

Gender Differences in Workplace Diversity and Inclusion: A Study of Higher Education Institutions in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the intricate interplay between gender dynamics and workplace diversity and inclusion within the higher education sector. Utilising a mixed methodology, the study employed online surveys and virtual interviews to collect data from 320 women across ten higher learning institutions in Zimbabwe. The findings of the study revealed that women encountered challenges in various aspects, including achieving a work-life balance, meeting familial expectations, the absence of paternity leave, a dearth of women in leadership positions, and instances of sexual harassment. Within their professional environments, women encountered obstacles such as biases, stereotypes, inadequate support, and barriers impeding their career advancement. The study recommended the full implementation of gender-inclusive policies and practices, the promotion of gender-responsive leadership and mentorship, and the fostering of an inclusive campus culture through educational initiatives. This research significantly contributes to a deeper comprehension of the role gender plays in shaping inclusive environments and provides valuable insights for developing strategies to create equitable and diverse workplaces.

Keywords: Gender, diversity, inclusivity, innovation, productivity, Zimbabwe

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1.0 Introduction

This study explores the multifaceted dimensions of gender, diversity, and inclusion within the context of higher education workplaces, highlighting the importance of fostering an inclusive environment for all employees. This is because the landscape of higher education is undergoing a significant transformation, as issues of gender, diversity, and inclusion gain prominence from researchers, leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs), human resources practitioners, and gender advocates (World Economic Forum, 2021; Thomas, Plaut and Zumbo, 2018). A growing number of women and non-binary individuals are stepping into the historically male-dominated sector, championing the cause of fair treatment and amplifying the complexities that already exist in the field of higher education (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023). According to Mott (2022), HEIs are regarded as the breeding grounds for future thought leaders and societal influencers. Establishing HEIs and fostering environments that actively promote and exemplify gender equality norms, as well as recognising and elevating the voices and ideas of women, represent some of society's most potent instruments for expediting advancements toward women's and girls' equality and empowerment on a global scale (Zvavahera et al., 2021).

Even though there is global recognition of gender equality, there is a persistent presence of multiple layers of discrimination and stigma that further curtail women and non-binary individuals' chances, their contributions at work, and their rewards from work, adversely affecting their well-being and professional growth (Paoletti et al., 2020; Heijstra et al., 2017). Often, instances of workplace discrimination, biases, and power imbalances reflect broader societal beliefs and values, posing obstacles to achieving workplace equality, diversity, and inclusion; unless comprehensive leadership and accountability are established at every level to deliberately advance the interests of female employees (European Commission, 2019; Hearn, 2020; Husu, 2020; Kachchaf et al., 2015). Research conducted by Cahyati et al. (2021) in Indonesia unveiled that women working in HEIs encounter difficulties arising from familial obligations, inadequate support, and the prevalence of a patriarchal culture in the home which is extended to the workplace.

According to Coleman (2001), women holding positions of authority in HEIs represent a minority not only in the United Kingdom but also in most countries, spanning both developed and developing countries. Despite various initiatives aimed at rectifying gender imbalances in HEIs, the prevailing notion that "women teach and men manage," as highlighted by Greyvenstein, and van der Westhuizen (1991, p. 271), continues to hold true within the higher education system across the globe. However, the changing demographic landscape is reshaping the workforce scenario, with HEIs now managing a more multi-generational workforce (ILO 2019a; ILO 2019b). A workplace prioritising equal treatment, diversity, and inclusion is pivotal in bolstering resilience and facilitating growth (ILO, 2022).

Gender equality in higher education has been a prominent issue in Zimbabwean HEIs since its independence in 1980. However, as noted by Zvobgo (1986), the focus of these universities has primarily been on gender imbalances in education, particularly concerning student enrolment and performance at various educational levels. According to Zembere (2022), the gender-related policies implemented by HEIs in Zimbabwe have not significantly influenced the promotion of women into leadership positions because male dominance persists in leadership roles. Achieving equality and justice is essential for fostering diversity and inclusivity in the workplace, as emphasised by Ortlieb and Sieben, (2014). Zimbabwe's Constitution Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, the Gender Commission, and the National Gender Policy as amended in 2017 have supported these initiatives. However, the 2020 Report of the Gender Commission of Zimbabwe highlighted that women and girls still face numerous gender-related challenges in the spheres of politics, the economy, and society, hindering their ability to reach their full potential. Even though Zimbabwe's Constitution mandates equal representation of both women and men in all positions across sectors of the economy, women's involvement in leadership and politics remains limited. This is supported by data from the 2018 harmonised elections where women's representation declined, with figures of 48% in the Senate, 31.5% in the National Assembly, and 13.3% in Local Governance (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2020). Zvavahera et al. (2021), corroborates that women in HEIs in the country encounter similar challenges. This could be pointing to a structural problem within the highest offices where gender equality is not appreciated. Recognising the importance of

women's empowerment is fundamental to upholding women's rights and achieving gender equality.

