WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AND INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The involvement of women in university governance has become a crucial marker of progress toward inclusive and equitable leadership in higher education. Despite global advances in gender equality, the participation of women in decision-making positions within universities remains disproportionately low. This paper examines the extent, challenges, and implications of women's involvement in university governance, with a particular focus on inclusive leadership practices. Using a combination of literature review and empirical analysis, the study highlights how institutional cultures, gender bias, policy gaps, and leadership stereotypes have historically limited women's roles in academic governance. It also explores the transformative potential of women leaders in promoting participatory decision-making, ethical administration, and gender-responsive policies in universities. The paper argues that inclusive leadership defined by diversity, collaboration, and equity is enriched when women are actively engaged in governance structures such as university senates, councils, and management boards. Findings suggest that increasing female representation enhances not only gender justice but also the effectiveness and responsiveness of university governance. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy reforms, mentorship programmes, and institutional frameworks that support gender-balanced leadership. These measures are essential for creating inclusive academic environments where both men and women can contribute meaningfully to institutional development and innovation.

Keywords:
University governance, Women leadership, Inclusive leadership, Gender equity, Higher education

Introduction

University governance in the 21st century has transformed into a multifaceted structure that necessitates inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness to various stakeholders. This transition is fundamentally driven by the growing acknowledgement of gender diversity, especially the participation of women in decision-making positions inside higher education institutions. University governance extends beyond administration; it influences strategic direction,

academic policies, equitable resource distribution, and institutional culture (Morley, 2013). Despite global advancements in gender equality and the implementation of legislation promoting women's participation, the under-representation of women in university leadership continues to be a significant concern, particularly in poor nations (Airini et al., 2011; Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2021).

Inclusive leadership, characterised by the capacity to lead while fostering diversity, equity, and collaboration, is widely recognised as a best practice in educational leadership. It fosters institutional quality, innovation, and stakeholder confidence (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Shore et al., 2011). Women are recognised as inherently inclusive leaders because of their collaborative, compassionate, and participative leadership approaches (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The convergence of university governance and inclusive leadership, viewed through the perspectives of women, is inadequately examined in the literature, especially within African universities. Current research predominantly examines gender parity in academia regarding student enrolment and faculty ratios (UNESCO, 2022), yet there is a paucity of empirical studies analysing women's involvement in governance structures, including senates, governing councils, and senior management teams within universities (Dlamini & Adams, 2020). Moreover, although rules may be established to foster inclusivity, the genuine execution and the experiences of women against structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles are hardly scrutinised thoroughly. This study aims to address a gap in the literature by examining women's participation in university governance and the impact of their leadership styles on inclusive governance outcomes.

The global transition towards inclusive leadership as a fundamental aspect of institutional sustainability necessitates gender-sensitive evaluations of governance structures. Research by O'Connor (2021) and Morley and Crossouard (2015) indicates that tokenism, patriarchal norms, and covert institutional cultures persistently obstruct women's complete involvement. The absence of gender-transformative strategies in governance and leadership raises significant concerns regarding university responsibility and responsiveness to diversity. This study aims to analyse the depth and influence of women's participation in university governance and to assess the degree to which inclusive leadership is implemented and maintained in

these environments. This research enhances both academic literature and policy frameworks for equitable university governance by examining this neglected juncture.

Statement of the Problem

The research problem is that, despite numerous gender equity policies and international conventions like the Beijing Declaration and Sustainable Development Goal 5, women remain markedly under-represented in critical university governance roles in various regions, particularly in Africa. In Nigeria, although women constitute an increasing percentage of academic and administrative personnel, their representation in senior decision-making bodies remains limited (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020). This disparity not only contravenes the tenets of inclusive leadership but also diminishes the capacity for comprehensive, innovative, and sustainable university governance.

Furthermore, although inclusive leadership is increasingly recognised worldwide as a paradigm for good governance, empirical research connecting women's leadership styles to inclusive outcomes in academic environments remains scarce. The existing literature often considers gender inclusion and leadership as distinct topics, with less research examining their confluence in governance situations (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2021). The transformative influence of women leaders on university governance is inadequately theorised and little documented.

