

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND INTERSECTIONAL PAY GAPS

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Abstract: *The present study explores higher education students' perspectives on gender and intersectional pay gaps through visual representations, adopting a qualitative approach. The method applied was the focus group, to facilitate interactions among participants regarding their views. The results show a rather strong awareness regarding disparities in salary based on gender and intersecting dimensions. In general, both male and female students identify the existence of unequal treatment, highlighting that differences in status are associated not only with people's gender but also with other aspects such as culture, nationality, race and ethnicity, which give shape to the pay gap in society at present.*

Keywords: *gender inequality, gender pay gap, intersectionality, higher education students*

1. Introduction

The idea of living in the 21st century might have made suffragists believe that, by now, women would share the same fundamental rights as men, especially in terms of work and earnings. However, despite decades of efforts and progress, there are still challenges that need to be tackled to address the imbalances that persist in today's world.

Gender inequality has been a consistent headline for several decades, as it refers to complex dynamics between men and women in society. It is not simply a matter of biological differences or individual capabilities, but also an issue that goes beyond superficial matters, as it comprises norms and social constructs (Wienclaw, 2021) which are created, developed and perpetuated by cultural factors within societies around the globe.

These cultural aspects may be more or less similar depending on the context; however, one idea remains as a common ground among all of them: the disadvantaged position of women, which hinders their full potential from being developed and deployed in relevant ways that society and the world urgently need to reach higher levels of civility and progress.

Traditional ideas about gender norms and roles are transmitted from generation to

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generation and change little over long periods of time, especially in geographical contexts where worldviews are deeply influenced by religious and cultural factors that shape societies.

Women and their place in the world are closely related to roles that confine them to the home; consequently, while the idea of women in the workplace has gained particular relevance in recent decades, it has not happened without problems that affect the quality of women's experiences in these contexts, payment being one of the most important factors that influence women's lives.

At the same time, there are factors that create distinctions which go beyond the female/male binary; rather, work experiences are also shaped by elements such as race, ethnicity, class, and age, among others.

In other words, today's societies reflect a double disparity that affects women in particular and has nothing to do with their intellectual capacities: the mere fact of being women on the one hand, and the colour of their skin, their ethnicity or their class, on the other.

2. Literature Review

In today's society, gender equality is understood as a condition in which all people, regardless of their gender, are provided with equal rights, the same respect, as well as opportunities to live as human beings (Amri et al., 2024; Bhanja, 2022; Center for Reproductive Rights, 2014). Thus, this concept implies that everyone should have the same access to resources, education, participation in decision-making processes and opportunities to work (Batar, 2021).

Despite this conception being widely shared among individuals as well as organisations, there still exists a notable difference between women and men that manifests itself in terms of actual participation and access. This difference can be understood as the objective aspect of reality from which subjective factors emerge that gender laws or policies cannot change on their own: the individual subjectivities of people and societies, shaped by the culture of each particular place.

In this sense, gender inequality arises as a concept that refers to situations in people's lives in which they can experience dissimilar treatment or be perceived in a different way due to their gender, and the idea is shaped not only by socially constructed norms, roles and expectations, but also by biological factors (Wood, 2005).

The existence of gender inequality has been explained taking into consideration a variety of perspectives. From a structural and functional point of view, gender roles are understood as stable and socially assigned, men being typically related and assumed to portray instrumental functions, while women are typically associated with more expressive and emotional responsibilities (Wienclaw, 2021).

Thus, distinctions between men and women are often made taking into consideration their roles within social, economic and political fields. Women are more commonly associated with socially oriented roles, such as childbearing, caregiving, as well as managing household responsibilities, which therefore lead them to remain economically dependent on partners or other family members (Devi, Singh and Kumar, 2024).

On the other hand, men are typically (and have been traditionally) related to the out-of-the-house arena, being therefore trained to be more apt to economic and political roles, which include generation of income, property ownership, decision-making as well as the leadership within the household. These differences in roles can therefore contribute to the development of perceptions of superiority and inferiority within society (Devi, Singh and Kumar, 2024).

With these ideas in mind it is not difficult to imply that, regarding work positions, men are always favoured, a situation that puts women at a disadvantage, requiring them to work more or study harder in order to be at least “recognized” as capable and worthy of higher incomes.

