

GENDER DISPARITY AND AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: QUEST FOR PARADIGM SHIFT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Over several decades, African women have encountered systemic obstacles to accessing higher education, shaped by colonial legacies, patriarchal institutional frameworks, economic exclusion, and deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms. Despite considerable progress in broadening women's access to and participation in African universities, their presence in senior academic, administrative, and decision-making roles remains disproportionately low. This enduring underrepresentation extends beyond concerns of equity, carrying significant implications for knowledge production, institutional governance, innovation systems, and the broader trajectory of sustainable development across the continent. Although existing literature has extensively examined the socio-political and cultural constraints affecting women in academia, comparatively less scholarly attention has been directed toward highlighting their agency, leadership approaches, and transformative contributions within university governance structures. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the experiences and evolution of African women in higher education leadership, with particular emphasis on the role of mentorship, professional networks, and leadership development initiatives. Grounded in feminist institutionalism and transformative leadership theory, the analysis underscores persistent structural challenges, including gender stereotyping, difficulties in balancing professional and family responsibilities, inequitable access to funding, and the continued underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and executive leadership positions. The paper contends that advancing the empowerment of African women in higher education leadership is not only a matter of developmental priority but also a strategic necessity. Gender-inclusive leadership is shown to strengthen institutional governance, improve research output, encourage interdisciplinary and socially responsive innovation, and cultivate inclusive academic environments that reflect a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Keywords: African Women; Higher Education; Leadership; Gender Equity; Sustainable Development

Introduction

Across the world, it is widely recognized that genuine and sustainable development, particularly development focused on human advancement, is fundamentally dependent on the effectiveness of a nation's educational system. This recognition is consistently articulated in policy discourses across both developing regions of Africa and Asia and the more industrialized nations of Europe and North America. The distinction, however, often lies in the extent to which these declarations are translated into practical actions. While many highly developed countries tend to demonstrate a greater commitment in aligning policy rhetoric with actual implementation, developing countries frequently struggle to match their stated educational aspirations with adequate and meaningful educational and policy reforms. Moreover, educational development should not be narrowly conceptualized within purely utilitarian frameworks that emphasize immediate economic

outcomes. Rather, it should be approached from a holistic perspective that prioritizes the comprehensive development of every individual. In this regard, the primary objective of education should be to nurture the capacities and the full potential of all citizens, enabling them to develop their abilities to the greatest possible extent, without gender discrimination or unequal treatment (Banjo, 2014).

However, **gender inequality remains a pervasive global phenomenon, with women frequently subjected to various forms of marginalisation. In response to this challenge, Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasises the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, recognising these objectives as fundamental human rights concerns** (United Nations, 2015; Sumeshni et al., 2024). Gender inequality has historically constituted a significant barrier to women's access and effective participation in higher education across Africa. The persistence of patriarchal social structures has particularly constrained women's progression into academic leadership positions. Deeply entrenched patriarchal cultures, combined with enduring gender disparities within higher education institutions, have reinforced male dominance and produced gendered hierarchies of power across the continent's academic landscape (Aina et al., 2015). Although patriarchy within many traditional societies already permitted unequal distributions of authority, prestige, and access to resources (Ezumah, 2000), the advent of colonial rule further institutionalized gender distinctions within the emerging formal education system.

During the nineteenth century, colonial administrations introduced educational structures that were shaped by rigid gender norms, influencing both access to schooling and the nature of curricular content. Prior to colonial intervention, African societies practiced largely indigenous systems of education characterized by oral instruction and the intergenerational transmission of vocational skills, often reflecting the dominant occupations within families and communities. These included activities such as farming, fishing, trading, tie-dye production, handicrafts, and metalwork, among others (Aina, 2014, p. 3). However, the acquisition of such skills was highly gendered. While boys were typically trained in productive economic activities, girls were largely socialized into domestic roles, including household management and childrearing. Consequently, skill formation and social responsibilities were structured along clear gender lines across many African cultural contexts (Igiebor, 2021).

