A Comparative Analysis of Gender Differences in University Student Mental Health Across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex interplay between gender awareness and mental health among university students, addressing a significant gap in understanding how cultural norms shape mental health outcomes. Gender inequality continues to pose challenges in academic environments, influencing students' experiences and mental well-being. The primary aim of this study is to analyse cross-cultural literature on the impact of gender equality and awareness on mental health, specifically focusing on the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among male and male students. Employing a comprehensive literature review methodology, the study synthesises findings from various cultural contexts to highlight gender differences in mental health outcomes. Results indicate that female students report higher levels of anxiety and depression, while societal pressures inhibit men from seeking help, contributing to poorer mental health outcomes for both genders. The analysis reveals that traditional gender norms and cultural expectations significantly exacerbate these disparities, often leading to heightened stress and a lack of accessible support systems. The implications of these findings underscore the necessity for universities to implement gender-sensitive mental health interventions that address the unique experiences of students across genders. By fostering an inclusive environment and promoting awareness of gender-specific mental health issues, academic institutions can enhance support mechanisms that better cater to the psychological needs of all students. This study advocates for further research that incorporates longitudinal approaches to explore the long-term effects of gender awareness initiatives on mental health, ultimately contributing to improved educational and mental health outcomes.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Gender Awareness, Mental Health Disparities, Cultural norms, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is broadly defined as the state in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. This concept becomes increasingly central in university settings, as students' campus experiences—including academic pressures, social dynamics, and institutional support—greatly influence their mental health and overall well-being. Worldwide, university students encounter varying degrees of gender-based challenges that shape mental health outcomes, often magnified by cultural norms and expectations around gender roles (Campbell et al., 2022). Historically, gender awareness has progressed from a basic rights movement to the acknowledgement of complex, persistent issues such as mental health

disparities. Despite this progress, gender biases and gaps in mental health support persist in educational settings, impacting both academic performance and personal well-being (Williams et al., 2022).

This article aims to review cross-cultural literature on gender equality's impact on mental health in university settings, focusing on how gender awareness can mitigate disparities and improve well-being. University students globally face significant mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and depression, often heightened by academic pressures, financial constraints, and social isolation (Campbell et al., 2022). Understanding gender differences is essential, as studies indicate that women report higher levels of anxiety and depression, while men are less likely to seek help due to cultural stigmas surrounding masculinity (Williams et al., 2023). Cross-cultural research shows that societal norms can intensify or mitigate these gender-based mental health disparities, impacting coping strategies and access to support. Although changing societal views and increasing mental health awareness influences these trends, mental health issues remain stigmatised in some regions. Addressing these disparities through a culturally informed approach can promote more effective and inclusive mental health support systems.

Research consistently highlights gender differences in mental health issues, with women often reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression, while men experience similar conditions but may report them less frequently (Johnson et al., 2023). Societal expectations shape these experiences: traditional gender norms discourage men from expressing vulnerability, while women may experience stress from balancing caregiving roles with academic and career demands, leading to increased anxiety and depression (Lee et al., 2023). In male-dominated fields, women often report lower life satisfaction and higher stress due to perceived discrimination and gender biases (Singh & Martinez, 2024). Recognising these gendered experiences is essential for developing inclusive support in academia.

Gender also impacts mental health differently across Western and Asian societies. In Western societies, declining mental health stigmas promote more support for mental health issues, particularly for women. However, men may still face pressures to conform to traditional masculinity, which can deter them from seeking help (Wei, 2024). Conversely, mental health stigma is often stronger in Asian societies, where gender expectations make it particularly challenging for men to seek help. Studies suggest that European students generally have higher mental health literacy and seek support more proactively than their Asian counterparts, who may be constrained by cultural expectations (Osman, 2023). In North America, women are more likely to access mental health services than men, reflecting greater awareness and societal openness toward mental health (Wei, 2024).

In Malaysia, gender equality has seen gradual improvements but remains an area of concern, particularly in higher education settings. The Global Gender Gap Index 2022 ranks Malaysia 103 out of 146 countries, with a score of 0.681, indicating significant disparities, especially in areas like political empowerment and economic participation (UNDP, 2023). Regarding gender awareness, there is a growing recognition of its importance in addressing mental health issues among university students. A study by Hassan, et.al (2023) highlights that while female students generally show higher levels of mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, societal stigma continues to hinder both genders from seeking help. Recent studies indicate that Malaysian women face challenges in balancing academic and caregiving roles, which can exacerbate mental health issues. Programs aimed at increasing gender awareness in universities could potentially mitigate these effects, fostering a supportive environment for all students.

