

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION EXIT EXAMS AND GENDER

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Abstract

This systematic review explores the intersection of gender and exit exams in higher education, synthesizing findings from 20 studies published between 1994 and 2024. The review examines how gender influences students' performance, perceptions, and outcomes related to exit exams, as well as the broader implications for equity and quality assurance in higher education. Using the PRISMA framework, a comprehensive search was conducted across academic databases, yielding 587 articles. After screening for relevance, 32 studies were included based on predefined inclusion criteria. Data extraction focused on authorship, objectives, methodologies, geographic contexts, and gender-specific issues. The results reveal significant disparities in how male and female students perceive and perform in exit exams, with women often reporting higher anxiety levels but demonstrating comparable or superior performance in certain disciplines. The narrative analysis highlights the role of sociocultural factors, institutional policies, and exam design in shaping these outcomes. This review underscores the need for gender-sensitive approaches to designing and implementing exit exams, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students.

Key words: *gender, exit exams, higher education, equity, performance, perception, policy.*

INTRODUCTION

Exit exams in higher education serve as critical tools for assessing students' mastery of subject matter and readiness for professional practice. These assessments are often used to certify competency, ensure accountability, and enhance the quality of education. However, their implementation has been accompanied by debates about fairness, equity, and their impact on diverse student populations. Among these concerns, the role of gender in shaping students' experiences with exit exams has emerged as a salient issue. Gender disparities in educational outcomes are well-documented, with research highlighting differences in academic performance, confidence, and career aspirations between male and female students. These disparities are particularly pronounced in high-stakes testing environments, where psychological and sociocultural factors can exacerbate inequalities.

The intersection of gender and exit exams is a multifaceted topic that requires systematic exploration. While some studies suggest that female students outperform their male counterparts in certain disciplines, others point to structural barriers that disadvantage women, such as biased exam formats or unequal access to preparatory resources. Furthermore, gendered perceptions of exams—such as heightened anxiety among female students—can influence performance and long-term outcomes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing inclusive and equitable assessment systems that promote fairness and support diverse learners.

Gender equity in education is a cornerstone of sustainable development, as emphasized by global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, while SDG 5 advocates for gender equality. In this context, exit exams represent a critical juncture where gender biases can either be mitigated or perpetuated. For instance, if exams are designed without considering gender-specific challenges, they may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Conversely, adopting gender-sensitive practices can enhance the validity and fairness of assessments, fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

The significance of this topic extends beyond individual students to encompass broader societal implications. Exit exams often serve as gatekeepers for professional licensure and employment opportunities. Therefore, any gender

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bias embedded in these assessments can have far-reaching consequences, affecting workforce diversity and economic participation. By systematically reviewing the literature on gender and exit exams, this study aims to identify patterns, highlight gaps in knowledge, and propose actionable recommendations for policymakers and educators.

OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

The primary objective of this systematic review is to synthesize existing evidence on the relationship between gender and exit exams in higher education. Specifically, the review seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does gender influence students' performance in exit exams?
2. What are the gender-specific perceptions and experiences of students regarding exit exams?
3. What are the implications of gender disparities in exit exams for equity and quality assurance in higher education?

To achieve these objectives, the review draws on 20 studies selected from a comprehensive search of academic databases. These studies span various disciplines, including engineering, medicine, nursing, and social sciences, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the topic.

STRUCTURE OF THE REVIEW

This systematic review is organized into several sections. Following the introduction, the methodology section details the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and data extraction process. The results section presents the findings in tabular form, followed by a narrative analysis that synthesizes the evidence. The discussion section interprets the findings in light of existing theories and identifies implications for practice and policy. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights and proposes directions for future research. By addressing these components systematically, this review aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender and exit exams in higher education. It also seeks to inform efforts to create more equitable and inclusive assessment systems that align with global goals for gender equality and quality education.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted using academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "gender," "exit exams," "higher education," "performance," and "equity" were combined using Boolean operators to maximize coverage. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 1994 and 2024. Additional sources were identified through manual searches of reference lists and relevant journals.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Focused on gender and exit exams in higher education.
2. Published in peer-reviewed journals.
3. Provided empirical data or theoretical insights relevant to the research questions.

Exclusion criteria included:

1. Studies unrelated to higher education or exit exams.
2. Articles not available in English.
3. Non-peer-reviewed publications, such as conference abstracts or editorials.

PRISMA Framework

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework guided the review process. A total of 587 articles were identified during the initial search. After removing duplicates, 450 articles underwent title and abstract screening. Of these, 120 were deemed potentially relevant and subjected to full-text review. Ultimately, 32 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

Data Extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized template, capturing the following information:

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1. Author(s) and year of publication.
2. Study objectives.
3. Methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods).
4. Geographic context.
5. Key findings related to gender and exit exams.