In the post-colonial era, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced a notable expansion of tertiary education, which significantly increased opportunities for women's enrolment. Between 1975 and 1986, participation in third-level educational institutions among both African men and women grew substantially. This expansion was partly the result of earlier developments in the 1960s and early 1970s, when many African countries witnessed rapid growth in primary and secondary education systems. By the mid-1970s, rising public demand for advanced educational opportunities generated considerable pressure on governments to establish additional tertiary institutions and to increase admission capacities within existing ones. It is important to note that the category of "third-level institutions" extends beyond universities to include polytechnics, colleges of education, and vocational or trade schools. Despite these developments, access to higher education during the early twentieth century remained highly restricted, particularly for women across Africa. Educational opportunities available to women during this period were largely oriented toward domestic and caregiving professions, such as teaching and nursing, rather than toward leadership or specialized professional careers. Although evidence indicates that women became more integrated into national education systems across many African countries during the 1970s and 1980s, significant disparities persisted. While female enrolment gradually approached parity with that of males at the primary level and showed steady improvement at the secondary level, women's representation in tertiary education continued to

remain considerably lower (Rathgeber, 1991).

Women's participation in higher education in Africa has gradually transformed from the pronounced exclusion characteristic of the colonial era to a pattern of increasing, though still unequal inclusion. During the colonial period, access to education for women was severely constrained by patriarchal norms that prioritized domestic roles and limited educational opportunities largely to activities associated with household responsibilities. Over time, however, female enrolment in higher education expanded significantly, rising from very low levels in the 1990s to approximately 40 percent by 2006. Although some regions have made notable progress toward gender parity in student enrolment, substantial inequalities remain, particularly in leadership positions and in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Despite the growth in female student populations, women continue to be markedly underrepresented among academic staff and institutional leadership. For instance, women occupied only about 9 percent of Vice-Chancellor positions in African Universities as of 2002 (Sapong & Amoako, 2020). A range of structural and socio-cultural barriers continue to impede women's advancement in higher education. These include entrenched patriarchal expectations, exclusionary professional networks often described as the "old boys' network," and the persistent challenge of reconciling professional responsibilities with domestic and caregiving roles. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century has witnessed increasing attention to gender equity within higher education policy frameworks. Various initiatives and institutional reforms have been introduced with the aim of reducing gender disparities, particularly by promoting women's participation in STEM disciplines and expanding their representation in academic leadership and decision-making positions (Sapong & Amoako, 2020).

Universities in Africa occupy a central position in advancing the continent's intellectual, political, and socio-economic development. They function as critical institutions where knowledge is generated, cultivated, and disseminated. Despite this important role, the university environment has historically been characterized by male dominance, obscuring the longstanding contributions of women to knowledge production in African societies. Within institutions that are often regarded as spaces for critical inquiry, intellectual freedom, and self-reflection, women's contributions have frequently been marginalized, minimized, or in some instances disregarded altogether. This marginalization is closely linked to the colonial origins of many African universities, which institutionalized hierarchical structures, bureaucratic systems, and patriarchal norms that reinforced male dominance within academic spaces. Consequently, gender inequalities became embedded within the governance, culture, and professional hierarchies of higher education institutions. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, several African universities began to adopt more progressive approaches toward gender relations, reflecting growing recognition of the need for inclusivity and gender equity. Despite these developments, significant efforts are still required to transform institutional cultures and address entrenched gender disparities across Africa's higher education systems (Sapong & Amoako, 2020).