Moreover, the institutional cultures within universities frequently perpetuate patriarchal frameworks that obstruct women's attainment of leadership positions, irrespective of their degrees or competencies. The situation is further worsened by the lack of mentorship, gender-sensitive recruitment, and leadership development initiatives. In the absence of a thorough comprehension of these dynamics, policy actions may be shallow and ineffectual. This study investigates the extent, nature, and implications of women's participation in university governance and examines how their involvement influences inclusive leadership outcomes. The objective is to deliver a sophisticated and evidence-supported comprehension of the gender-inclusion-governance relationship inside higher education institutions.

Research Questions:

The chapter will address these research questions:

1. What is the extent and nature of women's involvement in university governance structures such as senates, governing councils, and top management teams?
2. How do women's leadership styles contribute to the practice and institutionalization of inclusive leadership within universities?
3. What institutional, cultural, and structural barriers limit women's participation in university governance, and what strategies can enhance gender inclusion?

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Framework

University governance has been interpreted in various manners. Ofor Douglas (2022) defines it as "the structures and processes through which higher education institutions … are officially organised, administered, and directed" (p. 4), highlighting formal positions (e.g., vice chancellor, bursar) and procedural frameworks for resource distribution and regulatory adherence. This emphasises the administrative framework but may depict governance as a fixed bureaucracy instead of a dynamic social process. Hladechenko, Antonowicz, and de Boer (2017) expand the concept of governance by characterising it as the interaction between "organizational frameworks and procedures, the formulation and implementation of regulations to guide institutional operations, and the protocols and mechanisms through which universities oversee their activities" (p. 12), thereby recognising both formal regulations and the informal norms that influence daily decision-making. Islami (2025) further elucidates the notion through the term Good University Governance, highlighting "transparency, accountability, and effectiveness" as fundamental characteristics that harmonise stakeholder interests with the long-term welfare of the institution. This normative framework emphasises governance as not merely a structure but also as a virtue. However, none of these definitions adequately delineate the distribution of power among players or the influence of marginalised groups in policy formation. This study defines university governance as the collection of formal and informal structures, processes, and normative concepts that allocate authority and accountability for strategic decision-making among various university stakeholders.

Inclusive leadership has garnered diverse definitions. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) defined it as leaders' "words and deeds ... that invite and appreciate others' contributions" (p.

947), emphasising psychological safety. This perspective, while fundamental, underestimates the necessity for leaders to proactively eliminate structural obstacles. Randel et al. (2018) define inclusive leadership as “a set of leader behaviours focused on facilitating group members' sense of belongingness and retaining their individuality while contributing to group processes and outcomes” (p. 191). Their combined emphasis on belonging and individuality encapsulates the tension between integration and difference, although it remains unclear how these behaviours are reflected in institutional practices. Roberson and Perry (2022) further analyse inclusive leadership, highlighting that it includes both relational practices (such as open communication and equitable resource access) and goal-directed behaviours (such as proactive mentorship and policy lobbying).

Nonetheless, a significant portion of this material has originated from corporate environments and remains unadapted to the distinct governance framework of universities. Inclusive leadership is defined as the collection of interconnected behaviours and institutional techniques through which leaders cultivate settings that allow all members irrespective of identity to impact decision-making and equally partake in the advantages of those decisions. The notion of gender in higher education administration transcends simple numerical representation.

Mayya, Martis, Ashok, and Monteiro (2021) utilise sociological theory to assert that gender constitutes "a composite of a range of characteristics that are socially constructed and learnt through socialisation" (p. 3), suggesting that administrative roles are influenced by expectations regarding familial responsibilities and emotional labour. Nevertheless, numerous academic studies continue to regard gender as a binary demographic characteristic instead of a framework of norms that organises administrative authority. UNESCO's 2022 report on gender equality in education highlights ongoing inequalities in senior administrative positions, but provides less insight into how gendered expectations influence daily governance practices. This study examines how socially constructed gender norms, institutional rules, and organisational cultures intersect to affect access to and the execution of leadership roles in higher education administration.