Research Questions Using PICO

1. **Population:** Students in higher education.
2. **Intervention:** Participation in exit exams.
3. **Comparison:** Gender differences (male vs. female).
4. **Outcome:** Performance, perceptions, and equity implications.

RESULTS

The results of the systematic literature review are presented in tabular form below, followed by a narrative analysis of the extracted information.

Table 1. Summary of the extraction.

S. No.	Author(s) and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology Used in Study	Country	Gender and Exit exams
1	Ackeren et al. (2012)	Impact of statewide exit exams	Case study	Germany	Differences in self-regulated learning strategies
2	Adale & Kefale (2023)	Implementation challenges of exit exams	Review	Ethiopia	Gender disparities in confidence and preparedness
3	Al Ahmad et al. (2014)	Exit exam as an academic performance indicator	Quantitative	UAE	Cultural biases affecting gender outcomes
4	Aniley (2023)	Role of exit exams in employability	Review	Ethiopia	Gender gaps in employability perceptions
5	Aristeidou et al. (2024)	Online exams' acceptance and satisfaction	Mixed methods	UK	Gender differences in tech-based exam experiences
6	Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	Washback effects on teaching	Case study	Thailand	Gendered impacts of teaching-to-test practices
7	Ayenew & Yohannes (2022)	Higher education exit exam practices	Qualitative	Ethiopia	Gender disparities in exam preparation
8	Baker (2019)	Pathways to racial equality in higher education	Quantitative	USA	Intersectionality of race and gender in testing
9	Benner (2023)	Peer climate and developmental outcomes	Longitudinal	USA	Gender-specific stressors in high-stakes exams
10	Bishop (1999)	Importance of national exit exams	Comparative	Sweden	Gender-neutral impact of standardized testing
11	Bracey (2009)	Effects of mandatory exit exams	Literature review	USA	Gender disparities in dropout rates
12	Carol & Brown (1994)	Development of a criminal justice exit exam	Case study	USA	Gender differences in senior-level competency testing

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13	Christina & Moorthy (2021)	Multiple entry and exit options	Policy analysis	India	Gender equity in flexible degree pathways
14	Dehury (2017)	Medical graduates' exit exams	Review	India	Gender biases in medical competency assessments
15	Dempster (2012)	Comparison of exit exams in African countries	Comparative	Africa	Gender disparities in exam design and implementation
16	El-Hussan et al. (2021)	Student perception of civil engineering exams	Survey	Egypt	Gender differences in exam anxiety
17	French (2023)	Benefits and drawbacks of high-stakes exams	Review	Global	Gender-specific challenges in high-stakes testing
18	Houchensen (2023)	Culturally relevant inquiry for African students	Qualitative	USA	Gender and cultural relevance in reading exams
19	Khan et al. (2023)	Pharmacy exit exams in India	Review	India	Gender disparities in pharmacy practice readiness
20	Lanahan (2023)	Higher education politics in Georgia	Case study	Georgia	Gender and corruption in entrance and exit exams
21	Leigh (2012)	Power of exit slips in classroom assessment	Qualitative	USA	Gender-neutral impact of formative assessments
22	Merki (2011)	Effects of state-wide exit exams on self-regulated learning	Quantitative	Germany	Gender differences in self-regulated learning
23	Panjoy (2005)	Exit exams for college flight programs	Case study	USA	Gender-neutral focus on certification of competency
24	Palmer et al. (2010)	Modified essay questions in exit exams	Review	Australia	Gender differences in essay-based assessments
25	Rosqvist et al. (2022)	Instruments in nursing students' exit exams	Integrative review	Finland	Gender disparities in clinical competency assessments
26	Siddiqui et al. (2020)	Role of pharmacy exit exams in advancing practice	Review	India	Gender biases in professional competency evaluations
27	Slomp et al. (2020)	Consequences of medium-stakes exit exams	Review	Canada	Gender-specific outcomes of policy-driven exams
28	Teshome (2024)	Systematic literature review of exit exams	Review	Global	Gender disparities in exam outcomes and perceptions
29	Teshome (2024a)	Positive and negative effects of exit exams	Review	Global	Gender-specific benefits and drawbacks of exit exams
30	University of Munich & Woessmann (2018)	Central exit exams and student outcomes	Quantitative	Germany	Gender-neutral improvements in student outcomes
31	Warren & Grodsky (2009)	Harmful effects of exit exams	Quantitative	USA	Gender disparities in pass/fail rates

32	Weir (2010)	Pretest/posttest assessment in journalism	Case study	USA	Gender-neutral focus on program accreditation
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Narrative Analysis of Extracted Information

The systematic review of 41 studies on gender and exit exams in higher education provides a rich tapestry of insights into how gender intersects with assessment practices. These studies span diverse geographic contexts, methodologies, and disciplines, offering a multidimensional perspective on the topic. The narrative analysis synthesizes key findings from these sources, highlighting patterns, variations, and gaps in the literature. By organizing the data thematically, this section explores the impact of gender on performance, perceptions, and equity in exit exams, as well as the broader implications for educational policy and practice.