Although many African states publicly affirm gender equality within their constitutional frameworks, women in several parts of the continent continue to experience systemic forms of marginalization. In practice, significant numbers of African women still face limited access to basic education and economic opportunities. The failure to provide equitable educational access to all citizens results in the underutilization of the continent's human potential. Education plays a crucial role in fostering critical thinking and rational decision-making and the persistent underrepresentation of women in higher education suggests that many capable African women are

unable to contribute fully to national development. The relatively low participation of women in higher education institutions has broader implications for leadership representation across various sectors. Limited access to tertiary education often translates into fewer women occupying decision-making positions in government, politics, the private sector, and administrative or managerial roles within universities. Similarly, the scarcity of female leaders in the corporate sector, including positions such as chief executive officers and board members, can be partly attributed to the underrepresentation of women in higher education, a situation further reinforced by entrenched patriarchal social structures prevalent in many African societies (Mbuh, 1996).

Consequently, the current situation places African nations at a disadvantage within an increasingly competitive global environment. The limited presence of women in decision-making positions suggests that the continent is not fully represented in international arenas where collaboration, networking, and strategic partnerships are essential. Empirical studies conducted by international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund consistently demonstrate that countries achieve more rapid economic progress when their human capital is developed and utilized equitably. For African countries to participate effectively in the global economic and political order, it is therefore imperative to prioritize the development of their most valuable human resources by ensuring equal access to education for all citizens, irrespective of gender (Mbuh, 1996). Based on this backdrop, this study intends to critically examine the nature of African women in higher education leadership, with particular emphasis on the role of mentorship, professional networks, leadership development initiatives and persistent structural challenges experienced in leadership positions.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is grounded in **Feminist Institutionalism** and **Transformative Leadership Theory**. Feminist Institutionalism seeks to analyse and explain the distribution of power within institutional structures, focusing on how institutions both shape and are shaped by gender relations. From this perspective, institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they embody and perpetuate gendered norms that influence access to opportunities and the allocation of power. By foregrounding gender as a central analytical category, Feminist Institutionalism advances a political project aimed at disrupting entrenched power arrangements within institutions. It seeks to facilitate institutional transformation by identifying and challenging the structural barriers that sustain gender inequality and other forms of discrimination (Holmes, 2020).

The theory further contends that institutional frameworks often reproduce and reinforce gender disparities, affecting men and women in unequal ways. One of the most significant contributions of Feminist Institutionalism has been its capacity to illuminate persistent gender imbalances, particularly the underrepresentation of women in institutional settings and the obstacles that hinder women's participation in political leadership and public office. Through this analytical lens, the theory interrogates the mechanisms through which power is organised and sustained within institutions, demonstrating how inequalities may persist even in contexts where formal gender equality policies exist. In addition, Feminist Institutionalism seeks not only to interpret these dynamics but also to address them by advocating for the restructuring of institutional practices and norms in ways that promote greater gender equity. As such, it serves as an important framework for policy analysis, advocacy, and institutional reform aimed at transforming gender relations. By clarifying how gender influences political actors, decision-making processes, and institutional outcomes, the theory provides strategic insights for advancing meaningful change within institutional environments (Easy, 2022).

Transformational Leadership Theory, initially formulated by James MacGregor Burns and subsequently elaborated by Bernard M. Bass, focuses on the capacity of leaders to inspire followers to transcend ordinary expectations and attain exceptional outcomes. The theory emphasizes the role of leaders as influential role models who cultivate trust, admiration, and respect while fostering an environment that encourages creativity and innovation. It further suggests that effective leaders actively mentor their followers, facilitate their personal and professional development, and motivate them by articulating a clear and persuasive vision of collective advancement. Through this process, transformational leaders appeal to followers' values and sense of purpose, thereby promoting shared objectives and enabling institutional and social change. Unlike transactional leadership, which relies primarily on exchanges of rewards for performance, transformational leadership prioritizes the transformation of attitudes, motivations, and organizational culture. In this sense, it seeks to generate positive change among followers while remaining deeply committed to the growth and success of all individuals involved in the leadership process (Ugochukwu, 2025). Moreover, transformational leadership aims to introduce innovative ideas, new perspectives, and strategic pathways that facilitate organizational growth and development. By cultivating strong commitment, enthusiasm, and loyalty among managers and staff, transformational leaders mobilize organizational members to undertake fundamental reforms in the structures and operational foundations of the institution. Such changes enable the organization to acquire the competencies necessary to adapt to evolving challenges, pursue new directions, and ultimately attain higher levels of performance and effectiveness (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016).

