

Female Gender Difficulties in Higher Education: Case Study of Tunisian Universities

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Abstract— This paper presents some results of a survey carried out as an activity of the project “SOLIDAIRES” implemented by the Tunisian Association for Science and Research and funded by the United Nations Development Programme in the framework of ODD16 portfolio. It aims to identify the difficulties encountered by female gender students at the University of Gabes. Four higher education institutions are covered by this study: the National Engineering School of Gabes (ENIG), the Higher Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (ISSAT), the Higher Institute of Technological Studies (ISET) and the Faculty of Science (FSG).

The results of the survey show that besides the problems, already known, and encountered by most students, females because of their gender suffer from other specific difficulties which are unknown or less considered. The main difficulty that faces females in university is harassment. Much more effort should be put into leaving no one behind in the university.

Keywords— female gender, university, Harassment, student, survey, Tunisia.

JEET Category— Practice

I. INTRODUCTION

HIGHER education is an important driver for societal progress and individual empowerment, offering opportunities for personal and professional growth. However, significant gender disparities persist in many regions, creating barriers that delay women's full participation and success in academic sector. Despite global advancements in gender equality, women in higher education continue to face some challenges, including limited access to leadership positions, and the dual burden of academic responsibilities and societal expectations. These difficulties are often exacerbated in developing countries, where cultural, economic, and institutional factors interplay to shape women's experiences in higher education.

In Tunisia, a nation known for its progressive outlook on women's rights compared to many neighbouring countries, the higher education landscape reflects both opportunities and

challenges for female students and faculty. While women constitute a substantial proportion of university enrolments, their representation diminishes significantly at advanced academic and leadership levels. Existing literature highlights the structural and cultural barriers affecting women's academic progress globally, yet country-specific studies focusing on Tunisia remain scarce. This limitation restraints a comprehensive understanding of the unique socio-cultural and institutional dynamics that shape female gender experiences in Tunisian universities.

This study contributes in addressing issues and gaps about gender in the literature. The first one is the specific context insights. While global and regional studies examine gender disparities in higher education, limited research explores the Tunisian context in depth. This study fills this gap by examining the challenges faced by female students and academics within Tunisian universities, considering the country's specific socio-cultural, economic, and political context.

The intersection of barriers in higher education is the second gap. In fact, much of the existing research on gender in academia focuses on overarching trends, often neglecting the intersection of cultural norms, institutional policies, and individual experiences. This study aims to provide a more complete perspective by integrating these dimensions and dropping light on the systemic factors that perpetuate gender inequalities in Tunisian universities.

By addressing these gaps, the paper contributes to the pronounced discourse on gender equality in higher education, offering achievable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders trying to create more inclusive academic environments.

This document presents the results of a survey on the difficulties encountered by the student community of the University of Gabes. It was conducted in May and June 2022 as an activity of the project “SOLIDAIRES” implemented by the Tunisian Association for Science and Research and funded by the United Nations Development Programme in the framework of ODD16 portfolio. The Tunisian Association for Science and

Research is an association of academic and it had implemented many projects for the student community. For students who were present at the institution in this period, the survey was elaborated face to face by interviewing. For the others, they were interviewed by telephone. The students interviewed belong to the four institutions of the university. Given the limited budget of the project, the institutions where the association has focal points were chosen. These four institutions are: The National Engineering School of Gabes (ENIG), the Higher Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (ISSAT), the Higher Institute of Technological Studies (ISET) and the Faculty of Science (FSG). The students of these four institutions were interviewed to identify the difficulties and the problems that students face. A particular attention is paid to students with special needs (disability, illness, etc.), females because of their gender, and foreign students.

The next section of the paper is dedicated to the methodology in preparing the survey. The results of the survey are presented in the third part. The survey is carried out in a sample of Tunisian students.

II. METHODOLOGY

The adopted methodology, consisting of a combined survey (face-to-face and by telephone) was imposed by the context to overcome the constraint of time and availability of students who were during the period of the survey at the end of the academic year, it means in the final courses or the revision period before the end-of-year exams. Those who were still in institutions (ISET) were interviewed face to face. For the others, the telephone seemed to be the best solution.