However, most women around the world need to balance work and life given the fact that they continue to be expected to demonstrate their traditionally assigned roles, their right to work and access higher income positions being seen as a sort of “favour” that society offers them, therefore not being rewarded the same as men in terms of salaries.

Following this idea, it can be understood that there is a phenomenon taking place in society at large at present, in which women and men do not earn the same wages even if both share similar work contexts.

This phenomenon is called the gender pay gap and explicitly refers to the extent of disparity in salaries between men and women, which is frequently related to the discrimination that leads to women receiving less money for executing precisely the same type of work, done with the same level of effort, carrying the same responsibilities and having the same experience at the position (Smóder and Mirosław, 2016).

It represents therefore an indicator of how much women advance towards equality, and reflects at the same time how much society acknowledges and values both women’s work and women as people (Lips, 2003), also serving as an estimation of discrimination in the workplace (Blau and Kahn, 2017).

Closely related to this idea is another one that takes into consideration other demographic characteristics which also affect the levels of income received, i.e. the intersectional pay gap, meaning an unequal wage distribution that results from the intersection between gender and race, combined with class, age, sexual orientation and religion (Bendl et al., 2015; Holvino, 2010).

Taking into consideration the abovementioned forms of inequality, it is also relevant to examine how they are understood within educational contexts, as universities represent an important space where students live and develop their own critical views on issues such as gender and intersectional pay gaps which will, in turn, influence their future lives.

For this reason, exploring how university students perceive and interpret those kinds of inequalities can offer valuable insights in terms of their level of awareness and understanding of the matter. Although some research has been conducted regarding higher education students’ views on topics related to gender perceptions and stereotypes which intersect with race and class (Bu, Zhang and Hang, 2023; Chen et al., 2025; Kataeva, Izenkova and Roshka, 2026; Ragbir et al., 2021; Thompson, Dalberg and Bruch, 2024), it remains limited in addressing how university students interpret gender

and intersectional pay gaps, particularly in terms of how the mentioned inequalities are recognized, understood and interpreted by the students themselves.

3. Materials and Methods

The present research has been conducted by adopting a qualitative approach to explore higher education students' perceptions and mental representations of gender and intersectional pay gaps. The technique applied was the focus group, given its capacity to bring about interactions as well as exchange of ideas among the participants.

The main objective of this study is to examine higher education students' perspectives on gender and intersectional pay gaps through visual representations, given the necessity to gain a more in depth understanding of how these phenomena are interpreted within students' subjectivities and how they are perceived in relation to broader inequalities that affect a large part of the world population.

Therefore, in order to achieve the main goal, the following specific objectives are proposed:

S.O.1: To identify how students interpret inequality between men and women in similar work contexts through visual representations.

S.O.2: To identify how students interpret wage differences related to ethnicity and race through visual representations.

S.O.3: To critically analyse similarities and differences in the responses between male and female students.

An interview guide was designed and applied within the focus group session to facilitate the interactions among participants. The mentioned guide included the use of visual stimuli in order to elicit verbal responses (Pauwels, 2019), in which students were presented with two images that depicted situations of pay inequality.

The first image showed a man and a woman each standing on columns made of coins. The two of them were dressed in similar types of clothes, which suggested equivalent work positions. However, the woman was placed at a lower level than the man, which implicitly represented a gender pay gap.

The second image portrayed disparities in payment across various racial and ethnic groups including White, Black, Asian, and Latino categories, also adding the gender element across each group. In this image, white men were shown standing at the highest level of income, while men from other racial and ethnic groups appeared at levels that displayed lower incomes. All women, including white ones, were located at levels below their male counterparts, which highlights intersectional inequalities in payment.

This approach allowed for relevant qualitative data to be obtained to understand students' interpretations of gender and intersectional pay gaps.

The students who participated in the study were selected through an open call that was presented in class sessions at the university, where the research and its objectives were explained. Students who expressed an explicit interest in taking part in the study were therefore invited to join the focus group, based on their voluntary agreement.

Inclusion criteria for the research required that participants be enrolled as university students at any academic level, as well as have interest and willingness to engage with the topic related to gender issues. The voluntary character of students' participation ensured that all of them had a basic awareness of the ideas to be discussed, which would result in meaningful contributions during the session of focus group discussion.