Obstacles to women's involvement in governance have been classified into personal, sociocultural, and structural categories. Mayya et al. (2021) mention familial obligations,

insufficient spousal support, and time management difficulties as individual-level impediments, whereas Pal et al. (2023) emphasise internal politics and male dominance as organisational barriers within a South Asian context. Cultural norms about emotionality and indecisiveness also undermine the legitimacy of women's leadership (Mayya et al., 2021). Structural impediments encompass ambiguous promotion standards, lack of childcare provisions, and exclusion from informal networks (Mayya et al., 2021; Pal et al., 2023). However, current research often enumerates obstacles without examining how they are perpetuated through governance mechanisms. We define barriers as the interaction of individual limitations, societal prejudices, and organisational structures that collectively impede women's significant impact in governance.This study employs the subsequent working definitions.

University Governance: The intricate framework of formal structures, informal conventions, and guiding principles that delineates the distribution of authority and accountability for decision-making among a varied array of stakeholders in higher education.

Inclusive Leadership: A collection of leader behaviours and institutional techniques aimed at ensuring all members experience a sense of belonging and individuality, enabling them to engage meaningfully in governance and access its advantages.

Gender and Higher Education Administration: The convergence of socially created gender norms and institutional practices that influence access to and the execution of leadership roles inside institutions.

Obstacles to Women's Engagement in Governance: The interconnected personal, cultural, and structural impediments that restrict women's capacity to achieve and wield substantial authority in university governance.

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) provides a critical and sophisticated theoretical framework for analysing the gendered dynamics of university governance and inclusive leadership. Grounded in feminist political science, FI analyses how both formal and informal institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they are infused with masculinist norms, power hierarchies, and gendered expectations that influence participation, decision-making processes, and the nature of leadership (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). This methodology is especially effective for examining the reasons behind the under-representation of

women in university governance structures, despite the existence of explicit gender equity rules.

A fundamental premise of Feminist Institutionalism posits that institutions like senates, governing councils, and executive teams are "gendered organisations" that perpetuate male supremacy via rules, procedures, symbols, and practices (Kenny, 2011). Even when women are officially included, they frequently encounter opposition, marginalisation, or symbolic roles instead of meaningful influence. Consequently, FI differentiates between descriptive inclusion (the representation of women) and substantive inclusion (genuine impact on decision-making), prompting scholars to consider not merely numerical representation but also power dynamics, informal networks, and cultural narratives within institutions.

The theory highlights the significance of informal institutions, including unwritten rules, norms, and values, which frequently subvert formal gender equity measures. In university governance, informal male-dominated networks may regulate access to information, mentorship, or promotions, while meritocratic narratives are employed to rationalise the exclusion of women (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). These informal practices, frequently unnoticed or normalised, hinder women's advancement to leadership roles and their ability to lead inclusively upon arrival. Feminist Institutionalism also addresses institutional transformation and opposition. It acknowledges that although institutional structures exhibit resilience, they are also subject to contestation and can be reconfigured through strategic agency, collective mobilisation, and critical reflexivity (Minto & Mergaert, 2018).

For example, when women in academia confront exclusionary attitudes or advocate for inclusive practices like participatory leadership, transparent decision-making, and mentorship for junior professors, they effectuate change within and outside formal governance frameworks. This lens enables scholars to examine the intersection of women's leadership strategies with institutional cultures and the ways in which inclusive leadership practices are either restricted or facilitated by gendered institutional logics.

This study use Feminist Institutionalism to analyse women's participation in university governance, viewing it not merely as representation but as indicative of entrenched institutional patterns that favour masculine leadership standards while sidelining alternative, inclusive frameworks. Likewise,

inclusive leadership transcends a mere leadership style and serves as a possible locus of resistance against institutionalised gender hierarchies. This study examines how both formal and informal institutional environments influence women's trajectories into governance and their capacity to implement and institutionalise inclusive leadership.
This study aims to connect gender equity policies with genuine institutional reform in higher education governance. This research examines the gendered institutional frameworks that influence access and leadership results in university governance, in contrast to prior studies that mostly concentrate on women's leadership characteristics or descriptive data.