Since the survey was one of the activities of an associative project for students, the interviewers themselves are from the student community. The association leading this project had trained some students on survey techniques, conduction, and ethical context.

A. Definition of a survey

It is a structured way of collecting information.

B. Type of surveys

The elaborated survey is a survey by objective: Interaction with students. It is essential to interact with students because it brings a lot of information on specific issues about their university environment, social life and activities. This helps students to feel valued and encourages them to engage with their universities and to be committed. This will have an impact on the absenteeism rate, the failure rate and the occurrence of social and psychological problems.

C. Differences between a survey and other modes of data collection

If it is properly designed and distributed to a carefully studied demographic population, surveys can provide a wide variety of data. The thorough analysis of this data leads to relevant actions (Chauvel, 2002).

Questionnaire: The questionnaire is part of a survey. A questionnaire is simply a set of questions, while a survey

represents the whole life cycle of the question, distributing and sharing those questions and analysing the answers to those questions.

Poll: A poll is usually a single multiple-choice question. It is used to quickly and simply collect information on a very specific topic. Surveys provide more exploitable data points than polls.

Census: The main difference between a census and a survey is the sample size. While a survey asks a segment of a given population, a census attempts to capture information for the entire population (Lin 2023).

D. Tool used for the questionnaire

The chosen tool in our case is Google Forms. The survey is created using this tool and then transformed into paper format. The interviewers respond on paper and then transmit the data digitally on the forms (Manam 2021).

E. Methods of Conducting Surveys

Face to face

It is by far the most effective method. Surveys conducted via face-to-face interviews usually produce very detailed responses. This is because the interviewer can ask follow-up questions and go deeper into the reasoning behind the answers, thus gaining better insights.

By telephone

Surveys conducted by telephone offer a compromise between face-to-face interviews and surveys delivered online. Telephone surveys also allow for an active and personalized conversation between the interviewer and the participant. Like face-to-face surveys, telephone surveys allow interviewers to ask additional questions and allow respondents to explain their answers in more detail. This results in higher quality responses, especially from respondents who otherwise respond differently because they feel their anonymity is being threatened face-to-face.

F. Conduct of investigations

Creating the surveys requires critical thinking, planning and patience. The following steps are vigorously followed for the development of the survey for Tunisian students.

1. Survey objective: The why of the survey is important as it helps in formulating the right questions for the target audience. Through this survey, we seek to detect the difficulties and problems encountered by students at the University of Gabes in general and particularly those who are most vulnerable (with specific needs, foreigners, females because of their gender).

2. Target audience: This is to determine the population samples correctly to properly represent the target audience (Schwab, 2019). Our survey is limited to specific demographics. The group interviewed in this survey represents Tunisian students from four institutions of the university of Gabes.

The students targeted by this project are students from the University of Gabes. The size of the population sample in the survey is an essential element in determining the veracity of the information collected. In our case, and because of the limited budget, we chose a sample of 400 people. This is a suitable sampling for a population of a few hundred (around 3000) with

a margin of error of less than 5%. The response rate must be sufficient so that the data can truly reflect the opinion of the entire target population. The representativeness of the sample is also carefully considered. Indeed, the sample is composed of as many females as males from different levels of study and specialty. The survey methodology consists of having around 100 students per institution. The four or five interviewers of each institute should ensure between 20 and 25 anonymous surveys respecting the gender balance and the distribution upon academic levels. The student sample is chosen randomly.

3. Preparation of questions: The questions have been designed to serve our purpose. Each question was expressed to address a single topic objectively and unambiguously while remaining consistent with the objective.

4. Carrying out the survey: The survey focusing on a sample of a given population (Tunisian students) was conducted according to the chosen methodology (face-to-face interview or telephone call).

The number of students questioned is more than 300, and it is distributed between the four institutions.

5. Data processing: Data is processed, and results are carefully identified. We crossed, filtered and created graphs with the answers to the questions to properly analyse the results.

G. Execution of questionnaires

The investigators contacted the students directly or by telephone, they introduced themselves, briefly explained the objective of the survey and questioned the target students as indicated in the questionnaire. They carry out the data entry on the paper questionnaire by validating the correct understanding of the answers with the students and by respecting the rules of neutrality and the time allotted for each question. These data are then transferred into the digital formats of the questionnaires.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After processing and filtering the elaborated surveys, 313 are retained and the students are distributed as shown in Figure 1. The number of surveys varies from one institution to another as shown in the first figure.