The sample was made up of ten students, including an equal number of male and female participants which reflected a balance in the sample and a variety of responses; it comprised undergraduate and doctoral students from different fields of study, including both engineering and non-engineering disciplines. It is important to mention that the sample counted on participants from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

4. Results and Discussion

In order to present the data from a clear perspective and make the reading smooth, the results of the study are organized in accordance with the research objectives. In this way, the structure makes it easier to follow each topic, therefore providing an overall view of the participants' ideas.

S.O.1: To identify how students interpret inequality between men and women in similar work contexts through visual representations.

The analysis of the first objective focuses on how participants interpret inequality between men and women in similar work contexts based on the visual representation that was provided and mentioned before.

In general terms, the image is understood mostly as a depiction of inequality based on gender, particularly regarding differences in salary. Most of the participants associate the disparity of levels between the two individuals with an unequal pay, despite the recognition of an apparent similarity in the roles they have at a certain job position; furthermore, they highlight the disadvantage that females regularly face regardless of the efforts they make and/or the academic preparation they have in order to fulfil the necessary requirements for the job title.

Thus, apart from the evident wage inequality, several participants also emphasise that there are differences between men and women regarding the treatment received from others and generally at work settings, indicating that the image reflects much broader patterns in terms of unequal opportunities and recognition within professional settings.

Some of the participants' interpretations point to the existence of structural barriers that signify real and tacit obstacles that limit women's progress, which can be explained by the continuity of male dominance within the workplace. These interpretations reveal that participants are not only capable of identifying explicit disparities between men and women in terms of wages, but also of connecting them with wider inequalities at a structural level that result in a negative outcome for women in the workplace.

To a limited extent, but equally interesting, an alternative interpretation emerges in the responses, focusing mainly on a merit-based explanation which does not take gender into consideration as an element of segregation or discrimination. This response

focuses more on the “ideal” situation in which people would compete based on their own skills and preparation, rather than their gender as one of the variables involved.

However, most of the responses provided by the participants consistently relate the visual representation of this image to the persistence of disparities based solely on gender in similar work contexts.

The findings suggest that there is a rather strong awareness among participants regarding disparities in salary based on gender, demonstrating in this way the existence of a solid recognition of gender inequality among more educated populations from different fields of study and cultural backgrounds, as well as shared ideas of the gender pay gap as an important social issue to tackle, even within contexts in which men and women appear to occupy similar positions and roles.

S.O.2: To identify how students interpret wage differences related to ethnicity and race through visual representations.

The analysis of the second objective focuses on how participants interpret differences in wages associated with racial and ethnic representations in the image provided.

In general, participants identify a variety of factors that influence inequality within the image, more frequently relating these disparities not only to gender itself but also to differences that are connected to cultural, national, and racial or ethnic backgrounds. The interpretations provided reveal that participants recognise the coexistence of various dimensions of inequality in society at large, rather than only attributing the mentioned differences to just one factor or element.

A considerable number of responses put emphasis on unequal treatment that happens across racial and ethnic groups, combined with gender-based differences. Thus, the participants interpret the image as a reflection of wider types of division patterns, in which people’s gender as well as their race or ethnicity influence the extent to which they have access to higher income levels.

Likely, some participants also mention the non-negotiable situation of male dominance within this structure, something which reinforces the idea that gender remains the core of inequality even when other factors are also considered.

As a relevant aspect, it is necessary to mention that, even though to a lesser extent, some of the responses explicitly portray a critical viewpoint towards the inequalities depicted in the image, thus indicating a clear disapproval of the differences observed in the visual stimulus. This idea indicates that respondents not only recognise what they visualise but they also offer judgement that clearly goes beyond the mere description of a certain social issue, such as the intersectional pay gap, therefore providing more value to the general responses.

Equally interesting, another interpretation points to the role that cultural and traditional factors play in shaping the disparities mentioned by the participants and the necessity to change this.

As a general statement, it can be said that the visual representation is understood as a frame whose meaning carries both complex and intersecting forms of inequality, thus combining gender with racial and ethnic dimensions which give shape to the phenomenon of the pay gap in society at present.

Furthermore, the responses reveal a clear evaluative aspect, as some participants explicitly refer to their disapproval of the inequalities depicted in the visual representation.

While some responses remain at a mere descriptive level, focusing mostly on identifying disparities in treatment across gender and racial or ethnic groups, other answers include a more critical attitude (or moral judgement) towards the differences observed.

S.O.3: To critically analyse similarities and differences in the responses between male and female students.

