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Asmau and Baba, Bashariya (2024) Promoting Gender Equity:
Enhancing Women's Leadership in Nigerian Higher Education
Institutions. Project Report. York St John University.

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Promoting Gender Equity: Enhancing Women's Leadership in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions

Executive Summary

Having women in higher education leadership enriches the decision-making process, serves as role models for female students and facilitates achieving' Sustainable Development Goals. However, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within Nigerian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), primarily due to cultural stereotypes, work-life balance challenges, and institutional biases.

This policy brief presents a multi-faceted strategy to address these barriers, aiming to increase women's leadership representation at all levels of academia. By implementing the outlined recommendations, Nigeria can advance gender equality in HEIs, diversify leadership, and contribute to its national development goals.

Introduction

Leadership roles in Nigeria's HEIs continue to be male-dominated, with only a small percentage of women holding top positions. According to the National Universities Commission (2019), only 11 out of the 170 university vice-chancellors are female and there have been under 30 women who have been vice-chancellors in Nigeria history. As of 2017, the percentage of female professors in Nigerian Universities stood at 15.43% (Enyioko 2021).

Data was collected through a combination of interviews with key stakeholders, as well as a workshop and training held in Kaduna State on the 25th and 26th of June 2024, respectively. The workshop was attended by over 100 participants representing a diverse range of stakeholder groups, including government officials, religious and cultural leaders, non-governmental organisations, university management, and staff associations. The training had 86 participants specifically working within higher education.

Our project funded by the British Council found that societal stereotypes and institutional biases, combined with family responsibilities, restrict women's career advancement and leadership opportunities. Removing these barriers is crucial to achieving gender equity and improving the representation of women in leadership within the academic sector.

> "In my institution, an academic was refused the seat of Head of Department just because she is a woman."
>
> "Men prefer working under men instead of women. Therefore, they design regulations and rules so that males are preferred instead of women. Thus, they favor men in taking positions of leadership."
>
> "I got married before going for my Ph.D., and my husband didn't allow me to proceed until after I gave birth because of the fear of someone taking me away."
>
> "My aunt was nominated for ministerial appointment, however, her husband refused her from taking the position."
>
> Quotes from Women in HEIs in Kaduna

Table Showing the Number of Women in Leadership in HEIs in Nigeria

University	Male Leadership	Female Leadership	% Male Leadership	% Female Leadership
Federal Universities	678	159	80.70%	19.30%
State Universities	338	53	86.50%	13.50%
Private Universities	409	91	81.80%	18.20%
Overall	1425	303	82.80%	17.20%

Source: NUC's 2019 Nigerian Universities System Statistical Digest.

Key Challenges

1. **Work-Life Imbalance:** Many women in academia struggle to balance professional responsibilities with family obligations, limiting their ability to pursue leadership roles.

2. **Cultural Stereotypes:** Societal expectations reinforce the idea that women are better suited for domestic rather than leadership roles, hindering their career progression. These stereotypes are reinforced in diverse narratives.

3. **Institutional Barriers:** Structural challenges such as limited mentorship, biased recruitment, and promotion processes further curtail women's leadership opportunities in HEIs.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure gender-inclusive governance is embedded throughout Nigerian higher education institutions (HEIs), interventions must occur at multiple levels: institutional, departmental, and individual. Each level plays a critical role in dismantling gender barriers and fostering a culture of inclusivity, from leadership structures to everyday practices. The following recommendations address these various layers to create a comprehensive, sustainable approach to gender parity in HEI leadership.

Particpants at the training for women in higher education institutions in Kaduna State, held 26 June 2024

Institutional Level

- **Adopt Gender Quotas:** Enforce the National Gender Policy to ensure that 35% of leadership positions, including Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Heads of Departments, are held by women.

- **Promote Transparent Recruitment:** Ensure merit-based and transparent recruitment and promotion processes that provide equal opportunities for women.

- **Capacity Building:** Collaborate with stakeholders such as British Council to provide leadership training and workshops designed for women in HEIs.

- **Work-Life Support:** Establish on-campus childcare facilities, offer flexible work policies, and provide office accommodations that help female staff balance family and work responsibilities.

- **Celebrate women leaders:** Establish prominent, public-facing spaces both on university campuses and online platforms to honor and celebrate the achievements of past and present women leaders within the institution.

Individual Level

- **Personal Development:** Encourage women to actively pursue professional growth by participating in leadership training and mentorship programs.

- **Visibility:** Promote networking and professional visibility through platforms like LinkedIn to enhance recognition in their fields.

Faculty Level

- **Professional Development:** Faculties should prioritize leadership training and mentorship programs for aspiring women leaders.

- **Succession Planning:** Implement succession plans to facilitate the transition of women from middle to senior-level leadership roles.

- **Address Gender Biases:** Appoint qualified women to senior academic and administrative roles to challenge gender biases.

Departmental Level

- **Mentorship Programs:** Develop mentorship initiatives that offer leadership training and career development opportunities for women. Mentorship programs can be implemented at various levels, including within the institution, through cross-institutional collaborations, or aligned with external local mentoring initiatives, such as the WHESH Mentoring Scheme (www.whesh.org) established as part of this project. These programs provide valuable guidance, professional development, and support networks for aspiring women leaders, helping them navigate academic and leadership pathways more effectively.

- **Competence-Based Role Allocation:** Assign roles based on qualifications and avoid gender-stereotyped positions that hinder women's leadership growth.

Participants at the stakeholder workshop held on 25 June 2024

Implementation strategy

Gender Unit Coordination

A dedicated Gender Unit should be established to coordinate the implementation, monitoring, and reporting of gender equity policies. This unit will work with all stakeholders, organise leadership training, and ensure progress is reported to management.

SMART Goals

Institutions should set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) objectives to advance gender equity, which faculties and departments can adapt and track. Institutional progress should be measured based on these goals.

Data Collection and Analysis

Regularly collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data on recruitment, retention, promotion, and research output to identify gaps and trends, and guide future improvements.

Monitoring Tools

Develop institution-wide monitoring tools, such as dashboards and surveys, to track progress in real-time and ensure transparency in gender equity initiatives.

Regular Reporting and Evaluation

Produce periodic reports on gender equity, and share them with management, faculties, institutional associations such as ASUU and NASU and students. Institutions should evaluate the effectiveness of gender equity initiatives regularly and incorporate feedback for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Promoting women's leadership in Nigerian HEIs is essential for fostering an inclusive and diverse academic environment. The successful implementation of these recommendations will empower women to take on leadership roles, contributing to Nigeria's national development goals. Addressing the gender gap in leadership within HEIs will also create a more equitable and sustainable future for the higher education sector. This should be seen as a responsibility of everyone in the sector.