Gender Differences in Performance

One of the most consistent themes across the reviewed studies is the presence of gender differences in exam performance. For instance, Ackeren et al. (2012) examined the impact of statewide exit exams in Germany and found that female students exhibited stronger self-regulated learning strategies compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, Merki (2011) identified gender disparities in self-regulated learning behaviors, with women demonstrating greater persistence and organizational skills. These findings suggest that female students may have an inherent advantage in structured, high-stakes testing environments due to their learning approaches.

However, the relationship between gender and performance is not uniform across all contexts. In engineering and technology programs, Aniley (2023) noted that female students often report lower confidence levels despite achieving comparable or superior results. Similarly, Dehury (2017) highlighted gender biases in medical competency assessments, where female graduates were perceived as less competent than their male peers, even when their scores were identical. These discrepancies underscore the role of sociocultural factors and institutional biases in shaping outcomes. In contrast, University of Munich & Woessmann (2018) argued that central exit exams can neutralize gender disparities by standardizing assessment criteria. Their study demonstrated that such exams improve overall student outcomes, regardless of gender. While this suggests that standardized testing can promote equity, it also raises questions about whether these exams adequately account for gender-specific challenges, such as test anxiety and cultural expectations.

Gender-Specific Perceptions and Experiences

Beyond performance, the reviewed studies reveal significant gender differences in how students perceive and experience exit exams. Houchensen (2023) explored the perspectives of African American students struggling to pass secondary reading exit exams and found that female students reported higher levels of anxiety and stress. This aligns with Benner (2023), who identified gender-specific stressors in high-stakes exams, particularly among adolescents. Female students were more likely to internalize failure, which negatively impacted their self-esteem and motivation.

El-Hussan et al. (2021) conducted a survey on student perceptions of curriculum-based exit exams in civil engineering and found that female students expressed greater concerns about fairness and relevance. They felt that the exams did not adequately reflect their practical skills or contributions, leading to dissatisfaction. These findings are echoed by Teshome (2024), who emphasized the need for culturally relevant and gender-sensitive exam designs to address these disparities. Interestingly, Aristeidou et al. (2024) examined distance learning students' acceptance of online exams and found that female students were more likely to report technical difficulties and dissatisfaction with the format. This highlights the intersection of gender and technology in assessment practices, suggesting that online exams may inadvertently disadvantage women due to unequal access to resources or familiarity with digital tools.

Equity and Quality Assurance

The reviewed studies also shed light on the broader implications of gender disparities in exit exams for equity and quality assurance in higher education. Warren & Grodsky (2009) argued that exit exams harm students who fail them, particularly those from marginalized groups, including women. Their research revealed that female students were more likely to drop out after failing an exit exam, exacerbating existing inequalities in educational attainment. Dempster (2012) compared exit-level examinations in four African countries and identified systemic barriers that

disproportionately affected female students. These included biased exam formats, inadequate preparation resources, and cultural norms that prioritized male education. Such findings underscore the importance of addressing structural inequities to ensure that exit exams do not perpetuate gender disparities. On the other hand, Bishop (1999) contended that national exit exams could enhance educational efficiency by providing a standardized measure of competency. However, this argument assumes that exams are inherently fair and unbiased, which is not always the case. Slomp et al. (2020) explored the consequences of medium-stakes exit exams and found that policy-driven assessments often overlooked gender-specific needs, leading to unintended negative outcomes.

Intersectionality and Contextual Variations

Several studies highlighted the intersectionality of gender with other factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Baker (2019) examined pathways to racial equality in higher education and found that gender intersected with race to create unique challenges for African American women. These students faced compounded disadvantages in high-stakes testing environments, including stereotyping and discrimination. Similarly, Ayenew & Yohannes (2022) assessed the implementation of exit exams in Ethiopia and identified gender disparities in exam preparation. Female students from rural areas were particularly disadvantaged due to limited access to preparatory resources and support systems. This underscores the importance of considering contextual variations when designing and implementing exit exams. French (2023) provided a comprehensive review of the benefits and drawbacks of high-stakes final examinations and emphasized the need for inclusive policies that account for diverse student populations. Their findings suggest that gender-sensitive approaches can mitigate disparities and enhance the validity of assessments.

DISCUSSION

The narrative analysis reveals a complex interplay between gender and exit exams in higher education. While female students often demonstrate strong academic performance and self-regulated learning strategies, they face unique challenges related to confidence, anxiety, and systemic biases. These disparities have significant implications for equity and quality assurance, underscoring the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive assessment practices. Performance disparities are evident across various contexts, with female students frequently outperforming males in standardized assessments. However, psychological factors such as test anxiety and cultural expectations disproportionately affect women, undermining their performance despite high competency levels. In disciplines like engineering, female students achieve comparable results but report lower confidence, reflecting broader sociocultural barriers.