Gender encompasses socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities of individuals across the gender spectrum, influencing their behaviour, self-perception, societal power dynamics, and resource allocation, with gender identity existing on a fluid continuum beyond a binary framework, shaped by roles, expectations, interactions, and institutionalised norms sources (Morgenroth and Ryan, 2018).

As described by Shore et al. (2011) and Thomas, Plaut, and Zumbo (2018), inclusion goes beyond representation, emphasising the creation of respectful, valued, and fully integrated work environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds and identities can actively participate.

Diversity in this study encompasses a wide range of individual differences, including race, gender, age, and more (Jackson and Ruderman, 2017). Valuing diversity means respecting each person's uniqueness and leveraging differences for an inclusive and enriched work environment (Ankita, 2014). Historically, discrimination based on these factors has persisted, resulting in a heterogeneous workforce. Managing diversity is challenging for HEIs, but it is vital for building resilient and productive teams (Herring, 2009; Jackson and Ruderman, 2017).

Despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks, women in HEIs in Zimbabwe encounter persistent difficulties as they navigate the transition into the world of work and contend with the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within Zimbabwean universities. To identify the challenges being faced by women in higher education, the following objectives were formulated:

- i) Assess gender disparities in workplace representation and leadership;
- ii) Examine gender-specific challenges and experiences;
- iii) Evaluate the effectiveness of gender-inclusive policies and initiatives; and
- iv) Proffer recommendations to policymakers.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel et al. (1979) underpins the literature of this study. The rationale is that individuals' identification with particular social groups, such as gender, influences their attitudes, behaviours, and interactions within HEIs. According to the Social Identity Theory, individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). In the context of this study, individuals working within higher education institutions categorise themselves into groups based on gender. The theory posits that people tend to favour their in-group (the group they belong to, in this case, their gender group) over their out-group, (the opposite gender group) (Saqib and Khan, 2023). In the workplace, this can manifest in various ways. For instance, individuals may show a preference for colleagues of the same gender when forming professional networks or collaboration opportunities (Saqib and Khan, 2023). Women in HEIs feel that they are segregated from their male counterparts (Zvavahera et al., 2021). Conversely, men exhibit biases against women (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023). In the context of this study, this involves gender-based stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward women by men. Social Identity Theory also involves social comparison, where individuals evaluate their own group (in-group) favourably compared to other groups (out-groups). In this study, this relates to how women perceive their own gender group's contributions to workplace diversity and inclusion compared to the opposite gender group (men). The theory suggests that the salience of a particular social identity (gender) becomes more prominent in certain situations. For instance, in workplaces where gender diversity and inclusion are actively discussed or when specific gender-related issues arise, individuals may become more aware of their gender identity, which can influence their behaviours and reactions. Social Identity Theory also addresses the concept of identity threat (Blake, 1989). When individuals perceive a threat to their social identity (through gender discrimination), in this case, women, may respond defensively or engage in strategies to protect their identity and group status.

In this study, the Social Identity Theory is used to investigate how women within HEIs identify with their gender groups, how this identification affects their perceptions of workplace diversity, and inclusion, and how it influences their behaviours, attitudes,

and interactions with colleagues of the same and opposite genders. By applying this theoretical framework, more insights will be gained into the role of gender identity in shaping women's experiences within HEIs and how it contributes to or hinders workplace diversity and inclusion efforts. Additionally, it explores potential strategies to mitigate in-group favouritism, out-group bias, and identity threat to promote a more inclusive and equitable workplace environment.

3.0 A Global Overview

Discriminatory practices persist and hinder workplaces in HEIs across the globe, impeding productivity, talent utilisation, and cohesiveness, thus undercutting competitiveness and growth (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023; Rodrigo and Clavero, 2022). It is of utmost importance that every employee feels valued, and receives fair treatment, respect, and empowerment through inclusive institutional approaches, within a culture that fully embraces inclusivity, and under the guidance of leadership, that embodies inclusiveness (Vignoles et al., 2006). Even though there are calls for inclusive organisational cultures where all individuals can flourish and contribute their skills equitably, there are still considerable barriers to overcome (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023). HEIs possess significant potential to advance gender equality, diversity, and inclusion, influencing not just the realm of higher education but also the broader society (Rodrigo and Clavero, 2022). It is important to recognise that universities themselves are influenced by and contribute to gender norms and values (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020). Despite efforts by governments and civic groups, gender disparities and wage inequalities persist among both high-ranking and lower-level positions within the academic hierarchy in some parts of the world (Brower and James, 2020; LNVH, 2016). Gender-based divisions are evident in HEIs and other sectors of the economy, while the incorporation of gender viewpoints in teaching and research remains insufficient (Zvavahera et al., 2021; Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango, 2009). It is imperative for employees to experience a sense of value, respect, equitable treatment, and empowerment through the implementation of inclusive institutional practices, fostering an organisational culture that embraces inclusivity, and promoting inclusive leadership (ILO, 2022).