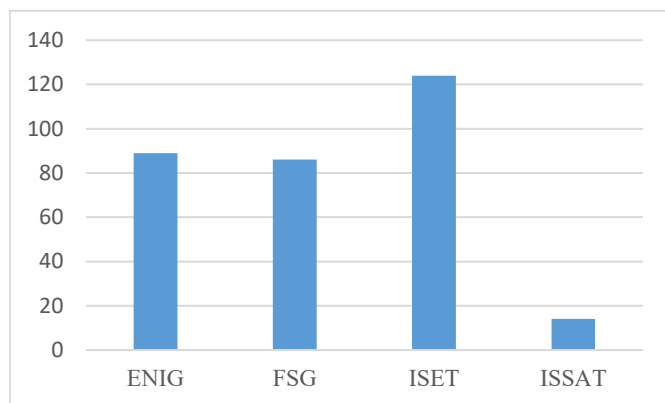


Fig. 1. Distribution by institution.

The majority of students (92.3%) are between 20 and 25 years

old. As shown in Figure 2, only 3.5% are under 20 years old and 4.2% are over 25 years old.

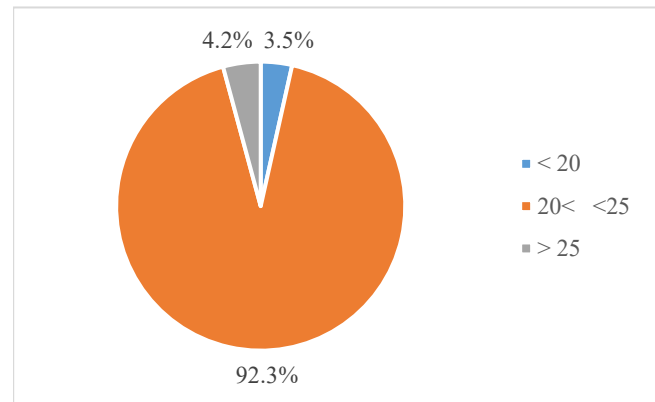


Fig. 2. Distribution by age.

Half of the students surveyed are male (159) or 50.8% and the other half are female (154) representing 49.2% as shown in Figure 3.

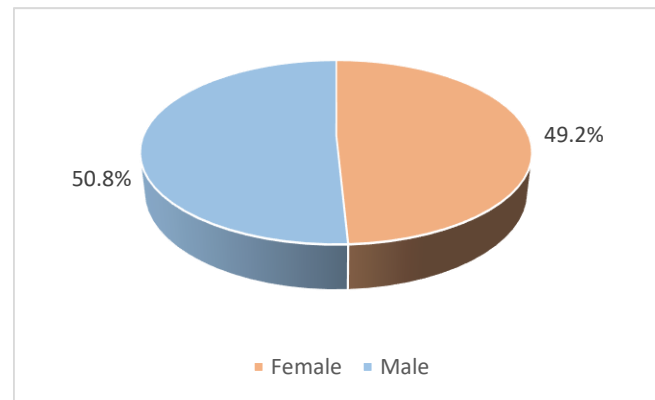


Fig. 3. Distribution by gender.

Persons with disabilities are also identified (United Nations, 2009). Figure 4 shows the number of students surveyed with special needs.

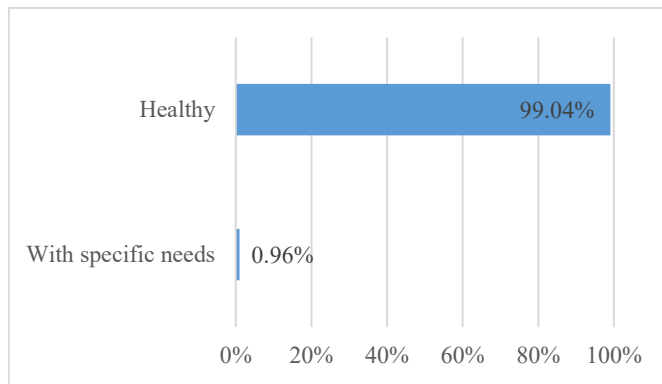


Fig. 4. Distribution by physical state.