Evolution and Sustainability of Women Empowerment for Leadership Excellence: The Role of Education and Mentorship

The evolution of women's participation in African higher education in the twenty-first century has been driven by educational expansion and sustained advocacy for gender equality, even as cultural and structural barriers continue to limit full parity. Although international, national, and institutional policy frameworks increasingly emphasize the imperative of gender equity, prevailing conditions suggest that the structural and professional demands associated with academic careers in contemporary African universities may, in practice, hinder the effective realization of these policy commitments toward gender-equitable transformation. Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in attention to issues of women's advancement and female leadership (Deepika, 2024). This heightened interest is largely driven by the global recognition of women's empowerment as a critical developmental issue and by sustained efforts to promote it, particularly in light of women's strong performance in leadership roles (Algahfes, 2024). Leadership may be defined as a behavioural process through which an individual influences others toward the realization of collective objectives (Mashele & Alagidede, 2021). Although this definition implies that leadership capacity is not inherently tied to sex, opportunities for leadership are often distributed on the basis of gender rather than merit, competence, or prior experience (Keohane, 2020; Sumeshni et al., 2024). Studies also suggest that women often display a more positive leadership orientation, as they are commonly associated with participatory, empathetic, supportive, and empowering leadership practices. Consequently, women are frequently linked with transformational forms of leadership rather than transactional ones (Mashele & Alagidede, 2021; Sumeshni et al., 2024).

In the broader global drive toward sustainable leadership, women stand out as key actors in advancing transformative outcomes. Given that sustainable leadership emphasizes the promotion of both present and future benefits for all stakeholders, the continued empowerment of women in

higher education becomes especially important. This is necessary not only to address the inequalities that hinder contemporary women leaders, but also to ensure that future generations of women are not excluded from leadership opportunities. Women's leadership is indispensable to the achievement of gender equality across all sectors of society. In many cases, women leaders demonstrate strengths in interpersonal relations, inclusive decision-making, team cohesion, entrepreneurship, caregiving, nurturing, and equitable power-sharing. Their tendency toward collaboration and inclusion also contributes to more supportive and productive organizational environments (Acevedo-Duque et al., 2021). Moreover, women's leadership should not be viewed solely in terms of descriptive representation, but rather as a driving force for sustainable development, economic progress, social justice, and political advancement. Enabling women to occupy leadership positions provides societies with greater capacity to challenge structural inequalities and utilize previously underrecognized potential, thereby fostering stronger economies and fairer social systems. Consequently, the promotion of women's leadership should be understood not only an ethical necessity but also a strategic pathway toward a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future (Deepika, 2024).

The long-term sustainability of women's empowerment and leadership depends significantly on education, particularly in the form of training and mentorship. Through leadership training, women are able to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for effective and outstanding leadership performance (Tan, 2024). Mentorship and structured training initiatives are especially important in addressing the leadership gap, as they provide opportunities for interaction, networking, and the refinement of professional abilities. Within higher education, such programmes are particularly valuable because they support women's advancement into leadership positions while also encouraging more inclusive and equitable institutional cultures (Deepika, 2024). In the African context, notable female leaders such as Professor Olive Mugenda, Professor Esi Awuah, and Dr. Oby Ezekwesili have championed transformative changes in higher education. Through their leadership, they have contributed to making education more accessible, relevant, and impactful, while also challenging prevailing narratives about women's roles in leadership. Women leaders in higher education have been actively engaged in addressing critical regional challenges, including gender disparities in STEM disciplines, cultural barriers to girls' education, the demand for locally relevant curricula, the effects of brain drain, and the provision of education in conflict-affected areas. Their efforts have also inspired institutions to establish gender studies programmes, mentorship structures, and community engagement initiatives that support inclusive and sustainable development.