Women in HEIs in Africa face the general trend of exclusion and marginalisation that applies to both administrative and academic career paths, but it reaches its peak when it comes to senior academic and research positions (Mama, 2006). While persistent gender inequality is attributed to external social and familial factors, it is contended here that there is substantial evidence to indicate that, contrary to institutional and managerial assertions of administrative impartiality, African institutions exhibit underlying sexual and gender dynamics within their institutional and intellectual cultures (Sabharwal, 2015).

For the past three decades, Makerere University in Uganda has actively pursued greater gender equality in its student, academic, and administrative population (Kigotho, 2021). Policies to support women's academics, backed by budgetary allocations, have been making an imprint on the statistics. The number of women academics increased from about 15% in the 1990s to the current level of 35%. During the same period, the number of women leading large research teams has risen from 5% to 15%, while the number of those in senior administrative positions has shot from 5% to 25%. Furthermore, about 30% of research funding in Makerere is allocated to female researchers. A study conducted by Miller and Katz (2002) prompted a transition in the discourse from managing diversity to leveraging diversity, emphasising that solely adopting practices to manage a diverse workforce falls short of the mark. As a result, the term 'inclusion' became intertwined with diversity in the 1990s (Holvino et al., 2004). Consequently, it becomes essential to scrutinise the concept of inclusion alongside diversity. This examination is crucial to address important inquiries about how to effectively leverage the potential of a diverse workforce.

4.0 The Zimbabwean context

According to Guzura (2017), achieving Sustainable Development Goal number 5, which is gender equality, is regarded as an essential element. However, in Zimbabwe national gender machineries encounter financial difficulties because they are frequently provided with insufficient resources, hindering their ability to function effectively. As pointed out by Clisby in 2005, there is still a substantial amount of work to be undertaken to transform gender mainstreaming into tangible outcomes at the

grassroots level. Zvavahera et al. (2021) note that female leaders should actively promote and create opportunities for other women. Collectively, men continue to enjoy advantages throughout their academic journeys. Although women often outnumber men at the beginning of higher education, as they advance through academia, men overwhelmingly occupy senior positions (Zvavahera, 2023). Men receive more opportunities and greater discretionary rewards. Additionally, students consistently rate male instructors more favourably than they consistently rate their female counterparts, a pattern observed even in experiments where the gender of the instructor is artificially altered (Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango, 2009). There exists a biased assumption of incompetence among students toward academic educators who are female or belong to other minority groups. Advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls are crucial components of any endeavour aimed at diminishing human suffering, vulnerability, and poverty. These actions are integral to fostering positive societal transformation, which, in turn, leads to increased prosperity, growth, and development, as well as enhanced security and stability (Mott, 2022; Mukeredzi, 2022). The study's methodology is covered in the section that follows.

5.0 Methodology

This study utilised the mixed approach method and concentrated on a sample drawn from an online community of practice (CoP) that included both academic and non-academic staff representing 10 out of the 21 universities in Zimbabwe. By focusing solely on women, the study wished to generate recommendations and strategies that are tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of women in HEIs, leading to more effective diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The CoP is a voluntary and informal group where professionals with shared interests learn from one another, collaborate, and enhance their expertise in areas of interest. Within this community, members exchange experiences and endeavour to address workplace-related challenges.

To collect data, the researcher administered an online survey containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions to all the 230 members of the CoP. One hundred

and fifty (150) completed questionnaires were received and 10 members of the CoP were purposively selected to participate in the online interviews resulting in a response rate of 74%. The selection of the ten participants was based on their willingness to take part in the interviews, their possession of over 11 years of higher education experience, and their access to a stable internet connection. The rationale behind selecting individuals with more extensive experience was rooted in the belief that they could offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in HEIs. The interviews were conducted primarily to validate and corroborate the responses collected through the online survey. By combining both an online survey and online interviews, the study intended to yield more comprehensive and nuanced data.

Prior to data collection, the researcher ensured participants provided informed consent. The purpose of the survey, data usage, and the right to withdraw at any point was thoroughly explained. To safeguard participant anonymity and confidentiality, no personally identifying information was solicited.

To enhance the study's validity, the survey questions were meticulously designed to minimise bias and ensure clarity, objectivity, and impartiality. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted on a small sample with similar characteristics to refine its content.

Data analysis involved transcription and organisation, followed by coding to identify themes, patterns, and categories within the textual data. Subsequently, content analysis was conducted to distil essential findings and insights. These findings were presented coherently, accompanied by verbatim quotations from participants to provide a rich contextual understanding. Figures tables were used to visually illustrate discernible patterns. The online interview participants were assigned anonymous labels ranging from P1 to P10, with "P" denoting Participant.

6.0 Findings and discussion

This section introduces and analyses the study's findings while establishing connections with existing literature and the study's theoretical framework. Additionally,

the study offers conclusions and provides recommendations. Subsequently, the upcoming section furnishes pertinent background information concerning the respondents.

6.1 Demographic data of the respondents

A survey was conducted online, targeting 230 women from 10 HEIs in Zimbabwe, and 150 responses were received. Out of the initial pool of 230 women, 10 members were selected for online interviews, leading to a response rate of 74%. The majority of the participants had over 11 years of work experience, with 14% falling into the 6-10 years category. Regarding their educational background, 74% held a Ph.D., 14% had a master's degree and 12% possessed a bachelor's degree as their highest level of qualification.