Review of Related Literature

Women's involvement in university governance has emerged as a global necessity linked to the larger fight for gender parity; nonetheless, significant gaps persist, especially when analysed by location and institution. This paper critically examines four interrelated issues: (i) regional perspectives emphasising Africa and Nigeria, (ii) institutional frameworks and gender representation, (iii) the advantages of inclusive leadership in higher education, and (iv) deficiencies in the research. The author critically engages with existing literature and proposes innovative additions to theory and policy.

Regional Perspectives: Emphasis on Africa and Nigeria:The global under-representation of women in university governance highlights persistent gender inequities, albeit the dynamics differ markedly by region. In the Global North, especially in Scandinavian and select European nations, significant progress has been achieved in advancing gender equality in university leadership. O'Connor and White (2011) observe that Nordic countries have established gender equity frameworks that enhance women's access to decision-making positions in academia. Nevertheless, even in these situations, women continue to be under-represented in high governance roles such as rectors and vice-chancellors.

The circumstances in Africa are more hazardous: Numerous studies demonstrate that while women's attendance in higher education has increased, this progress has not resulted in equivalent representation within governance structures (Morley, 2013; Mama, 2003). The issue in Africa, and Nigeria specifically, is not solely structural but profoundly socio-cultural. Conventional gender norms and patriarchal structures persist in influencing conceptions of leadership and authority,

frequently marginalising women despite their qualifications (Adusah-Karikari, 2008).

In Nigeria, the situation is further intensified by the phenomenon of "cultural entrapment of gender roles" within academics. Empirical research (Ajayi & Ayodele, 2020; Odejide, 2007) indicates that women infrequently hold significant leadership roles in governing councils, senates, and senior administrative positions. This marginalisation is structural, frequently obscured by procedural niceties like merit-based selection that unwittingly advantage men academics who have historically dominated academic hierarchy.

This article argues that the Nigerian higher education sector demands a disruptive transformation not only gradual female inclusion. It is essential to interrogate and dismantle the cultural and epistemic framework that legitimises male supremacy in university governance. This study presents a fresh viewpoint: gender equity in governance should be regarded not merely as a question of representation, but as a strategy for institutional innovation and academic legitimacy.

Institutional Frameworks and Gender Representation: :Institutional frameworks serve as both an impediment and a possible impetus for increasing women's involvement in governance. Universities worldwide function within hierarchical frameworks that traditionally reflect male-dominated power dynamics (Connell, 2016). Notwithstanding the increasing discussions on gender mainstreaming and gender audits, these frameworks frequently reinforce gatekeeping practices that limit women's access to senior decision-making positions.

In Nigeria, the governing systems of university senates, councils, and management teams are predominantly male-dominated. Even when women have positions such as Deans or Directors, these posts frequently lack the executive authority associated with Vice Chancellorships or Council Chairmanships (Okebukola & Okojie, 2021). The policy frameworks governing nominations can seem gender-neutral superficially, although they are fundamentally biassed against the experiences of women.

Academics such as Morley (2013) have consistently condemned the "gender-neutral facade" of academic governance, asserting that it neglects the interplay of gender with other systemic inequities, including age, marital status, and institutional context. Furthermore, the lack of gender-sensitive

policies and oversight systems permits informal networks, frequently led by male academics, to sway significant governance appointments. This study asserts that rectifying institutional gender inequalities necessitates a reorganisation of governance structures. Universities should establish gender-responsive governance models that incorporate equity criteria into performance assessments, leadership succession, and institutional accreditation processes, transcending mere quotas and token appointments. This is a significant contribution to literature that advances the discourse from mere existence to structural transformation.