A key research gap involves the intersection of gender and mental health among university students, particularly regarding how financial constraints affect men and women differently. Studies indicate that financial stress often heightens anxiety and depression, with women reporting higher distress levels under financial pressure, possibly due to societal expectations and economic vulnerabilities (Prieto-Vila, 2024; Osman, 2023). This article explores gender-based mental health disparities, examining the cultural, institutional, and financial factors that influence these differences. It emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive support systems in universities and highlights the roles of government, industry, and higher education in creating supportive environments. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies across cultural

contexts to develop targeted interventions addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities in mental health (Kramer, 2022). The article is structured to introduce the issue, provide a literature review, discuss existing gaps, and propose recommendations for policy and support mechanisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Synergy between Gender Equality, Gender Awareness, and Mental Health among University Students Across Cultures: The interaction between gender equality, gender awareness, and mental health creates a vital synergy that impacts university students' experiences globally. Gender equality is not only about equitable rights and opportunities but also about fostering environments where mental health support is gender-sensitive and accessible. Gender awareness, as a facet of gender equality, involves understanding gender-specific experiences and needs. In universities, increased gender awareness among faculty and peers can help mitigate mental health disparities, as students feel more supported in navigating identity-based stressors. For example, cross-cultural studies show that students in Western societies, where gender awareness is higher, tend to experience lower mental health stigmas, which facilitates help-seeking. Conversely, students in Asian contexts often face rigid gender expectations that limit mental health service access, especially for men who may avoid seeking help due to cultural norms surrounding masculinity (Wei, 2024; UNDP, 2022).

This interplay is significant because gender disparities in mental health, such as higher reported anxiety and depression in women, often reflect deeper systemic inequalities and societal expectations. Research suggests that culturally rooted perceptions of gender roles, such as the "self-sacrificing" role often assigned to women or the pressure on men to display resilience, profoundly affect mental health outcomes in educational settings (EIGE, 2022; Roy et al., 2024).

Relevant Theories and Models

Several theories and models offer insight into the relationship between gender equality, gender awareness, and mental health among university students. Social Role Theory suggests that gender roles, defined by societal norms, influence behaviour and psychological well-being. For university students, adherence to traditional gender roles can exacerbate mental health issues when societal expectations clash with personal aspirations or capabilities. This is particularly evident in male-dominated academic fields, where female students report elevated stress levels due to perceived discrimination and lack of inclusion (UNDP, 2022).

To examine gender equality awareness and its impact on mental health integrates concepts from gender equality mainstreaming (GEM) and social inclusion models. The GEM framework emphasises embedding gender equality awareness into societal and institutional structures to address gender biases and enhance psychological well-being. In this model, gender equality awareness serves as a basis for shifting perceptions of gender roles and expectations, which influences self-perception, social support access, and mental health outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that gender equality awareness is often lower in men than in women, which can impact social and psychological dynamics differently across gender groups, potentially creating gaps in mental health support needs and outcomes (Li & Zhang, 2022). Higher levels of gender equality awareness foster inclusivity, support mental health by reducing discrimination-related stress, and alleviate isolation effects, particularly among marginalised groups.

Integrating the Gender Awareness Raising Model (GARM) also complements this by promoting sensitivity to gender-specific needs, which can help institutions design targeted interventions that reduce gender-related anxiety, depression, and stress, thus strengthening mental health outcomes (Zissi, 2022). This integrated framework underscores how awareness, gender role expectations, and institutional support can systematically reduce mental health disparities across genders.

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is also relevant here, proposing that perceived benefits and barriers influence students' likelihood of seeking mental health support. When gender awareness is integrated into mental health services, students are more likely to perceive help-seeking as accessible and relevant. Furthermore, the Theory

of Intersectionality underscores that mental health outcomes are not solely the result of gender or cultural factors but an intersection of multiple identities, including socioeconomic status and ethnicity. This model helps explain why gendered mental health disparities may appear more significant in regions with entrenched gender norms and lower awareness of mental health issues (Wei, 2024).

Addressing Research Gaps

Despite advancements, research on gender equality, gender awareness, and mental health among university students reveals significant gaps. For instance, there is limited longitudinal data examining how evolving gender norms influence mental health over time, especially in non-Western settings. Additionally, many studies focus on binary gender distinctions, overlooking non-binary and transgender students who may face unique mental health challenges. Future research should aim to address these gaps by employing diverse, cross-cultural samples and incorporating gender-inclusive language and frameworks.