The 74% response rate is relatively high for an online survey, which indicates that the topic was of substantial interest to the participants, potentially reflecting the importance of diversity and inclusion in higher education. The fact that the majority of participants had over 11 years of work experience is noteworthy. It implies that the research may be able to capture insights from individuals with a considerable amount of experience in HEIs. This can be valuable for understanding how gender dynamics evolve over time in such institutions.

The educational qualifications of the participants are also an important aspect of the study. The predominance of Ph.D. holders suggests a high level of expertise in their respective fields, which can influence their perceptions and experiences in the workplace. This information could be useful for exploring whether higher levels of education impact gender-related issues in HEIs. The following section pertains to the first objective.

Objective 1: Assess gender disparities in workplace representation and leadership

6.2 Gender disparities in workplace representation and leadership

The data gathered through online interviews indicate that among the 21 universities in the country, only 2 women held the position of Vice-Chancellor. Moreover, when it comes to senior roles like Pro-Vice Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, Deans, and

Heads of Departments, men overwhelmingly occupied these positions. This situation raises concerns about the prospects of women achieving prominent leadership roles in the future. P3 had this to say:

We are underrepresented in leadership roles, and management is not prioritising gender, diversity, and inclusion when it comes to promotion and access to opportunities. Cultural norms and values are perpetuating gender disparities within this institution because men hold most leadership positions and most decisions favour them. This has reinforced traditional gender roles and biases affecting how we interact with each other at the workplace.

The underrepresentation of women in prominent leadership roles within higher education institutions raises several important concerns and considerations. This finding corroborates the research conducted by Schiltmans and Davies (2023) as well as Zvavahera et al. (2021), both of whom highlighted the existence of obstacles or prejudices that hinder women from advancing into leadership positions, even though they possess the requisite qualifications, expertise, and the potential to make valuable contributions. Having a diverse leadership team, including women in top positions, is crucial for providing role models for aspiring female academics. It can inspire young women to pursue careers in higher education and provide access to mentorship opportunities that are often essential for career advancement. Diverse leadership teams bring a variety of perspectives and experiences to the table, which can enrich the decision-making process. When women are underrepresented in senior roles, it may limit the diversity of thought and potentially hinder the institution's ability to address complex challenges and meet the needs of a diverse work environment (Mama, 2006). Insufficient gender diversity in leadership can foster an environment that feels less embracing and accommodating for women. As outlined in the Social Identity Theory and research conducted by Saqib and Khan in 2023, leadership within HEIs tends to exhibit a bias toward individuals of the same gender (in this case, men) when establishing professional networks or seeking collaborative prospects. This tendency inadvertently results in a lack of opportunities for women. This may affect recruitment and retention of female faculty and staff, leading to a less diverse workforce overall.

Examining the representation of women in leadership should include an analysis of the pipeline. The underrepresentation of women in various roles and the limited encouragement for them to pursue leadership positions in the early stages of their careers can be attributed to cultural norms and values that traditionally associate women with caregiving responsibilities. This association tends to constrain their potential for advancing into senior positions. Guzura's research in 2017 highlights that men consistently benefit from advantages across their academic journeys in comparison to women. This study's findings indicate that men continue to access opportunities and privileges primarily due to their presence in senior positions.

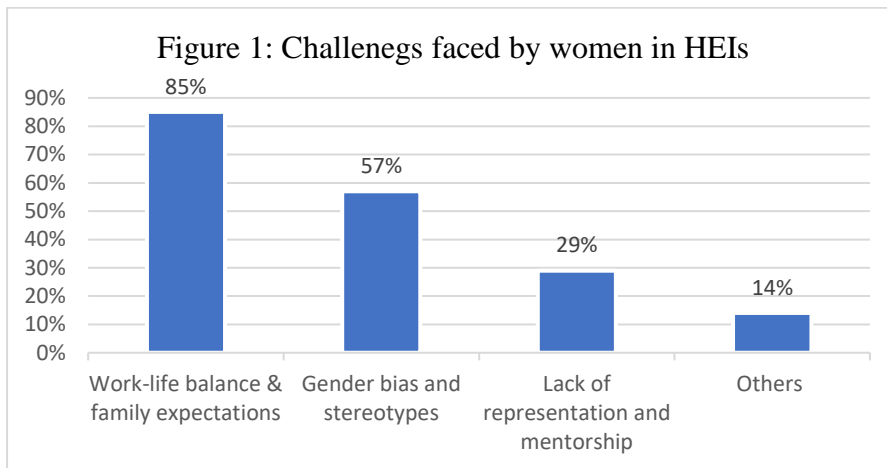
Implicit bias and stereotypes can play a significant role in hindering women's career advancement. Addressing these biases through awareness, training, and unbiased hiring and promotion processes is crucial. Ankita (2014) advises leaders in HEIs to value diversity since each person's uniqueness and leveraging differences for an inclusive and enriched work environment.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within higher education institutions is a multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive and proactive approach. Addressing these disparities is not only a matter of equality but also contributes to better decision-making, enhanced workplace culture, and the overall success of universities in fulfilling their educational and research missions.

