

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0099

Understanding the Aspirations of Working-Class Girls

Hannah Ogundipe Akinbode<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*King's College London, London, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** There are a number of barriers which affect access into higher education for White and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) working-class females. In order to understand barriers to social mobility, and the progression of working-class female students into university it is important to highlight that many factors are interrelated. These include: social class, ethnicity, gender, home environment, and aspirations and attitudes towards higher education, in addition to a number of other factors not listed.

This paper will present findings from qualitative interviews with Year 12 students who identify as working-class and female. The primary research aim of this paper is to understand the factors that influence working-class girls decisions from urban and rural areas, whether or not they want to go to university and what they choose to study. Collected evidence will be used to design an intervention to support the information and guidance students receive, and to address the number of students from under-represented groups ('widening participation students') wanting to apply to Russell Group universities across subject areas.

**Paper:** This paper is focused on research to understand working-class females' journeys from urban and rural areas into university. The findings will contribute to the design of an intervention to improve university applications from this group.

The research project was developed after finding that the majority of White working-class females were clustered in our nursing faculty. We conducted a literature review on barriers to Higher Education for White Working Class (WWC) Girls and found that there was a comparative lack of information about WWC females compared with their male counterparts. Following this, we ran focus groups with female WWC students from King's College London. We then conducted pilot interviews with year 12 working-class females in a school in East London and Bath. This has led us to design a project to conduct digital interviews with working-class females in year 12 (looking at the difference between rural and urban experiences). The final step will be to design an intervention based on our findings that we will test with females in sixth form .

We contacted a number of schools across England with above national average percentage of students on free school meals. Three schools in a rural area, and three schools in an urban area (two of which were in London) expressed interest. Intent on interviewing students in year 12 we got in

contact with a designated member of staff from each school who shared details of the project with students. A challenge was a combination of ethical considerations and a lack of accurate data on defining “working-class female”. We therefore asked students to self-identify to take part in interviews.

As part of our pilot research, our literature review identified the following key factors that may influence progression to Higher Education. The findings from the interviews will be discussed in relation to the literature in December. We have sought to explore these issues within interviews with students:

### **GCSE attainment and post-16 requirements**

To understand progression of home students from working-class backgrounds to university, it is important to first understand if they have the grades to get into university. Qualitative research by Richards (2018) found working-class girls may adjust or lower their expectations after GCSE, often due to grades. Girls considered whether or not they had the GCSE’s to follow their original ambitions, this was a key factor in their post-16 aspirations. Low grades at GCSE often mean restricted course choices at KS5, with more academic course options such as A-levels being inaccessible.

### **Social mobility and geography**

When looking at access to Higher Education in England, it is important to recognise geographical differences. Disadvantaged students from some areas are more likely to enter Higher Education than disadvantaged students from others, regardless of their prior attainment. In their report on social mobility, the Social Mobility Commission identified the Midlands, coastal towns and older industrial towns as social mobility cold spots.

### **Influence of family- desire to support family and stay ‘local’**

The attitudes and values family members have towards work and education have an influence to either push or pull young people towards or away from Higher Education. Research has found when thinking about the future young girls from a working-class background, especially those who are White, tend to prioritise supporting their family financially. Where White working-class girls do go to university, qualitative research suggests they are more likely to stay local. Proximity to home effects university choice. It will be interesting to see if this is the case for working-class females from other ethnic groups.

### **Female aspirations for their future**

Higher Education Policy Institute data shows that from the Academic year 2006/07 to the most recent data for 2017/18, more females have gone to university than males. However, female students tend to concentrate in certain areas linked to traditional care-based roles such as education, social studies, and subjects allied to medicine (e.g. nursing). This clustering means that females are under-represented in particular subject areas and job sectors.

### **Cultural values and feelings of self worth**

How females from a working-class background experience: a sense of belonging, feelings of self-efficacy and the values important to them will in many ways be similar, and very different. Research

by the Runnymede Trust found that class and culture was the defining characteristic for White working-class young people. The alienation and discrimination they experience in relation to both class and culture has some influence on how they think they will fit in, and how they believe they will progress within university. BAME students report microaggressions they face, the lack of representation and a Eurocentric curriculum as issues that affect their sense of belonging.

The research has just finished the fieldwork stage conducting interviews with Year 12 students. When presenting this paper in December, we will have concluded findings to report and we look forward to sharing.

**References:** [1] Richards, G (2018) Working Class Girls, Education and Post-Industrial Britain, Palgrave

[2] <http://www.colleges.co.uk/gcses-14-16/gcse-what-do-i-need-for-a-levels.html>

[3] OFS (2018) The geography of higher education and higher education access and participation, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/our-news-and-blog/tackling-the-geographical-disparities-in-higher-education/>

[4] EPI (2017) Closing the Gap? Trends in educational attainment and Disadvantage Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage/>

[5] Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662744/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_2017\\_-\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf)

[6] [St Clair, R., Kintrea, K., & Houston, M. \(2011\). The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.](#) Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/young-people-education-attitudes-full.pdf>

[7] Richards, G (2018) Working Class Girls, Education and Post-Industrial Britain, Palgrave

[8] Evans, S (2009) In a Different Place: Working-class Girls and Higher Education Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038508101169>

[9] Gibbons, S., and Vignoles, A., (2009) Access, Choice and Participation in Higher Education, Centre for the Economics of Education, DP 101, Available at: <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp101.pdf>

[10] <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/07/mind-the-gap-gender-differences-in-higher-education/>

[11] <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he>