The question of gender and the difficulties encountered by the gender females is also treated in the survey of Tunisian students. The most critical situations as mentioned by the interviewees are illustrated in Figure 5 and described below:

- 31%: Harassment
- 17%: Unclean toilets and changing rooms
- 16%: Classification according to accent and outfit
- 14%: Intimidation, verbal and physical violence
- 8%: Lack of comfortable places at the university
- 6%: Intrusion into privacy
- 5%: Exclusion of veiled females
- 3%: When we have problems, we don't know where to go.

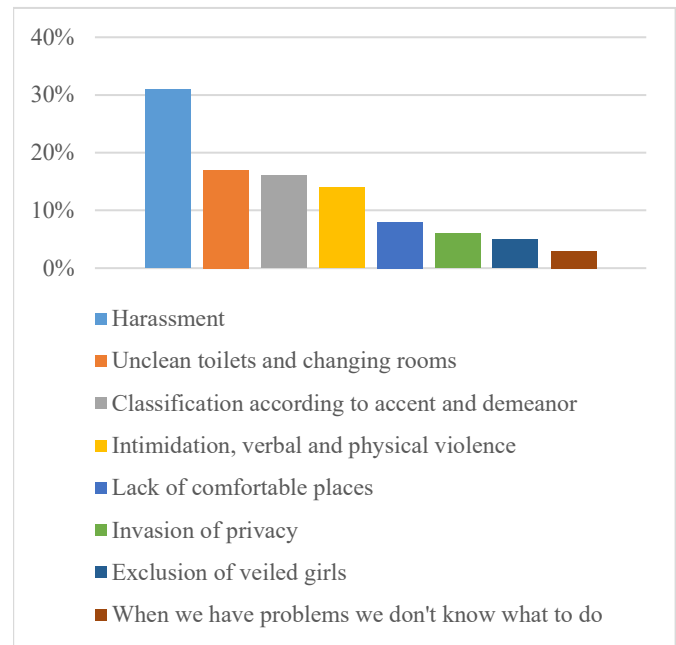


Fig. 5. Difficulties of females.

Six questions in the survey are reserved for this vulnerable population in order to identify the sources of unease and dissatisfaction that females may encounter in their university environment. The questions are detailed in TABLE I.

TABLE I
QUESTIONS RELATING TO FEMALE GENDER

Question 1	Are female students favoured in assessment tests?
Question 2	Do female students benefit from a favour or an exclusion in the end-year project?
Question 3	Do female students receive a favour or exclusion in punishments for violations?
Question 4	Are female students favoured or excluded from international mobility opportunities?
Question 5	Are female students favoured or excluded from presiding over student clubs and bodies?
Question 6	Do female students benefit from a favour or an exclusion in the relationship with the administration?

The answers to these questions are depicted in the figure 6.

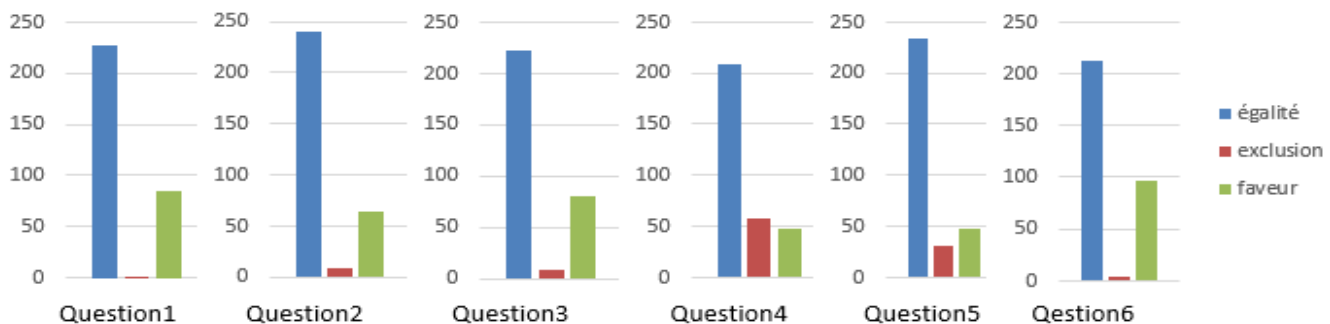


Fig. 6. Collected answers.