Objective 2: Examine gender-specific challenges and experiences

Figure 1 illustrates that a significant number of the survey respondents faced various challenges related to work-life balance and family expectations, gender biases, and stereotypes. Specifically, 85% encountered issues related to work-life balance and family expectations, 57% experienced gender biases and stereotypes, 29% noted a lack of representation and mentorship, and 14% cited other challenges.

Online interviews revealed that women encountered additional obstacles, such as sexual harassment, career stagnation, and limited opportunities for staff training and development. Furthermore, it was evident from the interviews that women were under-represented in positions of authority, and available opportunities were predominantly extended to men, further hindering their professional advancement and status.



All the respondents concurred that the interplay between work-life balance expectations and caregiving responsibilities has a pronounced impact on gender disparities in career progression, with female employees being the group most adversely affected. During online interviews, several women disclosed that they experienced exclusion from institutional activities due to their caregiving responsibilities, and this exclusion had far-reaching consequences on various aspects of their lives. P2 indicated that:

Caregiving has been the responsibility of women since time immemorial. I feel that men take it as a shared responsibility. Cultural norms and values continue to play a big role in maintaining the traditional roles of men extending this to workplaces. There is inadequate support for achieving work-life balance and family expectations at the workplace and home.

P10 had this to say:

There is implicit bias in the hiring and promotion processes and this has affected the number of female guest speakers and visiting scholars, hindering mentorship

opportunities. There are also limited networking opportunities due to a lack of participation in international conferences and seminars.

P4 observed that gender discrimination issues were deeply rooted in culture. The participant further highlighted the absence of paternity leave for her spouse to provide assistance during and after childbirth. She also mentioned that even when her spouse was at home, he was unwilling to share household chores, exacerbating her workload. P2 added: *“Men should be educated about the evolving nature of culture and advocate to be granted paternity leave to support us after giving birth.”* Additionally, P9 emphasised the need to revise labour laws to accommodate paternity leave and provide proper facilities for breastfeeding mothers at the workplace. P3 challenged the assumption that men neither desire nor need paternal leave, stressing that this notion perpetuates traditional gender roles. P3 pointed out that:

These expectations place women in the role of primary caregivers and men as the primary breadwinners, resulting in an unequal distribution of domestic labour. Interestingly, I am also contributing to the welfare of our family and I feel that we should be equal partners in everything.

Regarding representation and mentorship, participants expressed concerns about the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and gender disparities within STEM fields. One participant (P8) highlighted that their university had a stark gender imbalance among professors, with only 10% being women. Responses from online interviews corroborated the findings of online questionnaires. Furthermore, responses from both online questionnaires and online interviews expressed frustration over the shortage of female advisors/mentors available for research and thesis supervision, limiting opportunities for women wishing to pursue Ph.D. studies (Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango, 2009). There was a consensus among all respondents that HIEs in Zimbabwe lacked diversity initiatives to address these challenges. Regarding gender biases and stereotypes, there was a unanimous agreement that women encountered occupational stereotypes, wage disparities, leadership biases, occupational prejudices, instances of sexual violence, and a dearth of parental leave (Brower and James, 2020; LNVH, 2016).

Striking a balance between work and personal life can be more challenging for individuals who have caregiving responsibilities. The findings of this study corroborate Mama (2006) and Zvavaehra et al. (2021) who note that persistent gender inequality is commonly attributed to external social and familial factors thus; traditional gender roles and expectations continue to exacerbate this challenge for women since they bear the burden of being caregivers. Thus, workplace discrimination, biases, and imbalanced power dynamics mirror prevailing societal beliefs and values, thus acting as hindrances to achieving workplace parity, diversity, and inclusivity, unless comprehensive leadership and accountability are established across all echelons (European Commission, 2019; Hearn et al., 2020; Husu, 2020; Kachchaf et al., 2015; Schiebinger, 1999). Subtle but harmful behaviours and comments, known as micro-aggressions, can create an unwelcoming environment for individuals of certain genders. These micro-aggressions perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to a lack of inclusivity (Mama, 2006).

These findings corroborate the social identity of women (out-group) and men (in-group) who control everything and are favoured by the workplace systems. The theory posits that people tend to favour their in-group (the group they belong to, in this case, their gender group) over out-groups, (the opposite gender group) (Saqib and Khan, 2023). Work-life balance expectations and caregiving responsibilities significantly affect gender disparities in career advancement (Zvavaehra et al., 2021). Women often face greater caregiving demands and societal expectations related to family responsibilities, which can hinder their career progression. Individuals of varying genders, as men, are typically expected to prioritise their careers over caregiving, while women may experience pressure to prioritise family life and navigate these challenges differently. Women often have to make career sacrifices, such as taking on part-time or less demanding roles, to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, which can result in slower career advancement (Zvavaehra and Chirima, 2023). In contrast, men who prioritise their careers may experience fewer interruptions and faster advancement. Gender disparities in career advancement persist when societal norms and workplace policies do not adequately address these imbalances and when individuals are not supported in balancing their caregiving responsibilities with their career aspirations.