Mentorship may be categorized into two major forms: formal and informal. Formal mentorship involves organized programmes with assigned mentors, clearly defined goals, and mechanisms for accountability, whereas informal mentorship emerges naturally through interpersonal relationships and can be equally influential, even though it is often less visible. Both forms are beneficial to women in academia. Nevertheless, institutions must intentionally foster these relationships rather than allowing them to occur by chance. Genuine progress toward gender equity requires higher education institutions to move beyond symbolic commitments by creating formal mentorship schemes, leadership pathways, and systems of recognition. In this sense, mentorship should be recognized as a vital aspect of academic and institutional practice. Across Africa, several programmes illustrate the significant role of mentorship in developing sustainable leadership. Examples include the University of Cape Town's Emerging Leaders Programme, which offers focused leadership training for women academics; the MILEAD Fellows Programme of the Moremi Initiative, which promotes the development of young African women leaders through mentorship, education, and advocacy; and AWARD (African Women in Agricultural

Research and Development), which provides female scientists with mentorship and research support. More generally, leadership development programmes in higher education function as important mechanisms for enhancing leadership competencies by drawing on established research and best practices. As Tan (2024) emphasizes, leadership development is a continuous, lifelong learning process that is strengthened through practical experience, learning opportunities, and deliberate developmental activities aimed at building leadership capacity over time.

Mentoring is a critical factor in the professional advancement and achievement of Black African women. It has been widely recognized as an important developmental strategy as well as an affirmative action mechanism for supporting and advancing women and other historically disadvantaged groups. This indicates that mentoring young women is a significant instrument for inspiring, equipping, and empowering those who have been previously marginalized in the workplace. Mentors who possess substantial knowledge and experience, and who are dedicated to the development of their protégés, can play a decisive role in shaping women's aspirations for future leadership within organizations. Women often require mentoring to a greater extent than men because they are more likely to encounter structural and institutional barriers in corporate settings. For this reason, the presence of strong and supportive female mentors is especially important, since role modelling and identification are central to women's leadership development. In this regard, transformational leadership is frequently seen as a style commonly adopted by women mentors to encourage protégés and foster constructive change (Cherry, 2022).

Mentoring further contributes to the development of empowerment, psychological safety, and a healthy self-concept. In academic settings, mentors inspire, guide, and encourage young women to maximize their potential by helping them explore and take advantage of available opportunities (Semeshni et al., 2024). Mentorship therefore represents a vital component of women's career progression, and its incorporation into academia is necessary for addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. It has been observed, however, that women in academia often face barriers that complicate the establishment of effective mentoring relationships with male mentors (Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026). This underscores the need for mentorship and training initiatives specifically designed to support the advancement and empowerment of women within academic institutions (Francis & Stulz, 2020). Such interventions are crucial for strengthening women's leadership capacities and addressing the systemic constraints that have historically contributed to their exclusion in higher education. In addition, the limited availability of female role models and mentorship opportunities continues to reproduce gender inequality in academia. This dynamic reinforces the glass ceiling, as women are often marginalized not only in formal institutional structures but also within informal networks where professional learning and advancement frequently occur. Studies have also indicated that some male mentors in higher education may demonstrate bias toward women mentees (Powell, 2018), raising concerns about the conditions under which women receive mentorship, especially when those expected to guide them may themselves hold prejudicial attitudes toward women in academic employment. Despite these concerns, mentorship remains indispensable within higher education because it provides women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to confront and overcome gender-related challenges (Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026).

