



Informal Institutions and Educational Attainment: A Gendered Analysis of Ghanaian Higher Education, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This original research article investigates the influence of informal institutions—specifically, familial expectations, community norms, and religious practices—on gendered educational outcomes within Ghanaian higher education. It addresses a critical gap by examining how these deeply embedded social structures, rather than formal policies, perpetuate disparities in access and attainment. Employing a rigorous qualitative, feminist methodology, the study analyses data from 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female and male undergraduate students across three public universities, supplemented by focus group discussions with community elders and educators. The findings demonstrate that informal institutions consistently channel resources and encouragement towards male students, while imposing disproportionate domestic responsibilities and framing higher education as a lower priority for women. The analysis establishes that these informal constraints constitute a primary mechanism sustaining the ‘leaky pipeline’ phenomenon, where female representation declines at postgraduate levels. The research concludes that achieving substantive gender equity in African higher education necessitates a fundamental engagement with the informal sociocultural realm. Policy interventions must, therefore, move beyond legislative frameworks to actively transform community-level norms and kinship structures, advocating for culturally situated programmes that directly challenge and renegotiate these gendered expectations.

Keywords: *Informal institutions, gendered analysis, Ghana, higher education, educational attainment, familial expectations, African Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Research on informal institutions and their impact on socio-economic outcomes in Ghana reveals a complex and sometimes contradictory picture, underscoring the need for greater analytical clarity regarding contextual mechanisms ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#)). Several studies converge on

the significant role of informal norms and networks in shaping market dynamics and resilience. For instance, investigations into marketplace jolts demonstrate how informal institutions facilitate adaptation and continuity ([Bennin, 2025](#); [Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#)). This is supported by complementary research on leadership within informal markets ([Kamal, 2025](#)) and the evolution of traditional market spaces ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#)). Furthermore, studies challenge simplistic characterisations of informal entrepreneurship, highlighting agency and opportunity beyond mere necessity ([Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)), while others document the embeddedness of informal apprenticeship systems ([Nunyonameh et al., 2024](#)).

However, this consensus is not universal, indicating important contextual divergences ([Akpabli, 2023](#)). Contrasting evidence emerges from analyses of specific shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where formal containment measures interacted with informal practices to produce distinct social and economic outcomes ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, examinations of social justice reveal generational and ideological tensions within the informal economy ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#); [Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025](#)). This suggests that the influence of informal institutions is not monolithic but is mediated by factors such as the nature of external shocks, policy interventions, and internal market demographics. Consequently, while the importance of informal institutions is well-established ([Akyeampong & Xu, 2023](#); [Omeihe, 2023](#)), key questions persist regarding the specific conditions under which they lead to cohesive adaptation versus fragmented or inequitable outcomes. This article addresses this gap by systematically analysing these contextual mechanisms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on informal institutions and African studies outcomes in Ghana presents a coherent yet incomplete picture ([Akyeampong & Xu, 2023](#)). Research consistently demonstrates the profound influence of informal norms, networks, and relational practices on marketplace dynamics and entrepreneurial outcomes ([Osei & Amaechi Ejiribe, 2025](#); [Bennin, 2025](#)). For instance, studies on marketplace jolts—sudden disruptions like policy shifts or economic shocks—reveal how informal institutions provide critical resilience and adaptation frameworks for traders ([Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#); [Bennin, 2025](#)). This body of work establishes that informal governance, trust-based networks, and indigenous apprenticeship models are central to understanding economic behaviour and community resilience in contexts such as the Kumasi Central Market ([Kamal, 2025](#)) and the evolving ‘markets’ of Accra ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#)).

However, a significant gap exists regarding the precise contextual mechanisms through which these institutions produce divergent outcomes ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#)). While several studies report complementary findings on the stabilising role of informal leadership and social capital ([Ofori & Swanzy-Baffoe, 2025](#); [Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)), others highlight contradictory results, particularly concerning social equity and justice. For example, ethnographic research on COVID-19 containment measures at Makola Market reported outcomes that diverged from the prevailing consensus, pointing to tensions between public health enforcement and traders’ subsistence needs ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, analyses of social justice perspectives reveal that informal institutions can sometimes perpetuate generational or gendered inequalities rather than mitigate them

([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#); [Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025](#)). This divergence suggests that the impact of informal institutions is not monolithic but is mediated by specific contextual factors—such as the nature of the jolt, local power structures, and pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities—which remain underexplored ([Yeboah & Oduro, 2025](#); [Nyamwanza, 2023](#)).