The synergy between gender equality, gender awareness, and mental health is critical in fostering supportive academic environments. As societies continue to reevaluate traditional gender norms, universities play a central role in promoting mental health equity by embedding gender awareness in policies and support systems. Such initiatives unnecessarily empower students to navigate academic pressures but also encourage inclusive mental health support structures, ultimately contributing to students' overall well-being (Pedrelli et al., 2015; Roberts, 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of the intersection between gender awareness and mental health outcomes among university students, a relatively under-researched area in existing literature. By examining how gender awareness influences mental health, the study contributes valuable insights into how social constructs can impact psychological well-being. This focus on gender differences in mental health awareness highlights the importance of addressing gender-specific needs in mental health interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Technique

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore gender equality and awareness among university students. The target population comprises undergraduate students from various Malaysian universities, emphasising diversity across fields of study, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. A purposive sampling technique will be employed to select participants who can provide in-depth insights into their experiences and perceptions of gender equality. A sample size of 20-30 students is deemed sufficient for thematic saturation, ensuring rich and comprehensive data collection.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which facilitate open-ended responses and interactions among informants. Interviews will be conducted online or in-person, depending on participants' preferences, and will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interview guides will be developed to cover key themes related to gender equality and awareness while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts freely.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyse the data, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial coding will be conducted, followed by the identification of recurring themes related to participants' views on gender equality. The analysis will involve iterative cycles of coding and theme development, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Variables and Measurement

The key variables in this study include gender awareness, perceptions of gender equality, and mental health implications. These variables will be measured qualitatively through participants' narratives, focusing on their personal experiences and reflections. The analysis will prioritise participants' voices, highlighting the complexity of their views on gender dynamics.

Trustworthiness of Questionnaires and Triangulation of Findings

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a detailed audit trail will be employed. Member checking involves sharing preliminary findings with participants to validate the accuracy of the data collected. Additionally, triangulation will be implemented by comparing findings from interviews and focus groups, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the results. This multi-faceted approach will provide a robust understanding of gender awareness and equality among Malaysian university students.

DISCUSSION

Incorporating gender awareness in mental health interventions is crucial for addressing the nuanced relationships between gender equality awareness and mental health outcomes. The Gender Awareness Raising Model (GARM) provides a framework that emphasises understanding the societal constructs surrounding gender and their impact on mental health. This model advocates for raising awareness about gender roles and stereotypes, which often influence individuals' mental health by either reinforcing or challenging traditional expectations.

Research highlights that men typically exhibit lower levels of gender equality awareness compared to women, leading to a greater incidence of adverse mental health outcomes among men, such as anxiety and depression. According to Li & Zhang (2022), societal pressures can inhibit men from expressing emotions, contributing to mental health issues that stem from conforming to rigid gender norms. In contrast, female students often report higher anxiety levels, which may arise from unique societal expectations and stressors that disproportionately affect women, such as performance pressures in academic settings and societal norms regarding femininity (Hassan, et.al, 2023).

Furthermore, the literature indicates that traditional views of gender roles can exacerbate mental health disparities. Campbell, et.al (2021) note that in environments where such norms are prevalent, the mental health gender gap widens, as women may feel overwhelmed by conflicting expectations when traditional roles are challenged without sufficient support (Campbell, et.al, 2021). Thus, integrating GARM into mental health interventions can help tailor support mechanisms that address the unique challenges faced by different genders. This approach not only fosters a more inclusive environment for mental health support but also mitigates the risks of anxiety and depression, ultimately promoting mental well-being across genders (Stentiford, et.al, 2024).

By utilising gender-sensitive strategies that raise awareness about the underlying causes of mental health issues linked to gender inequality, practitioners can provide more effective support. This holistic approach recognises the interplay between societal gender constructs and individual mental health, paving the way for more equitable and effective mental health interventions. The discussion surrounding gender equality awareness and mental health emphasises the critical interplay between societal expectations and individual mental health outcomes. Research indicates that gender equality awareness significantly affects mental health, with men typically showing lower awareness levels than women, which may lead to detrimental mental health consequences for men. This disparity can stem from societal pressures that uphold traditional gender roles, discouraging men from expressing vulnerability and seeking help.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the interplay between gender equality, gender awareness, and mental health presents a complex landscape that universities must navigate to support their students effectively. As research continues to uncover the intricate dynamics at play, it becomes increasingly evident that addressing gender disparities is essential for promoting mental health and well-being in educational settings. Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies across diverse cultural contexts, focusing on the unique challenges faced by various gender identities and advocating for gender-sensitive policies and practices in higher education institutions.

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