The findings of this study provide a significant contribution to understanding the gender-specific challenges faced by

female students in higher education within the Tunisian context. While the survey confirmed the presence of commonly known difficulties affecting all students, such as academic pressure, financial constraints, and access to resources, it also revealed additional challenges unique to female students. These insights call for urgent attention and targeted interventions to address these gender-specific issues effectively.

The survey's most concerning revelation is the prevalence of harassment as a persistent challenge faced by female students. Harassment, whether verbal or physical, creates a hostile environment that undermines academic performance, mental well-being, and students' overall sense of safety. This finding aligns with global literature on gender-based violence in higher education but emphasizes the need for localized strategies to tackle this issue within Tunisian universities.

A critical issue highlighted by the study is the limited awareness and consideration of gender-specific challenges by institutional policies and support systems. Female students often encounter barriers such as the lack of safe spaces on campus, insufficient reporting mechanisms for harassment, and inadequate sensitivity among staff and faculty toward gender-related issues. These gaps aggravate the difficulties faced by female students, leaving them vulnerable and unsupported.

Moreover, the results underline the importance of aligning institutional practices with the principle of "leaving no one behind," a core objective of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. Universities must adopt more inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. This includes implementing robust anti-harassment policies, providing gender sensitivity training for staff, and establishing accessible reporting and support mechanisms for female students.

The findings of this study also present an opportunity for systemic change. Addressing gender-specific challenges in higher education requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving university administrations, government bodies, and civil society organizations. The collaboration initiated by SOLIDAIRES project serves as a model for how partnerships can effectively address these issues. By leveraging such partnerships, universities can foster environments where female students can thrive without fear of discrimination or harassment.

While this study focuses on the University of Gabes, the challenges identified are likely to resonate with female students across other Tunisian universities and similar socio-cultural contexts. Future research should expand the scope to include other institutions and regions, offering comparative insights and identifying best practices (Naik 2024).

The findings of this study align with and diverge from existing research on gender-specific challenges in higher education, offering valuable comparative insights. The study identifies harassment as the most significant difficulty faced by female students at the University of Gabes, highlighting its pervasive nature and the lack of effective institutional mechanisms to address it. Indeed, studies indicate that sexual harassment is a widespread issue in higher education institutions worldwide, affecting female students' academic

performance and well-being (GESIS, 2024).

It has been shown that female students face a lack of safe spaces, insufficient reporting mechanisms, and inadequate institutional awareness of gender-specific issues. The situation is comparable in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where universities often lack comprehensive policies to tackle sexual harassment, leaving female students vulnerable and unsupported (Times Higher Education, 2024).

The study situates its findings within the framework of SDG 16, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and equitable education. Obviously, for African universities, there is a recognized need for higher education institutions to adopt holistic gender-responsive strategies to promote gender equality, moving beyond affirmative action to address systemic issues.

The study highlights the need for more extensive research on gender-specific challenges in Tunisian universities and comparable contexts, while in MENA Region, research on sexual harassment in universities is limited, with societal taboos and lack of data hindering comprehensive understanding and policy development.

CONCLUSION

A survey was carried out among students from university institutions in Gabes (Tunisia). The first survey is carried out for Tunisian students from four institutions. Various questions related to the university environment are proposed to these students to identify the difficulties and problems related to the administrations of the institutions, the teachers, and the relationship between the students themselves (Zwierzchowska, 2022). Accommodation, food, and transportation are also part of the questions. Social coverage and para-university activities are treated too.

The results of the survey show that although some problems encountered by students are known, other difficulties encountered by females because of their gender and people with special needs are unknown. Questions had to be asked to pinpoint their situations to leave no one behind in the university environment.

The survey highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to address the unique difficulties faced by female students. Harassment, as the predominant issue, requires immediate and sustained action through institutional reform and stakeholder collaboration. This discussion reinforces the necessity for inclusive and gender-sensitive policies, aligned with global frameworks like SDG 16, to ensure that no one is left behind in academia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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