In science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, women are frequently underrepresented among faculty members and researchers. This lack of representation can result in fewer female role models and mentors for female students pursuing STEM careers. There is often a shortage of female professors and mentors in many academic departments. This lack of representation can impact female students' access to guidance and support in their academic and career pursuits.

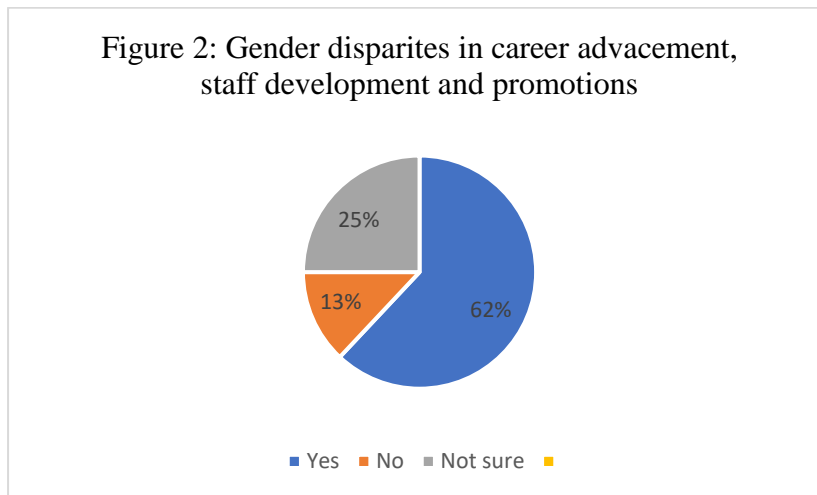
Implicit biases in hiring and promotion processes can disadvantage women in HEIs. These biases can result in women being passed over for job opportunities and promotions, even when they are equally or more qualified than male candidates. HEIs may invite a disproportionately low number of female guest speakers and visiting scholars to campus. This lack of representation can limit exposure to diverse perspectives and expertise for both students and faculty. HEIs may not provide sufficient support and accommodations for female faculty and staff members who have caregiving responsibilities, making it challenging for them to balance their professional and personal lives effectively.

Female students pursuing graduate studies may face challenges in finding female advisors and mentors for their research projects and thesis supervision. HEIs may lack comprehensive diversity and inclusion initiatives aimed at addressing these issues, which can perpetuate the underrepresentation of women in academia.

In the online survey, a majority of the responses (62%) pointed to notable gender discrepancies concerning career progression, staff growth, and promotions within their institutions. Meanwhile, 25% expressed uncertainty, and 13% acknowledged non-existent gender disparities (Refer to Figure 2).

The survey findings suggest that a significant portion of the respondents (62%) indicated the presence of noticeable gender disparities in terms of career progression, staff growth, and promotions within their respective institutions. This finding implies

that a majority of the participants perceive gender-based inequities in these aspects of their workplace. This corroborates the findings by Thomas, Plaut, and Zumbo (2018) who note that women find it difficult to progress in their careers across the globe. This implies that most women feel these disparities across the globe. This also supports the Social Identity Theory where women are always at the receiving end.



Additionally, a smaller but still notable percentage (25%) expressed uncertainty about the existence of gender disparities, indicating some level of ambiguity or lack of clarity among this group regarding the issue. This might encompass individuals who have limited experience and exposure in higher education institutions or a select few who may be reaping the rewards of the existing system.

Surprisingly, 13% of the respondents acknowledged the non-existence of gender disparities in these areas. This suggests that a minority of participants in the study did not perceive or believe that gender-based inequities were present within their institutions regarding career advancement and related matters.

Objective 3: Evaluate the effectiveness of gender-inclusive policies and initiatives