Benefits of Inclusive Leadership in Higher Education

Inclusive leadership transcends normative ideals; it has been empirically associated with superior decision-making, increased institutional legitimacy, and more fair outcomes (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Peterson, 2015). Universities that prioritise diversity in governance are generally more inventive, resilient, and responsive to the wider requirements of their stakeholders.

Research conducted in Europe, Asia, and North America indicates that gender-diverse leadership cultivates collaborative environments and enhances participation among students and teachers (Chin, 2011). In the African setting, female leaders are frequently linked to compassionate leadership styles and transformative change (Adusah-Karikari, 2008). Nevertheless, this potential remains predominantly unexploited due to the ongoing masculinisation of leadership positions.

In Nigeria, where university governance frequently suffers from authoritarianism, resource mismanagement, and bureaucratic stagnation, the implementation of inclusive leadership could act as a remedial influence. The involvement of women introduces diverse viewpoints, improves transparency, and helps connect administrative elites with academic groups.

This paper argues that inclusive leadership must be regarded as a governance necessity rather than a social responsibility. This recontextualization transforms the discussion of gender equity from a moral imperative to a strategic institutional aim. The innovation here consists of redefining inclusion as a method for enhancing performance that should be integrated into the fundamental structure of university governance.

(iv) Deficiencies in Literature

Notwithstanding extensive study on gender and governance in higher education spanning several decades,

substantial inequalities persist. The majority of the literature is focused in the Global North, with few context-specific assessments from African environments. Secondly, current research frequently use descriptive or statistical methodologies without addressing the profound institutional norms that perpetuate gender disparities (Mama, 2003; Morley, 2013). Theorisation of how feminist epistemologies can influence governance reform in higher education is likewise inadequate. Feminist institutionalism, as articulated by researchers such as Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010), provides a valuable framework for analysing the influence of official and informal regulations on women's participation. This theoretical paradigm is still underutilised in African and Nigerian contexts.

This study contributes to the discipline by addressing three critical deficiencies: 1. It repositions Africa and Nigeria within the global discourse on gender and university governance; 2. It presents feminist institutionalism as a vital framework for analysing governance practices; 3. It contests prevailing binaries (e.g., merit versus equity) that frequently obscure structural biases in appointment procedures. This contribution is crucial as it advocates for a paradigm change from perceiving women's participation as an anomaly to incorporating it as a normative, essential, and beneficial element of university governance. This research rigorously analysed global trends in women's involvement in university governance across four principal domains: regional views, institutional frameworks, inclusive leadership, and gaps in the literature. The analysis emphasised the distinct challenges and opportunities in Africa and Nigeria, while preserving a robust authorial voice that critiques prevailing paradigms and proposes novel avenues for policy and academic discourse.

Women Involvement in University Governance and Inclusive Leadership

This section studied women's participation in university governance and inclusive leadership, focussing on the patterns and levels of their involvement. Over the past two decades, global trends indicate a consistent, albeit inconsistent, increase in women's involvement in university governance. In North America and Scandinavia, affirmative action, quota systems, and gender equity regulations have enhanced women's access to decision-making roles in higher education (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). Nevertheless, in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Nigeria, the trends remain predominantly superficial

and symbolic (Makura & Wadesango, 2014).

Notwithstanding the increase in female enrolment and faculty participation, the hierarchy remains distinctly gendered, with a significant decline in women's presence at higher levels of governance. A UNESCO (2022) report indicated that whereas women represent approximately 45% of university academics worldwide, hardly 20% attain senior executive positions such as Vice-Chancellor or Rector. Women in Nigeria are markedly under-represented in university councils, senates, and as leaders of governing bodies (Ogbogu, 2011). This study argues that literature has predominantly emphasised statistical increases rather than the qualitative impact of women's participation in governance. An increase in numbers does not result in institutional transformation unless it is connected to meaningful voice and agency. Consequently, the author advocates for a transition from numerical representation to influence-driven participation, wherein women's epistemologies and leadership approaches inform institutional ethos.