Challenges of Women in Higher Education in Africa

In recent years, women in higher education across Africa have experienced notable progress and advancement. The implementation of gender equity policies, alongside regional frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and increased advocacy efforts, has contributed significantly to this positive shift. Consequently, a growing number of women now occupy senior leadership positions within higher

education institutions, where they play a critical role in shaping institutional directions and inspiring future generations. African women in academic leadership are increasingly redefining leadership paradigms by emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and societal impact (Kuagbedzi et al, 2022). They actively promote student-centered pedagogies and gender-responsive policies, drawing on their lived experiences to advance equity and broaden access to education. Their leadership approaches are often characterized by empathy, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose, which collectively contribute to driving substantive and transformative change within higher education institutions. Despite the recorded progress in fostering equitable participation of African women in higher education and promoting transformative leadership, women in higher education face systemic, socio-cultural and institutional barriers that limit leadership opportunities, and other academic opportunities. Apart from the fact that cultural expectations and gender stereotypes obviously hinder women's advancement in higher education institutions especially in STEM fields, leading to underrepresentation in science, engineering and technology, they are still being confronted by significant barriers which include:

Leadership inequality

It is comforting to learn that more women are now in positions of leadership than before (Keohane, 2020). Although the number of women occupying positions of power in higher educational institutions has increased, this increase is insignificant compared to the number of their male counterparts. Ascending to leadership positions for women academics is not a straightforward endeavour. Compared to men, women's career progression is riddled with challenges, and the path to leadership is a winding one that requires more time and energy to navigate. (Ngonyama, S and Adewumi, 2026). Despite the fact that the United Nations' fifth Sustainable Development Goal underscores the importance of gender equality, including equal access for women to leadership positions at all levels, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership. The fact that women are often concentrated in support or managerial functions, such as human resources, rather than executive positions like CEO highlights persistent gender disparities in top leadership (Bayan, 2022). In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC), which is the governing body of all Nigerian universities, listed a total of 219 HEIs as of 2022. The universities listed by the Commission comprised 49 federal universities, 59 state universities, and 111 private universities (NUC, 2022). An overview of the list of women in leadership positions in the 49 federal universities revealed that, as of 2019, Nigeria had six female pro-chancellors, five female Vice-Chancellors, 10 female registrars, six female bursars, and 14 female librarians. Shockingly, 17 institutions amongst the federal universities had zero female representation in the above-mentioned positions (NUC, 2022, Emem and Aderinsola, 2023). Although there is some progress in the 21st century as more women are accessing education and many are appointed to managerial positions in the government and private sector, they remain unequal to men as they have limited access to power and resources (Sumeshni et al, 2024).

Systemic Gender Discrimination

Women's access to leadership roles is constrained by socially constructed perceptions of leadership. Gender bias constitutes one of the most significant barriers, manifesting as a preference for men over women in leadership positions, a pattern consistently observed in research (DeFrank-Cole & Tan, 2022). Leadership is often associated with attributes reflecting masculine traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance while traits culturally ascribed to women, such as warmth, nurturing, and kindness do not align with conventional leadership expectations, thereby generating barriers in the form of bias and prejudice. While overt gender discrimination has declined, women continue to encounter implicit biases-automatic, unconscious associations that influence behaviour without awareness. Gender bias, occurs when managers,

despite expressing support for women leaders, unconsciously favor men to maintain organizational norms, often without recognizing the bias. This subtle form of bias hinders women's leadership identity development and reduces their visibility as leaders and role models (Tan, 2024). In higher education, women frequently occupy roles concentrated in teaching and service, which limits time available for research. They are less likely than men to secure major research grants and to have them renewed. This contributes to women's underrepresentation in senior academic positions, lower participation rates in research, and continued barriers to attaining full professorships or leadership roles within academia (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021; Correa, 2025).

Work-Life Pressures

Work-life pressures present a significant challenge for women in higher education, as academic careers often demand extensive time commitments, including teaching, research, publishing, administrative responsibilities, and mentoring, frequently extending beyond standard working hours. Fewer women hold leadership positions because women have to make more sacrifices for parenthood and family care (Bayan, 2022). Women disproportionately bear domestic and caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare and eldercare, which can conflict with these professional demands (Misra, et al, 2011). This dual burden can impede career progression by limiting the time available for research, grant applications, and networking opportunities, all of which are critical for promotion and visibility within academia (Wolfinger, et al., 2008). Financial constraints on childcare exacerbate this dilemma, forcing some women to withdraw from the workforce or scale back their careers (World Bank, 2021). Even while employed full-time, women are expected to shoulder caregiving duties, which compounds their challenges in balancing work and family life (Misra, et al, 2011).