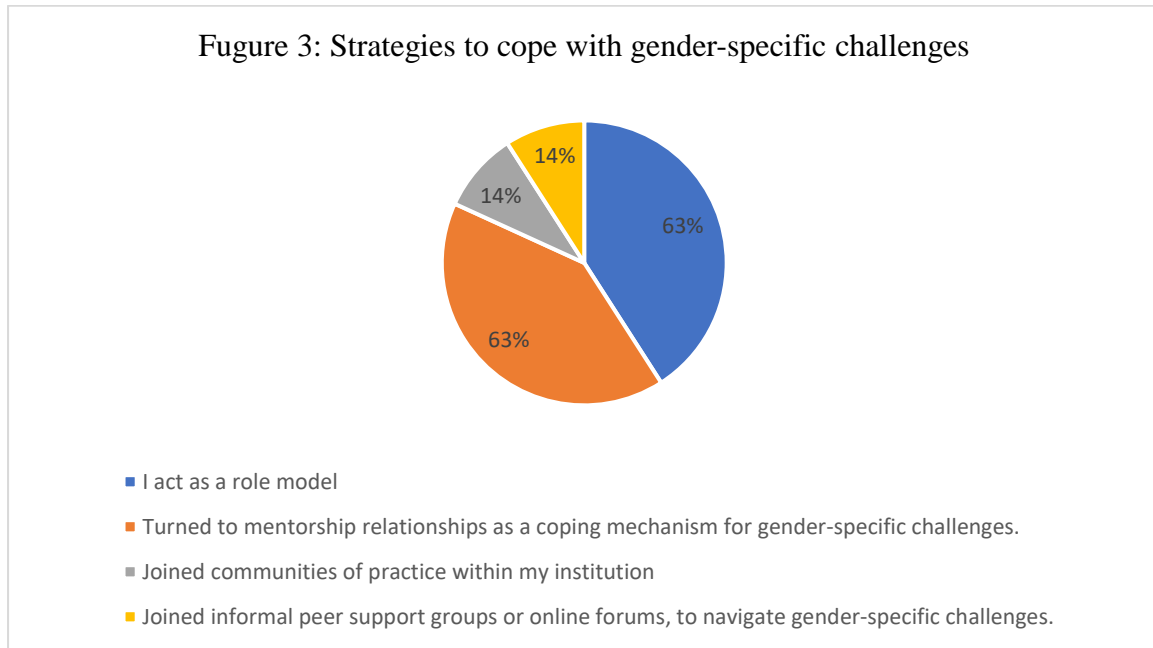
6.3 Strategies to cope with gender-specific challenges

The majority of the respondents (63%) indicated that they had turned to mentorship relationships as a strategy for addressing these difficulties. Correspondingly, an equal percentage of female employees, 63%, had also assumed the role of mentors, setting an example for both female colleagues and students. Additionally, 14% of survey participants disclosed their involvement in communities of practice, while another 14% disclosed their participation in informal peer support groups or online forums aimed at navigating the particular challenges linked to gender bias (Refer to Figure 3).

A significant number (63%) of the female employees in HEIs had sought mentorship relationships as a way to cope with the challenges of gender discrimination. This suggests that mentorship is a prevalent strategy among women to navigate their career paths and address workplace gender disparities as suggested by Tajfel et al. (1979). Saqib and Khan (2023) note that when individuals are segregated, they end up forming groups with colleagues of the same gender as a survival mechanism supporting the existence of all these formations.

Interestingly, an equal percentage (63%) of female employees had also taken on the role of mentors themselves. This means that many women were not only seeking guidance but were also actively contributing to the development and support of other women within their institutions, which could have a positive impact on gender diversity and inclusion. (Zvavavhera and Chirima, (2023) and the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel, et al. (1971) concur with this finding because when the out-group (women) is under pressure from the in-group (men) they intend to fight for their space and protect themselves from further physical and psychological harm.

Figure 3: Strategies to cope with gender-specific challenges



Another 14% of the participants had chosen to join informal peer support groups or online forums. This suggests that some women were seeking support and advice outside of formal institutional structures, possibly to find practical solutions and strategies to deal with gender-related challenges. When discriminatory practices persist this may affect, talent utilisation, and cohesiveness, thus, undercutting competitiveness and growth (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023; Rodrigo and Clavero, 2022).

6.4 Gender-inclusive policies, programmes, and initiatives that institutions have implemented to promote diversity and inclusion