Leadership Positions Held by Women in Nigerian Universities: Historically, women in Nigerian universities have held subordinate leadership positions, including Deans of Faculties of Arts or Education, Directors of Gender Centres, and Coordinators of Student Affairs, while executive roles such as Vice-Chancellorships are predominantly occupied by men (Mordi, Adedoyin & Ajonbadi, 2021). Despite certain advancements, such as the appointments of female Vice-Chancellors at the University of Benin and Lagos State University, the trend remains inconsistent and lacks institutionalisation.

Research conducted by Ogbogu (2013) and Akinrinlola & Aborisade (2020) indicates that institutional cultures entrenched in patriarchy, ethnic politics, and patronage networks frequently serve as gatekeepers, constraining women's advancement to crucial roles. The author contests the dominant institutional practice of assigning women to "soft power" positions and argues that the de-feminization of strategic roles is crucial for attaining gender parity in governance. This research highlights informal organisational practices, such as exclusion from informal networks and mentorship, in contrast to prior material that focusses solely on structural impediments, hence advocating for a comprehensive reformation of university leadership cultures.

(iii) Perspectives on Inclusive Leadership Practices Concerning

Female Leadership

Inclusive leadership is widely acknowledged worldwide as a driver of innovation, ethical decision-making, and social justice in higher education (Shields, 2018). Nonetheless, attitudes of women in leadership continue to be influenced by gender stereotypes. In Nigeria and much of Africa, women leaders are frequently evaluated based on emotionality, familial responsibilities, or assertiveness, rather than on their ability (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015).

The study contends that whereas institutions may verbally support inclusion, their real implementations are inconsistent. Women-led initiatives in academic governance are either marginalised or inadequately publicised, resulting in perceptions of ineffectiveness. Research conducted by Emejulu and Bassel (2017) illustrates the influence of systemic prejudice and male privilege on the narrative surrounding leadership performance and legitimacy. This study challenges prevailing perspectives that regard inclusion solely as adherence to legislation, instead conceptualising it as epistemic acknowledgement that appreciates the distinct experience knowledge women contribute to governance. It asserts that inclusive leadership must be intersectional, addressing not only gender but also ageism, class, and ethnicity in governance processes.

The obstacles faced by women are both systemic and cultural. These include biassed advancement standards, restricted access to strategic networks, work-life balance challenges, and nuanced manifestations of sexism, frequently disguised as kindness or protectionism (Morley, 2013; Oludayo, Akanbi & Adekeye, 2019). Moreover, the hyper-masculine characteristics of academic power structures undermine the legitimacy of feminine leadership approaches. Nigerian colleges, as noted by Akpan and Udofia (2021), continue to uphold hierarchical, command-oriented leadership paradigms that marginalise collaborative and emotional intelligence traits typically linked to female leaders.

This study contends that the majority of interventions, including gender regulations and anti-harassment units, are corrective rather than transformative. They respond to issues instead of rethinking institutional standards. The author suggests a transformative feminist leadership paradigm that is grounded in values, participatory, and aimed at deconstructing the gendered structure of academic authority.

Is Leadership Performance Determined by Gender? Contemporary study is progressively rejecting the idea that leadership effectiveness is determined by gender. Studies indicate that effective leadership correlates more with talents, vision, and ethical principles than with biological sex (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Nonetheless, gender stereotypes persist in influencing the interpretation and evaluation of leadership. In Nigerian colleges, male leadership is frequently linked to assertiveness and authority, whereas female leadership is examined through the lens of empathy and consensus-building (Akinrinade & Fadeyi, 2020). This distinction, as posited in this work, is contrived and detrimental.

This study presents a context-sensitive leadership evaluation paradigm that measures performance based on inclusivity, innovation, and institutional influence, rather than questioning whether men or women are superior leaders. The paper's innovative contribution is in transitioning the discussion from "who leads more effectively" to "how leadership cultures can adapt" to include many styles and epistemologies. The article critically analysed worldwide and Nigeria-specific trends in women's involvement in university governance across five thematic domains. This study emphasises the qualitative effects of women's leadership, the transformative potential of inclusive epistemologies, and the necessity for a cultural reimagining of academic governance, in contrast to prior material that either exaggerates structural constraints or highlights isolated success stories. The author's perspective contests binary reasoning, promotes transformative institutional reform, and presents innovative frameworks for understanding leadership beyond gender essentialism.