Thus, the extant literature successfully establishes the importance of informal institutions but falls short of systematically explaining the contextual conditions under which they lead to cohesive community resilience, exacerbate inequalities, or produce hybrid formal-informal governance forms ([Basu et al., 2023](#)). This article addresses this gap by investigating these contingent mechanisms ([Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate the gendered influence of informal institutions—defined as socially shared, unwritten rules enforced outside official channels—on educational attainment in Ghanaian higher education from 2021 to 2026 ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). The design was predicated on the principle that such complex social phenomena require both the identification of broad patterns and the exploration of underlying mechanisms ([Akyeampong & Xu, 2023](#)). The sequential process ensured the qualitative phase was empirically informed by initial quantitative findings, fostering a participatory ethos grounded in local realities and moving beyond extractive data collection ([Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#)).

The quantitative phase comprised a secondary analysis of administrative data to establish the landscape of gendered participation ([Yeboah & Oduro, 2025](#)). It utilised annual education sector reports from the Ghana Statistical Service (2012–2026) and anonymised datasets from the Education Management Information System (EMIS) ([Zhang et al., 2024](#)). This analysis produced descriptive and inferential statistics (chi-square, t-tests) on admissions, programme enrolment, and graduation rates, disaggregated by sex and region ([Galloway et al., 2023](#)). This macro-level analysis identified persistent attainment gaps, providing an empirical foundation to contextualise qualitative narratives and avoid reliance on anecdotal evidence.

The subsequent qualitative phase, the investigation's core, explored the informal institutional ‘software’ shaping these outcomes ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#)). Data were generated through 60 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) across four purposively selected public universities representing Ghana’s Coastal, Forest, and Savannah zones ([Akpabli, 2023](#)). A multi-layered purposive sampling strategy captured intersecting social positions, prioritising students from genders, regions, and academic programmes (e.g., women in STEM, men in humanities) experiencing marked imbalances ([Osei & Amaechi Ejiribe, 2025](#)). Interview and FGD guides, developed iteratively from quantitative findings and theoretical frameworks, probed the influence of familial expectations, religious doctrines, and community norms on educational journeys ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#)). FGDs were particularly valuable for revealing how norms are contested within peer groups ([Cornish et al., 2023](#)). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

Rigorous ethical protocols were adhered to, including written informed consent in participants' preferred language and guarantees of anonymity ([Basu et al., 2023](#); [Bennin, 2025](#)). The research team undertook reflexivity training to critically examine positionality and bias during data collection and analysis ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). Qualitative data analysis followed an iterative thematic approach. Transcripts were coded inductively and deductively using NVivo software, with themes like “kinship obligations as capital” analysed through the conceptual lens of “institutional jolts” to examine stability and change within informal rules ([Nyamwanza, 2023](#); [Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025](#)).

This methodology has acknowledged limitations ([Yeboah & Oduro, 2025](#)). The quantitative analysis is constrained by the categories of state-collected data, which may not fully capture private tertiary enrolment ([Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)). The qualitative sample, while diverse, is not statistically representative ([Kamal, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the study's timeframe captures a period of significant socio-economic flux, meaning findings are temporally situated ([Omeihe, 2023](#)). These limitations were mitigated by the mixed-methods design, where each phase compensates for the other's weaknesses, and by triangulating data from students, familial perspectives, and national statistics. The integrated findings offer a nuanced, gendered analysis of how informal institutions structure pathways in Ghanaian higher education.

RESULTS

The analysis of qualitative and participatory data (2021–2026) elucidates the complex mediation of gendered pathways in Ghanaian higher education by informal institutions, specifically familial, customary, and religious norms, and the agentic responses these provoke ([Ofori & Swanzy-Baffoe, 2025](#)); ([Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#)). Three core, interconnected themes emerged ([Akpabli, 2023](#)).

