

# Are Girls Better Learners Than Boys? An Analysis of Gender Imbalance in Higher Education in Sri Lanka

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The generalist and widespread assumption is that 'girls are better language learners than boys' and that 'language' is a 'girls' subject, belonging to the feminine domain. Since recently, researchers have attempted to question this assumption and argue that such assumptions are based on generalist and commonsense notions which form stereotypes (Schmenk 2004). However, despite this endeavor to revisit and disentangle the long-held belief that girls are better language learners in comparison to boys, the facts and figures related to learning in general, which are inarguably related to language learning, reiterates the long-held stereotypical assumption of the difference between the two genders regarding both language learning and learning in general, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, because, the majority of students, enrolled for most study programs at the higher education institutes are girls. Therefore, the current research attempted to question this paradox: that is, if the traditional assumption that girls are better learners than boys is a mere social construction, then why is that, our higher education institutions are more populated by girls in most of the subjects? Is it because girls are better language learners that they outperform boys in most of the other subjects? Is it then invariably linked to the fact that language competency is crucial for all other forms of learning. The current study attempted to find answers to these research questions in order to gain a wider and a deeper understanding of the issue. Using stratified random sampling data was collected from both learners and teachers engaged in higher education in Sri Lanka. Data was analyzed qualitatively and the findings reveal that the majority of the participants believe that the gender stereotypes regarding language learning and learning in general are true. The majority of the participants also believe that girls are better motivated than boys for learning and motivation could be one of the main reasons for this gender imbalance prevalent in higher education. About 30% of the sample are of the view that there is no distinct difference between girls and boys in relation to learning. Thus, the results imply that educators need to pay attention to this widening imbalance in gender in achievement in education and take necessary measures to both improve motivation in boys and also to amend teaching methods to improve participation of both girls and boys in education.

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