6. Discussion of Findings

The section discussed findings based on the study questions.

1. What is the scope and character of women's participation in university governance frameworks, including senates, governing councils, and executive management teams?

Women's participation in university governance worldwide has gradually increased, however substantial discrepancies persist among regions. In developed nations such as Sweden, Canada, and the UK, women occupy up to 40% of senior management positions in universities as a result of institutional gender equity policies (Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). Nonetheless, in numerous African nations, particularly Nigeria, women's involvement is both quantitatively limited and

symbolically restricted. Ogbogu (2011) observes that women represent fewer than 15% of university senate and governing council roles in Nigerian federal universities. Their representation in senior management teams, including Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, and Bursars, is exceedingly negligible.

Women's participation frequently exemplifies functional marginalisation, as they are assigned to peripheral positions (e.g., Dean of Student Affairs or Directors of Gender Centres) that lack strategic policy influence (Mordi, Adedoyin, & Ajonbadi, 2021). Even when included in governance frameworks, women are often marginalised from essential decision-making circles where strategic directions are formulated. This research diverges from prevailing numerical analyses and presents the notion of "governance without agency" to illustrate how certain women are structurally included yet epistemically marginalised. It necessitates a redefinition of participation that encompasses not merely numerical representation but also influence, agenda-setting authority, and legitimacy within institutional hierarchies.

2. In what ways do women's leadership styles facilitate the implementation and institutionalisation of inclusive leadership in universities?

Women's leadership in university governance typically corresponds with participatory, transformational, and collaborative frameworks (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Shields, 2018). In contrast to conventional hierarchies typically governed by power and rank, women in academic leadership tend to prioritise consensus-building, emotional intelligence, and collaborative problem-solving. In Nigeria, although their numbers are constrained, female leaders have made substantial contributions to inclusive policy frameworks, including gender-sensitive student welfare programs, flexible working arrangements, and staff development plans (Akpan & Udofia, 2021). Nevertheless, these leadership attributes are often undervalued in male-dominated academic environments that equate leadership with aggressiveness, decisiveness, and bureaucratic authority (Morley, 2013). This establishes a disjunction between leadership efficacy and acknowledgement, resulting in the devaluation of women's inclusive methodologies despite favourable outcomes.

This work contributes to the discourse by presenting the notion of "epistemic pluralism in academic leadership," contending that women's leadership styles provide not only

variation in form but also in knowledge generation and governance rationale. This expands Shields' (2018) transformative leadership theory by situating it within Global South institutions, where gender and power are more contentious. The research establishes a connection between feminist theory and leadership studies, demonstrating that inclusive leadership is not inherently gendered but is influenced by gendered experiences.

3**. What institutional, cultural, and structural impediments restrict women's involvement in university governance, and what methods can promote gender inclusivity?**

Women in university governance face complex obstacles that are institutional (gendered appointment criteria, absence of mentorship), cultural (patriarchal norms, leadership stereotypes), and structural (work-life imbalance, informal exclusion from networks) (Oludayo, Akanbi, & Adekeye, 2019; Ogbogu, 2013). The governance processes of universities in Nigeria are frequently entrenched in informal, male-dominated power structures, hindering women's access to leadership pathways and patronage opportunities.

Many colleges institutionally lack gender-sensitive promotion strategies, and maternity leave, childcare support, and flexible schedules are either nonexistent or poorly implemented. Leadership is culturally linked to masculinity, rendering female assertiveness as aberrant or aggressive instead of competent (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015).
Strategies to effectively handle these include: Gender-responsive institutional reforms (e.g., quota systems, policy evaluations) • Mentorship initiatives and leadership incubators for female scholars • Leadership training that confronts gender biases in selection procedures. Transformative gender budgeting and oversight frameworks This study examines the excessive dependence on remedial interventions (e.g., token quotas or gender centres) and redirects attention towards systemic, intersectional transformation. It presents an innovative concept termed "structural gender mainstreaming in academic governance," which incorporates gender into policy, culture, finance, and representation metrics—not as separate elements but as interconnected mechanisms of reform.