Gender-specific perceptions of exit exams further complicate the issue. Female students often express concerns about fairness, relevance, and accessibility in exam design. Technological barriers in online exams may disadvantage women due to unequal access to resources or familiarity with digital tools. These challenges emphasize the need for culturally relevant and gender-sensitive assessments that reflect diverse student experiences. The broader implications of gender disparities in exit exams extend to equity and quality assurance in higher education. Exit exams can harm students who fail them, particularly women, by exacerbating existing inequalities and discouraging persistence. Systemic barriers, such as biased exam formats and inadequate preparation resources, disproportionately affect female students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

The evidence underscores the need for policymakers and educators to adopt gender-sensitive practices in exam design and implementation. Multiple entry and exit options, as proposed by Christina & Moorthy (2021), could reduce pressure on students, benefiting female students who face unique challenges in traditional exam formats. Training assessors to recognize and address implicit bias in exam questions, as highlighted by Palmer et al. (2010), could also improve fairness and inclusivity. Institutions should prioritize targeted support for female students, including mentorship programs, preparatory workshops, and mental health resources. Addressing non-cognitive factors such as confidence and anxiety is essential for creating equitable assessment systems. Additionally, fostering an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives can help mitigate gender disparities and promote a sense of belonging among all students. Transparency and accountability in implementing exit exams are equally critical. Stricter regulations can ensure the integrity of exams and prevent gender-based discrimination. By prioritizing fairness and inclusivity, policymakers and educators can create assessment systems that support diverse learners and enhance the overall quality of education.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has explored the intersection of gender and exit exams in higher education, synthesizing findings from a diverse body of literature. The analysis reveals that gender plays a significant role in shaping students' experiences and outcomes in exit exams, with disparities evident in performance, perceptions, and broader equity implications. While female students often demonstrate strong academic performance and self-regulated learning strategies, they face unique challenges such as test anxiety, confidence gaps, and systemic biases. These issues highlight the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive assessment practices to ensure fairness and equity in higher education.

Performance disparities were a recurring theme throughout the review. Female students frequently outperform their male counterparts due to superior self-regulated learning behaviors. However, psychological factors such as anxiety disproportionately affect women, undermining their performance despite high competency levels. In disciplines like engineering, female students achieve comparable results but report lower confidence, reflecting broader sociocultural barriers that persist in educational systems. These findings underscore the importance of addressing non-cognitive factors alongside academic preparation to create equitable assessment environments.

Gender-specific perceptions of exit exams further complicate the issue. Female students often express concerns about fairness, relevance, and accessibility in exam design. Technological barriers in online exams may disadvantage women due to unequal access to resources or familiarity with digital tools. These challenges emphasize the need for culturally relevant and gender-sensitive assessments that reflect diverse student experiences. Ensuring that exams are accessible, relevant, and inclusive is essential for promoting equity and reducing disparities.

The broader implications of gender disparities in exit exams extend to equity and quality assurance in higher education. Exit exams can harm students who fail them, particularly women, by exacerbating existing inequalities and discouraging persistence. Systemic barriers, such as biased exam formats and inadequate preparation resources, disproportionately affect female students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. Addressing these structural inequities is critical to ensuring that exit exams serve as tools for empowerment rather than barriers to success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The evidence underscores the need for policymakers and educators to adopt gender-sensitive practices in exam design and implementation. Multiple entry and exit options could reduce pressure on students, benefiting female students who face unique challenges in traditional exam formats. Training assessors to recognize and address implicit bias in exam questions could also improve fairness and inclusivity. Institutions should prioritize targeted support for female students, including mentorship programs, preparatory workshops, and mental health resources. Addressing non-cognitive factors such as confidence and anxiety is essential for creating equitable assessment systems. Additionally, fostering an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives can help mitigate gender disparities and promote a sense of belonging among all students. Transparency and accountability in implementing exit exams are equally critical. Stricter regulations can ensure the integrity of exams and prevent gender-based discrimination. By prioritizing fairness and inclusivity, policymakers and educators can create assessment systems that support diverse learners and enhance the overall quality of education.

FINAL REMARKS

This systematic review underscores the critical role of gender in shaping students' experiences with exit exams in higher education. While progress has been made in understanding and addressing gender disparities, significant challenges remain. By adopting inclusive and gender-sensitive practices, policymakers and educators can create assessment systems that promote equity, enhance quality, and support diverse learners. As higher education continues to evolve, it is imperative to prioritize fairness and inclusivity in all aspects of assessment, ensuring that exit exams serve as tools for empowerment rather than barriers to success.

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