The analysis of the third objective focuses on comparing female and male students' responses across the two visual representations provided, structured according to each image.

In the first image, the analysis explores the presence of similarities and differences in the answers provided by male and female participants when they interpret gender inequality in a certain work context. In general, both males and females identify the image as a representation of wage disparities based on gender, recognizing in this way that men are situated at a higher level despite noticeable similarities in their roles at work.

Male participants identify inequality of salary as a central element of the visual representation, and in some cases acknowledge the existence of unequal treatment and male dominance within the fields. An alternative interpretation focuses mainly on the "ideal" situation based on people's merits, which does not take gender into consideration as a central aspect of discrimination. Males' responses are in general more focused on the descriptive elements of the image, with not many indicators of references to structural or systemic barriers.

Female participants express their interpretations more frequently in terms of an extension that goes beyond the apparent differences in salary to include other aspects of inequality, especially those that they can recognise in terms of unequal treatment as well as the existence of structural barriers which affect women's professional progress negatively. These responses reflect a more detailed interpretation of the image, which combines the visual symbolic aspect with ideas of broader patterns of disadvantage for females.

It can be said that, in general terms, the responses from both male and female participants display a recognition of disparities which is shared and include references to unequal treatment and structural disadvantage.

However, the most noticeable differences emerge in the way that these elements are expressed, given that female participants provide more elaborated interpretations which, in general, connect the visual representation to other patterns of inequality at a broader level, while male participants put more emphasis on the observable aspects of the image.

In the second image, the analysis focuses on similarities and differences in the responses provided by female and male participants as they interpret inequalities taking into consideration not only gender but also racial and ethnic groups. In general, both males and females identify the existence of unequal treatment, emphasising that the

differences in status are associated not only with people's gender but also with other aspects such as culture, nationality, race and ethnicity.

Female participants' interpretations combine gender with other elements which relate to inequality, meaning that their responses provide a deeper level of understanding or real-life applications of the image.

Several participants mention disparities in salary and unequal treatment, stating a strong relation between differences based on gender with those related to the racial and ethnic background of the people. This idea suggests interpretations of the visual stimulus through diverse lenses that result in inequality.

In the case of male participants, it can be said that they also identify disparities related to culture, nationality, race and ethnicity, and at the same time some cases realize there is unequal treatment, one of them explicitly stating comments of disapproval regarding the inequalities depicted in the image.

However, males' responses emphasise certain more specific elements of the image, such as patterns of dominance or cultural aspects, rather than a direct relation among various kinds of dimensions within one interpretation, as their female counterparts do.

5. Conclusions

The results of the study reveal that higher education students can recognize, realize and interpret gender and intersectional pay gaps when they are provided with visual representations. Participants in the research identified specific patterns of inequality, especially in relation to gender itself, also realizing the role that race, ethnicity, culture and nationality portray in terms of wage disparities between people.

At the same time, the results show the rich reality of having a diversity of subjectivities and opinions, given the fact that not all of the students interpreted inequalities in the same way. Some of them connected different elements of inequality, while others were more focused on merely describing what they observed in the images. These specificities constitute an interesting and valuable example of the varied and nuanced ways in which higher education students understand social inequalities.

The findings also highlight the value of presenting visual stimuli as an effective tool when exploring perceptions of inequality and emphasize the need for further research on how these interpretations are shaped within university contexts.

The results of this study can be useful for higher education institutions and policymakers as they offer a clear understanding about how university students recognize, realize and interpret gender and intersectional pay gaps.

From this perspective, it may be helpful to create and develop specific actions aimed at addressing these inequalities in a more effective way. Furthermore, the findings may be relevant for other organisations that focus their work on the area of gender equality, as they provide a general overview of how younger generations from diverse backgrounds interpret and respond to such issues in society.

The study also contributes to the academic field as it paves the way for further research and supports the development of different educational initiatives that encourage critical reflection on inequality topics within higher education institutions.

Lastly, it is important to mention that even though this study offers useful and interesting insights regarding how university students understand and interpret gender and intersectional pay gaps, some limitations need to be considered.

As it is a qualitative study, the results do not represent the population to a wider extent, but rather are a reflection of the viewpoints of the specific group involved in the research. In addition, the small number of participants represents a limit to the possibility of generalising the conclusions.

At the same time, although focus groups are especially useful for exploring shared opinions and interpretations, the context itself may influence how participants form and express their ideas in the presence of others.

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