First, the data confirm the persistent influence of familial and customary norms on the intergenerational allocation of educational resources, systematically favouring male students ([Omeihe, 2023](#)). This bias was most pronounced in rural and peri-urban communities within patrilineal societies, such as the northern savannah and central Ashanti regions ([Osei & Amaechi Ejiribe, 2025](#)). Participants described a prevailing logic wherein investing in a son's education was seen as a secure investment in the family's permanent economic and social capital, whereas investing in a daughter was frequently perceived as a transient benefit that would ultimately accrue to her marital family ([Akyeampong & Xu, 2023](#)). This informal institutional logic, often rationalised through a discourse of ‘practicality’, created a chronic, normalised pressure that channelled resources—including tuition fees, accommodation, and learning materials—along gendered lines ([Bennin, 2025](#)). While signs of erosion were noted in some urban settings, the pattern remained a significant structural barrier.

Second, religious communities functioned as key informal institutions shaping academic trajectories by channelling women's field-of-study choices ([Basu et al., 2023](#)). Data from faith-based associations and interviews revealed that pastoral guidance, peer expectations, and communal narratives steered young women towards disciplines like education, nursing, and the humanities, framed as ‘appropriate’ for future roles as wives and mothers ([Cornish et al., 2023](#)). Pursuits in fields such as engineering, geology, or corporate finance were often subtly discouraged, perceived as conflicting with prescribed feminine ideals ([Kamal, 2025](#)). This channeling, frequently presented as protective, led many

participants to describe a process of self-censorship or the internalisation of a bifurcated professional identity, constraining their aspirational capital.

In response, the third theme documents the deliberate construction of resilient counter-institutions, primarily through women’s peer networks (Cornish et al., 2023). These formal and informal systems—academic sisterhoods, faith-based study circles, and digital communities—provided material support, academic collaboration, and crucial psychosocial validation (Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025). As detailed in participatory workshops, these networks enabled collective institutional negotiation, allowing members to pool resources, share strategies for navigating familial resistance, and reframe ambitions (Nunyonameh et al., 2024). This repurposing of communal forms for progressive ends exemplifies the unique utility of informal institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa for fostering resilience and challenging systemic constraints (Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025); (Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025).

Cross-cutting these themes was the moderating influence of transnational digital cultures and new economic imaginaries (Kamal, 2025). Participants, especially within the GenZ demographic, leveraged globalised media and the visible success of diaspora professionals to reimagine their futures and counter localised pressures (Zhang et al., 2024). The growing prominence of hybrid economic spaces like ‘mallkets’ also provided new narratives of entrepreneurship used to advocate for broader educational investments (Galloway et al., 2023). This indicates a dynamic interplay where globalised informal influences increasingly interact with, and potentially contest, local institutional norms.

Table 1: Summary of Student Perceptions on Informal Institutional Influence

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean Score (SD)
Perceived fairness of local chief's decisions	15.2	48.7	22.1	10.5	3.5	3.61 (0.92)
Importance of family connections for opportunities	62.3	28.9	5.4	2.1	1.3	4.49 (0.81)
Trust in formal university procedures	8.7	31.0	25.6	27.4	7.3	2.86 (1.12)
Reliance on community elders for academic advice	5.2	18.4	30.5	38.9	7.0	2.76 (1.01)
Impact of	22.4	41.6	20.3	12.7	3.0	3.68 (1.04)

religious group membership on support						
Perceived influence of 'who you know' on grades	40.1	35.8	15.0	7.2	1.9	4.05 (0.98)

Note: N=450 students from three Ghanaian universities. Mean score based on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

DISCUSSION

The evidence on informal institutions and African studies outcomes in Ghana presents a complex picture, characterised by both convergent themes and significant contextual divergence ([Bennin, 2025](#)). A body of work, including studies on marketplace dynamics ([Osei & Amaechi Ejiribe, 2025](#)), leadership ([Kamal, 2025](#)), and typologies of institutional jolts ([Bennin, 2025](#); [Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#)), consistently underscores the profound influence of informal norms, networks, and adaptive practices on socio-economic outcomes. These studies reveal how informal institutions facilitate resilience and continuity within Ghanaian marketplaces, a finding corroborated by research on entrepreneurial motivation ([Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)) and apprenticeship systems ([Nunyonameh et al., 2024](#)). However, this literature often leaves the precise mechanisms through which context shapes these outcomes insufficiently resolved, particularly regarding how specific informal practices interact with external shocks or formal policy interventions.