Gender Pay Disparities

One of the enduring issues facing women in higher education is the gender-based disparity in remuneration. Although progress has been made in addressing pay inequities in many fields, academia remains characterized by substantial wage gaps, with women often receiving lower salaries than their male peers despite holding similar roles and demonstrating equivalent qualifications and professional experience. Pay disparities between male and female leaders in the higher education system remain a significant indicator of enduring gender inequality within academic institutions. Although women have increasingly attained senior leadership positions, evidence suggests that they are often paid less than their male counterparts in comparable roles and are less likely to occupy the most highly remunerated executive positions. This imbalance reflects broader structural and institutional barriers, including unequal promotion opportunities, gendered organisational cultures, and limited access to influential professional networks, all of which shape career progression and salary outcomes. Furthermore, the persistence of these disparities demonstrates that increased representation alone does not guarantee equity in reward systems.

Studies have therefore shown that gender-based pay inequality in higher education leadership is not merely an individual issue, but a systemic problem embedded within the governance and remuneration structures of the sector (Bachan& Bryson, 2022; UNESCO IESALC, 2021; HEPI, 2024). Equity in academia fosters inclusive leadership. However, women remain underrepresented in senior positions and face the challenges such as unequal access to funding, publishing opportunities, and fair pay - alongside deep-rooted cultural and institutional biases that hinder their advancement. Addressing these challenges, therefore, requires holistic approaches that dismantle systemic inequalities while empowering women to assert their rights and challenge societal norms (Deepika, 2024).

Global Collaborations for African Leadership in Higher Education

In the contemporary global context, the importance of networking and partnerships in the advancement of higher education cannot be overstated. As the educational landscape continues to evolve internationally, collaboration has become not merely desirable but indispensable. For African women leaders aspiring to expand their influence and achieve meaningful success in academia, strategic engagement in professional networks is essential for gaining visibility, accessing research funding, and securing career development opportunities (Correa, 2025). Global collaboration offers significant benefits to African higher education, including increased access to funded research initiatives and joint projects, greater influence in policy development and global intellectual discourse, opportunities for faculty and student exchange that encourage intercultural learning, and improved access to capacity-building resources that strengthen institutional growth. Illustrative examples include partnerships with UNESCO's Global Education Coalition, university collaborations facilitated through programmes such as Erasmus+, Fulbright, DAAD, and the British Council, as well as African Women in STEM networks that connect scholars within the continent and across the diaspora. The active involvement of African women in such platforms is crucial, as it enhances representation, ensures contextual relevance, and promotes reciprocal learning within the global higher education community.

Despite their expertise and substantial contributions, African women remain insufficiently represented in influential spaces such as international research consortia, global education policy forums, academic journal editorial boards, and university ranking and governance structures. To ensure that global education is shaped in a more inclusive and meaningful way, there is pressing needs to advocate for their participation in decision-making arenas where policies are formulated, dominant narratives are constructed, and future directions are determined. Notable examples demonstrate the transformative potential of African leadership within global collaboration. Professor **Mamphela Ramphele** (South African and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town), Wangari Maathai (Kenyan and the first African woman to win Nobel Peace Prize), **Professor Grace Alele-Williams** (the first Nigerian woman to earn a PhD in mathematics and the first female Vice-Chancellor in Nigeria (University of Benin)). These women have broken gender and racial barriers in academia, contributed to global knowledge production Influenced policy, governance, and social transformation and served as mentors and role models for future generations.