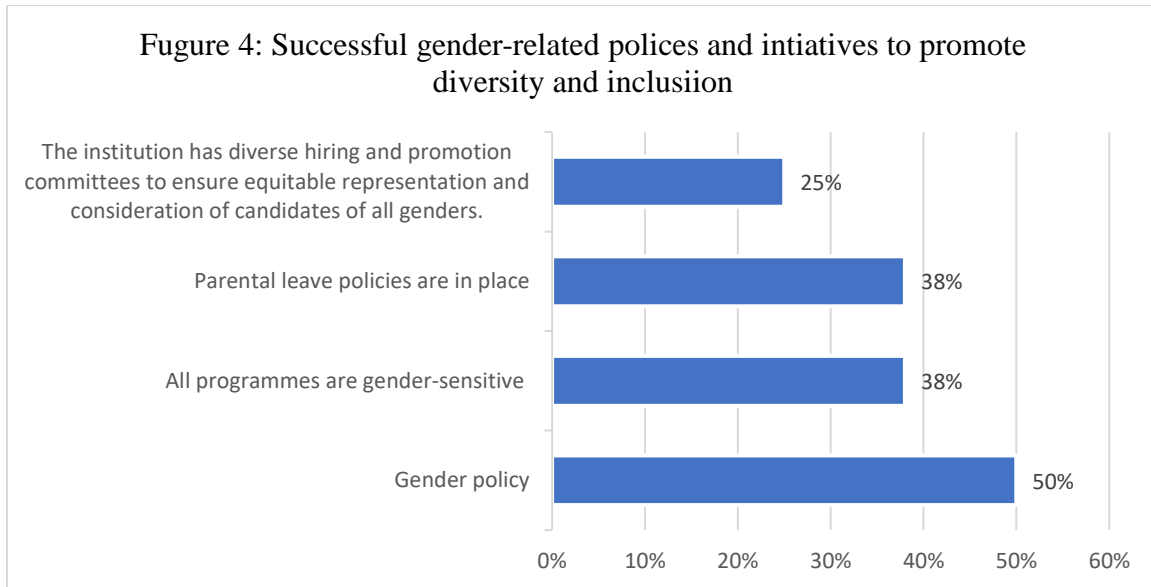


Figure 4 illustrates that, within their institutions, 50% of the respondents acknowledged the presence of gender policies, while 38% affirmed the existence of parental leave policies. Additionally, 38% indicated that all programmes within their institutions were intentionally designed to incorporate gender sensitivity. Furthermore, a quarter of the respondents (25%) mentioned the availability of inclusive hiring and promotion committees with the goal of guaranteeing equitable representation and evaluation of candidates from diverse gender backgrounds.

P9 indicated:

Our existing policy for leaves does not incorporate any arrangements for parental leave. Some members are currently mistakenly referring to the vacation and maternity leave, which are applicable to all University employees, as parental leave. This indicates a need for Human Resources to enhance its efforts in informing staff about their terms and conditions of employment. We are pushing for the implementation of a formal parental leave policy. It is worth noting that

under the Labour Act [Chapter 28:01]; there is a provision for maternity leave for women only.

P8 indicated:

Despite the existence of policies, there is a notable absence of quantifiable outcomes. This deficiency is primarily attributed to inadequate financial backing and leadership commitment. If these policies were functioning as intended, there would likely be fewer instances of gender-related discrimination within our institutions.

Figure 4 provides and demonstrates that among the survey respondents from higher education institutions, a significant number acknowledged certain aspects of workplace policies and practices related to gender diversity and inclusion. Specifically, 50% of the participants indicated that their institutions had established gender policies, which could be indicative of a commitment to addressing gender-related issues in the workplace. Additionally, 38% of respondents reported the presence of parental leave policies, suggesting efforts to support work-life balance for employees with caregiving responsibilities. The findings of this study support Guzura's (2017) position that national gender machineries in Zimbabwe and beyond encounter financial difficulties because they are frequently provided with insufficient resources, hindering their ability to function effectively. Nonetheless, the situation in Zimbabwean universities contrasts with the circumstances at Makerere University, where such initiatives receive financial backing through budget allocations. This support has visibly influenced the statistics, as noted by Kigotho (2021).

Furthermore, the data revealed that 38% of those surveyed believed that all programmes within their institutions were intentionally designed to incorporate gender sensitivity. This could imply that a substantial portion of institutions is striving to create an inclusive and gender-aware environment across various programmes and initiatives. However, online interviews revealed that there were very few programmes that were deliberately designed with a gender component.

Lastly, the study found that 25% of respondents mentioned the availability of inclusive hiring and promotion committees. This statistic implies that a quarter of the institutions had established specialised committees focused on promoting diversity and ensuring fair representation and evaluation of candidates from diverse gender backgrounds in recruitment and advancement processes.

7.0 Conclusion

The study uncovered clear indications of gender imbalances, a lack of diversity and inclusion within the 10 HEIs in Zimbabwe, notably in areas such as work-life balance, familial expectations, the absence of paternity leave, a shortage of women in leadership roles, and instances of sexual harassment. Some of the challenges faced by women in their professional environments encompassed biases, stereotypes, insufficient support, and obstacles hindering career progression. The situation could be the same in some parts of the world.

The conclusion underscores the significance of fostering gender equality, diversity, and inclusion within higher education institutions. This encompasses a discussion of the advantages arising from diverse perspectives, enhanced decision-making processes, and the creation of a fairer and supportive work environment for everyone.

8.0 Recommendations

Higher education institutions should review and enforce policies that promote gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity. This includes policies related to hiring, promotions, pay equity, paternal leave, and flexible work arrangements. Transparent and equitable policies send a strong message about the institution's commitment to diversity and create a foundation for an inclusive workplace.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for gender diversity and inclusion. Leadership in HEIs should champion gender equality by actively advocating for diverse talent, fostering mentorship opportunities, and serving as role models for aspiring academics and administrative staff. Implementing mentorship programmes

that pair individuals with experienced mentors who could provide guidance, support, and insights into overcoming gender-related challenges.

Leadership in HEIs should conduct workshops, training sessions, and awareness campaigns to educate the entire universities communities about the importance of gender, diversity, and inclusion. These initiatives can help combat unconscious biases, challenge stereotypes, and promote respectful communication. It is also important for HEIs to offer financial resources that emphasise the value of diverse perspectives and experiences in enriching the learning and working environment. It is also critical to conduct regular diversity and inclusion assessments to assess progress and identify areas for improvement.

9.0 Limitations and areas for further research

This study was limited to women in 10 universities operating in Zimbabwe. Subsequent studies may find it essential to incorporate senior management from all higher education institutions operating in Zimbabwe to gather their insights on the same topic. Additionally, it is imperative to involve female students, as they may be experiencing related challenges.

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