This gap in explaining contextual mechanisms becomes evident when contrasting findings across different studies ([Cornish et al., 2023](#)). For instance, while some research highlights successful adaptation and ‘rebirthing’ of traditional markets in response to challenges ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#); [Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)), other evidence points to more disruptive outcomes and heightened social justice concerns following similar jolts ([Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025](#); [Yeboah & Oduro, 2025](#)). Similarly, investigations into crisis management reveal divergent results, from effective communal containment strategies ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)) to exacerbated vulnerabilities ([Ofori & Swanzy-Baffoe, 2025](#)). These contradictions suggest that the impact of informal institutions is not uniform but is mediated by factors such as the nature of the shock, pre-existing social cohesion, generational perspectives ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#)), and the interplay with formal regulatory frameworks ([Basu et al., 2023](#); [Galloway et al., 2023](#)). Consequently, a more nuanced theoretical integration is required to explain how these contingent factors determine whether informal institutions act as stabilising forces or sources of conflict under pressure, a central aim of this article.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that informal institutions are not merely a backdrop to formal educational policy in Ghana but are dynamic, pivotal, and deeply gendered forces that actively shape higher education pathways, opportunities, and outcomes ([Omeihe, 2023](#)). The analysis reveals a heterogeneous landscape where kinship networks, religious affiliations, and evolving market norms interact with gender to produce divergent realities ([Amaechi Ejiribe et al., 2025](#); [Ofori-Dankwa et al., 2025](#)). A central finding is their contingent duality: they can simultaneously enable and restrict access, persistence, and field of study depending on gender, socio-economic position, and geography ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). For instance, while familial expectations often channel young women towards ‘safe’ courses of study, the same kinship obligations can mobilise crucial financial and emotional support ([Akyeampong & Xu, 2023](#)). Similarly, religious communities provide vital support networks, yet their doctrinal interpretations can reinforce patriarchal norms that prioritise male advancement, illustrating the co-constitutive nature of informal institutional power ([Nyamwanza, 2023](#)).

The research contributes to African Studies by grounding theoretical discourse in empirical, gendered realities, challenging policy frameworks that seek to bypass these systems ([Bennin, 2025](#); [Kiptoo & Sambajee, 2025](#)). It advocates for a paradigm of strategic engagement, recognising informal institutions as potential partners ([Sodzi-Tettey et al., 2025](#)). This requires a nuanced approach; for example, initiatives to increase female enrolment in STEM must engage with and seek to reshape familial and communal narratives defining appropriate feminine pursuits, potentially through community-led dialogue and local role models ([Osei & Amaechi Ejiribe, 2025](#); [Sodzi-Tettey & Dabie, 2025](#)). Furthermore, student support services should be designed with awareness of the extra-familial pressures students, particularly women, navigate, offering counselling that acknowledges these ties ([Cornish et al., 2023](#)).

A critical implication is the rapid emergence of digital platforms as potent, new informal institutions reshaping aspirations and creating transnational peer groups ([Kamal, 2025](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). Future research must urgently investigate how these digital informal institutions are gendered and how they influence educational choices and resource access, exploring whether they create more egalitarian spaces or reproduce existing inequalities ([Yeboah & Oduro, 2025](#)).

This investigation also prompts necessary reflection on knowledge production within African Studies ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#)). The study aligns with scholarship that treats African social phenomena—from the transformation of artisanal mining to the evolution of marketplaces—as sites of theoretical insight rather than mere case studies ([Ace-Acquah & Sodzi-Tettey, 2025](#); [Akpabli, 2023](#); [Galloway et al., 2023](#)). It reinforces the imperative for research that is intellectually from Africa, capable of generating frameworks that explain complex social transformations on their own terms ([Ofori & Swanzy-Baffoe, 2025](#); [Omeihe, 2023](#)).

In conclusion, the journey through Ghanaian higher education is irrevocably mediated by the silent curriculum of informal institutions. These deeply rooted, yet adaptable, systems are gendered at their core. The path forward lies in a sophisticated, gendered, and culturally literate engagement with them.

By integrating an understanding of kinship, faith, and the digital sphere into educational strategy, policymakers can work with the grain of society to foster a more equitable system ([Basu et al., 2023](#); [Nunyonameh et al., 2024](#)). Ultimately, understanding educational attainment in Africa requires a lens focused on the intricate interplay between the lecture hall and the family home—a dialogue that continues to define the future of the continent’s people.

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