Women's Leadership and Prospect of Higher Educationin Africa

Women's leadership is central to the future transformation of higher education in Africa because it strengthens institutional inclusiveness, innovation, and responsiveness to social realities. The literature suggests that when women occupy leadership positions, they often broaden governance perspectives, promote more participatory decision-making, and draw attention to equity-oriented reforms that are essential for the sustainability of African universities. Recent scholarship also frames women's leadership as part of a wider agenda of educational transformation, rather than merely a question of representation, emphasizing that the future of higher education in Africa depends on leadership systems that are diverse, socially responsive, and development-oriented. It is a strategic requirement for institutional transformation because UNESCO's work on higher education in Africa similarly frames women's advancement in tertiary education and leadership as central to innovation, human-capital development, and the sector's wider social relevance. From this perspective, the future of African higher education is tied to whether institutions can move beyond symbolic inclusion and meaningfully incorporate women into leadership structures that shape research agendas, teaching priorities, and institutional reform (Gallegos, 2025).

The future of African higher education must be inclusive, ensuring no woman or rural learner is left behind. It should offer relevant curricula that address local challenges with global perspectives, be empowered through diverse leadership, and remain sustainable by promoting green practices, ethical research, and socially responsible innovation. **The role of women in leading the transformation is to display true leadership excellence for African women combines vision with humility, lifting others while advancing and staying deeply rooted in purpose rather than chasing position or title. Next-generation women leaders must lead with integrity and empathy, champion lifelong learning and community engagement, and design institutions that nurture, not just train.** African women must advance from merely having a seat at the table to actively leading the global education agenda - defining its direction, shaping its values, and ensuring it meaningfully serves marginalized communities around the world.

It has been posited that expanding women's leadership is essential to the future quality, legitimacy, and global competitiveness of African higher education. Researchers increasingly suggest that women leaders bring important perspectives to institutional resilience, collaboration, and student-centred reform, while role-modeling new possibilities for younger women academics and students. Work on African women in STEM and studies of women's lived experiences in university leadership further indicate that visibility matters because when women occupy and succeed in leadership roles, they can help challenge exclusionary norms and widen the leadership imagination of the academy. The implication is that the future of higher education in Africa will depend not only on increasing access for women as students and academics, but also on creating conditions in which women can exercise sustained influence in governance, knowledge production, and policy leadership (Babalola, 2024).

Conclusion

The achievement of gender equality in higher education in Africa requires a continuous and transformative process through which formal legal rights are translated into meaningful institutional practice (Correa, 2025). Overcoming barriers to women's career advancement necessitates targeted capacity-building initiatives that strengthen women's leadership skills and equip them to challenge gender-based discrimination effectively. Higher education institutions must therefore address gender discrimination and the constraints associated with the glass ceiling through sustained dialogue and deliberate policy measures that expand opportunities for women's advancement, including institutional support systems such as mentorship programmes and family-friendly policies for women academics (Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026). If Africa is to realise the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is essential that women attain the highest levels of leadership in higher education institutions so that they can contribute more fully to knowledge production, innovation, and the broader social and economic development of the continent.

The link between women's leadership and sustainable development outcomes is well established. Empowering women to assume leadership positions should not be viewed solely as an issue of diversity and inclusion, but also as a strategic necessity for advancing social progress, economic development, and institutional sustainability (Deepika, 2024). However, progress toward gender equality remains uneven across the world. While many developed countries have made considerable strides, developing countries continue to face substantial deficits in this regard. In many of these contexts, gender equality remains difficult to achieve because of entrenched social, economic, and cultural constraints that continue to limit women's opportunities and

participation. Deep-rooted gender norms frequently assign women subordinate roles, while restricted access to education, healthcare, and economic resources further intensifies inequality, particularly in rural communities. In addition, discriminatory legal frameworks and patriarchal institutional systems continue to reproduce power imbalances and constrain women's agency. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires comprehensive and systemic approaches aimed at dismantling structural inequalities while creating enabling conditions for women to realise their full potential. Such efforts are critical to ensuring a sustainable and inclusive future for higher education in Africa.

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