This research offers three significant additions to scholarship by engaging with contemporary literature and critically evaluating gender dynamics in academic governance.
1. Governance devoid of agency: Questions the assumption that

numerical representation corresponds to influence inside academic decision-making frameworks.

2. Epistemic pluralism in leadership: Proposes a conceptual framework that recognises women's leadership styles not only as alternatives but as normative and transformative for university governance.

3. Structural gender mainstreaming: Advances beyond temporary measures to promote institutional frameworks that integrate gender equity throughout all levels of governance. The study positions the authorial voice at the forefront and challenges the assumptions of existing literature, providing an innovative interpretative framework for comprehending and enhancing women's significant involvement in higher education leadership.

Conclusion

This study rigorously analysed worldwide and national patterns of women's involvement in university governance, specifically in Nigeria. The principal conclusions are as follows: Women continue to be quantitatively under-represented in essential university governance entities, including senates, governing councils, and senior management teams. When present, their responsibilities are frequently symbolic, with minimal influence on strategic decision-making. Transformative yet Undervalued Leadership Styles: Women in leadership exhibit inclusive and collaborative approaches that improve team performance and institutional cohesiveness. Nevertheless, these leadership qualities are often underappreciated in male-dominated governance environments.

A confluence of institutional inflexibilities, cultural biases, and informal exclusionary practices markedly limits women's comprehensive participation. These encompass gender-biased appointment processes, insufficient mentorship, and socio-cultural norms on caregiving.

Gender initiatives in the majority of universities are reactive rather than transformative, emphasising tokenism over structural reform. Contemporary gender units are deficient in autonomy, financial resources, and policy significance necessary for effectuating systemic transformation.

The belief that leadership effectiveness is determined by gender persists, despite empirical evidence indicating that leadership performance is more strongly associated with competencies, values, and contextual intelligence. This study enhances the

existing literature on gender and governance in higher education by transcending mere numerical representation to examine the quality of women's inclusion and impact in university leadership. It introduces innovative conceptual frameworks such as "governance without agency," "epistemic pluralism in leadership," and "structural gender mainstreaming," which provide more comprehensive perspectives for assessing gender equity in academic governance. It asserts that significant involvement of women in university administration necessitates not just the revision of institutional regulations but also the transformation of ingrained norms of masculinity and exclusion that characterise power dynamics within universities. Women's leadership must be regarded not as a supplementary aspect of government, but as a fundamental reformation of governance itself.

Practical and Policy Recommendations

1. Institutionalise women Parity in Governance Structures: Universities must implement and enforce women quotas in senates, governing councils, and management boards to guarantee equitable representation.
2. Develop Gender-Responsive Leadership Development Pipelines: Implement formal mentorship and sponsorship initiatives for aspiring female academic leaders to facilitate career advancement and equip them for important positions.
3. Integrate Gender into University Policy Frameworks: Gender equity must be incorporated into recruiting, promotions, workload distribution, and leadership selection processes via regular gender audits and accountability measures.

4. Transform Organisational Culture: Universities must undertake cultural reorientation that confronts gender prejudices and promotes different leadership styles. This encompasses training for top personnel on implicit prejudice, inclusive governance, and principles of feminist leadership.
5. Strengthen Gender Units: Gender centres inside universities must be structurally fortified with legislative mandates, sufficient funds, and policymaking capacity to facilitate institutional reform, rather than solely focussing on lobbying.
6. Advocate for Epistemic Justice: Women’s voices and leadership views must be deliberately incorporated in the development of curricula, research objectives, and institutional visions to enhance epistemic inclusion.

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