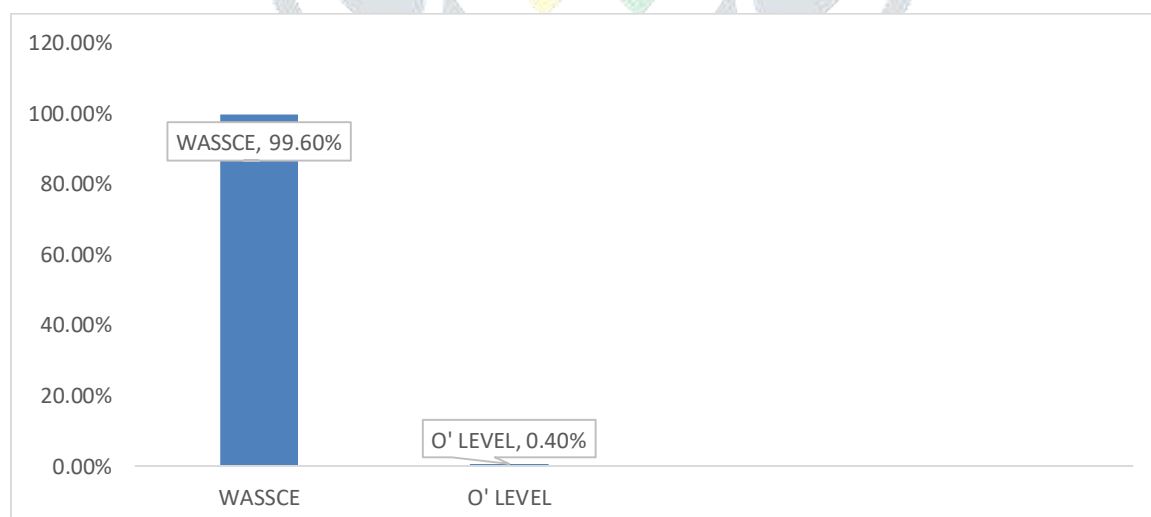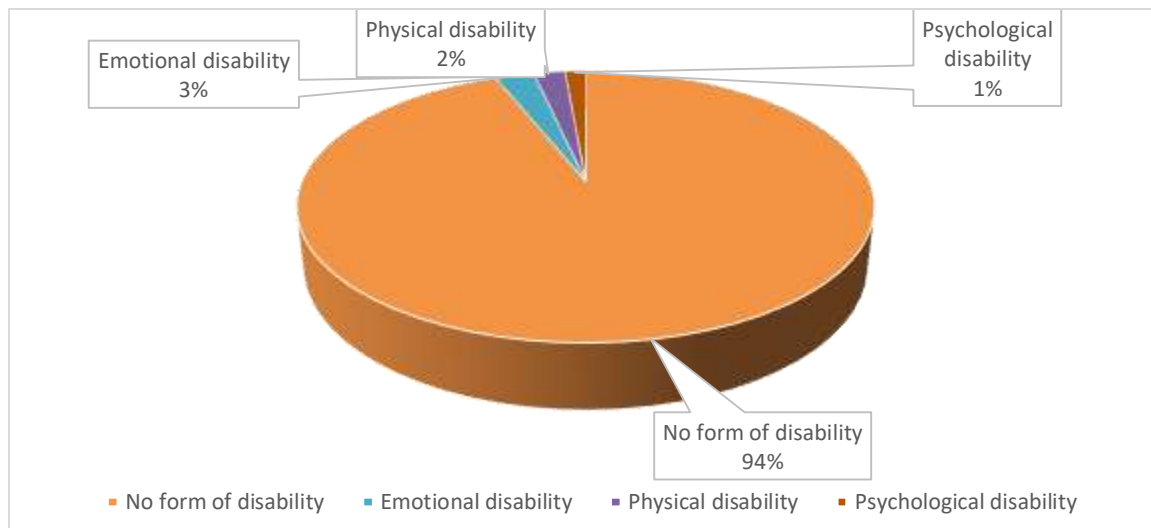

Figure 1: Examination that qualified female undergraduate students
Source: Field Data 2019

The figure shows that 99.6% of students qualified for admission through the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

Disability Status

Figure 3: Type of Disability of Female Undergraduate Students
Source: Field Data 2019

A significant majority (94%) reported no disability, while 6% encountered various forms of disabilities,

including emotional (3%), physical (2%), and psychological (1%).

Academic Performance
Table 2.1: Female undergraduate Students Repeating Before

Female undergraduate students repeating before	Frequency	Percentage
No	647	**92%**
Yes	53	**8%**
Total	**700**	**100%**

SOURCE: Field Data 2019

The table depict 92% of students had no previous instances of repetition in their academic coursework

whereas 8% had repeated before.

Table 2.2: Grade Point of Undergraduate Female Students

Grade Points	Frequency	Percentage
3.0	647	**92%**
3.0-3.6	53	**8%**
Total	**700**	**100%**

SOURCE: Field Data 2019

In terms of grade point averages, 92% achieved a cumulative score of 3.0, with the remaining 8% falling

within the 3.0-3.6 range.

Discussion: The findings from this study reveal a rich tapestry of demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds among female undergraduate students. Notably, the data underscore the commendable academic achievements of these students. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that a minority of students grapple with challenges related to disabilities. Addressing these challenges becomes paramount in order to ensure equitable access and foster success within the sphere of higher education.

The intricate issue of gender disparities in higher education has received extensive scholarly attention. Hakim's research (Hakim, 2000) has underscored the significance of work-lifestyle choices in comprehending these disparities, adding a valuable dimension to the discourse. Barbara Schneider's work (Schneider, 2010) has illuminated the shifting gender composition within college majors, which represents a pivotal aspect of comprehending gender disparities in higher education.

On a global scale, gender disparities in higher education have been the focus of comprehensive research endeavors (Buchmann, 2008; England & Li, 2006). Scholars have undertaken in-depth explorations of various facets of students' educational backgrounds, encompassing their academic qualifications and experiences during secondary school (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Schneider, 2010). Furthermore, the burgeoning interest in understanding the impact of disability status on students' experiences is evident in recent research (Smith et al., 2019).

Academic performance and repetition rates remain indispensable indicators for gauging students' progress (Sax, 2001; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). These metrics serve as crucial tools for assessing the academic trajectories and achievements of students, contributing significantly to our understanding of their educational journeys.

Conclusion: This study provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic characteristics, educational backgrounds, and challenges faced by female undergraduate students at Njala University. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing gender disparities and providing support for students with disabilities. Policymakers, educational institutions, and stakeholders should use these insights to create inclusive and equitable higher education environments.

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