

Abstract

Title

How Do Male Students Navigate the Reverse Gender Gap in Malaysia?:
Rethinking the Meaning and Roles of Higher Education in the Shaping Gendered
Pathways

Research Overview (50 words)

This study examines how male students navigate the reverse gender gap (RGG) in Malaysian higher education. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork and comparative analysis, it reconceptualizes RGG by focusing on the changing meanings and roles of higher education in shaping gendered pathways between learning and earning.

Purpose of Study

Conventionally, gender gaps in education have been understood as disparities disadvantaging women in access to educational opportunities. In recent decades, however, a new phenomenon—the RGG—has emerged in higher education worldwide, where female participation surpasses male participation.

Existing studies often interpret this phenomenon in terms of male underachievement or disengagement alongside women's educational advancement. This study seeks to move beyond such interpretations by reconceptualizing the RGG through an examination of the changing meanings and roles of higher education.

Building on this perspective, the study situates the RGG in Southeast Asia since the 1990s. Existing research highlights the feminisation of higher education and male educational disengagement (UNESCO, 2022). While women's increasing participation has been widely examined, the decline in men's attainment remains underexplored, with early entry into the labour market identified as a key contributing factor.

Focusing on Malaysia, where the RGG is particularly pronounced, the study investigates how male students select educational pathways and interpret their experiences within higher education. By shifting the analytical focus from individual outcomes to institutional functions, it aims to contribute to broader debates on how contemporary education systems structure gendered pathways and mediate the relationship between learning and earning.

Research Methods

This study adopts a multi-level approach combining macro-level comparative analysis and micro-level qualitative fieldwork. At the macro level, it draws on an international comparative research project covering five Southeast Asian countries. National education statistics and policy documents were analyzed to identify trends in female educational expansion and male educational disengagement, as well as their relationships with socio-economic, political, and cultural factors.

At the micro level, the study focuses on Malaysia through two case studies: polytechnics and public universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male students in both institutional contexts. Polytechnics represent technical and vocational education and training (TVET) pathways closely linked to employment, while public universities represent academic pathways. The analysis examines how male students make sense of their educational choices and how gendered discourses shape their experiences and identities.

Results and Discussion

This study proposes a framework that reconceptualizes the RGG not merely as a numerical reversal, but as a lens through which to re-examine the meanings of higher education from a gender perspective. Since the 1990s, higher education in Malaysia has expanded in response to globalization and has been massified in line with labor market demands. In this process, women's participation in higher education has increased rapidly,

leading to a pronounced RGG.

However, a structural misalignment has emerged: while the labor market remains male-dominated, higher education has become increasingly female-dominated. Under these conditions, male students' educational choices cannot be fully understood as outcomes of academic failure or disengagement. Rather, they are best understood as rational and strategic choices shaped by their relationship to the labor market. In this sense, male students' pathways should be reinterpreted not as adaptations to disadvantage, but as strategic actions formed within specific institutional conditions.

Furthermore, gendered discourses in Malaysian public universities—such as the stereotype of “diligent female students” versus “unmotivated male students”—can be understood as practical strategies through which male students navigate higher education, survive as a minority, and position themselves within academic settings. These sedimented discourses are not merely perceptions; they function as structuring forces that shape how learners are positioned and evaluated, thereby influencing educational practices and outcomes.

Through the examination of these cases, the study shows that while modern school systems have historically been constructed around male norms, higher education in particular has expanded under the role of linking education to the labor market. Today, however, the meanings of higher education itself are being reconfigured. By capturing how male students strategically navigate their educational pathways under these changing conditions, this study offers a new interpretation of the RGG as a global phenomenon.

Furthermore, the study contributes to discussions on educational equity by demonstrating that increased access does not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes. Instead, higher education simultaneously expands opportunities and reproduces differentiated, gendered pathways.

References

UNESCO. (2022). *Leave no child behind: Global report on boys' disengagement from education*. UNESCO.

Keywords

Reverse Gender Gap; Higher Education; Gendered Pathways; Malaysia; Learning and Earning