

CULTURAL NORMS AND GENDER DYNAMICS: EXPLORING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION LEADERSHIP IN KENYA

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15657516

Abstract

This is highly contextualized and conceptualized as such. This paper seeks to examine the social structures that have prolonged the problem and examine current data on women's leadership. Qualitative data collection and analysis methods were used.

Keywords: Bias Culture Education Gender-disparity Management

Introduction

The reality of participation of women within the leadership ranks of the Education sector in comparison with their male counterparts, remains far from balanced. The empowerment of women at different levels of leadership in the education sector across the country is notable. However, in secondary schools' leadership; ranging from Deans of Studies, Heads of Departments, and Principals in Co-educational schools, Chairpersons of Boards of Management, Chancellors and Vice Chancellors of major public universities, national polytechnics, and Parent Associations remain a male-dominated entity. This is highly contextualized and conceptualized as such. This paper seeks to examine the social structures that have prolonged the problem and examine current data on women's leadership. Qualitative data collection and analysis methods were used. The focus areas of data collection included a survey of secondary data from existing academic research. Data analysis was constructed on a systematic process based on purposive sampling, which limited the data on the research. The aim was to fast-track the need to develop policies and strategies in the education system geared towards increasing women's participation in decision-making, leadership, and management of affairs in secondary schools and higher education in Kenya. In the findings, data indicates that men continue to hold a significant majority of senior positions with only 73% against 27% of the women. The argument is that cultural underpinnings have led to women being overlooked in their careers. Also, the religious aspects that subject women to vague more like subjugation leading to male dominance. The Kenyan Constitution (2010), in Article 27, sections 1 and 3, states that every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit. Men and women have the right to equal treatment and opportunities in political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. The Employment Act prohibits discrimination concerning recruitment, training, promotion, terms and conditions of employment or

other matters arising out of employment. The Kenyan Constitution (2010) in Article 27, sections 1 and 3 is meant to help the country achieve $\frac{1}{3}$ gender representation in all public bodies through election or selection. The underrepresentation of women in senior academic management positions within secondary education and higher educational institutions in Kenya continues to be a concern (Smyth, 2012). Even though education institutions in Kenya offer equal opportunity and practice through an open-day policy for men and women during admissions and recruitments, available data communicate a different reality. In the recruitment, promotion, and appointment of staff, female staff members, up to this day, complain that their male colleagues attribute to them many stereotypes like being the weaker sex, low in confidence, emotionally unstable, less committed, and incapable of working as hard as men (Morley, 2013). Furthermore, Odhiambo (2011) argues that the Kenyan government's quest to develop the necessary manpower since independence in 1963 to take up leadership positions in various sectors was maleoriented and reflected the colonial model on which it was based. As such, like the academy in ancient and medieval times, higher education institutions in Kenya were expected to educate and train men to replace departing male colonial civil servants. He adds that this male civil servant stereotype extended to other sectors and fostered bias against women in leadership positions, in placement, promotion, and decision-making. Hence, neither the government nor the higher education institutions and secondary schools prioritise promoting women to senior positions because they consider it a preserve for males. Raburu (2015) reports that cultural attitudes and societal expectations have been used to deny women appointments, promotion, and training opportunities in the guise that, with their multiple roles, they cannot commit themselves to leadership positions. An excuse that has been used to deny them equal benefits with their male counterparts. Unfortunately, Kenyan universities and secondary schools are driven by cultural beliefs and general societal attitudes, viewing women's experiences in the academy as non-issues. Yet, when a female academic goes to work, she is exposed to two sets of conflicting demands: her job and family responsibilities, which do not emerge for most male academics (Raburu, 2010). These many responsibilities have restrained women from seeking promotion to senior education management positions. This will require them to devote more time to work and research at the expense of their domestic responsibilities. When this happens, they are likely to be considered neglectful and irresponsible. In other words, they are forced to accept the glass ceiling, which is detrimental to their success (Muasya, 2016). As Smyth (2012) argues, if women act according to the male definition of a leader (being aggressive, achievement-oriented, self-confident, forceful, or competitive), she is condemned to be unfeminine. Consequently, women shy away from taking up leadership roles, resulting in underrepresentation. Marchant & Wallace (2013) argue that women academics do immensely more teaching, are more positively slanted towards teaching, identify more as teachers, invest more in developing a teaching identity, are more likely to practice the scholarship of teaching and learning voluntarily, prepare more for teaching responsibilities, and hence, find it challenging to fit research in between their teaching, administration and pastoral care responsibilities. Nonetheless, universities and secondary

schools undervalue teaching compared to research on promotion matters. Other scholars have put forth theories to explain why women are rarely at the top of academic positions in nearly all universities worldwide.

Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research embedded in the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed. The paradigm assisted in understanding what it is to be human and the significance and meanings people ascribe to life events. This provides valuable insights into how subjective interrelations and individual experiences shape leadership approaches. This exploration helped me understand the unique challenges and opportunities women leaders face and contributed to developing more inclusive and effective leadership strategies within the educational context. The study employed a phenomenology design that allowed for the collection of detailed descriptive information about participants' perspectives, experiences, and contexts. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of subjective experiences and contextual understanding. The study gathered information through a survey of secondary data in existing academic research, observation of interviews in social media within the same topic of study, and the interpretation of reports and news media on the subject. Data was analysed systematically through purposive sampling, limiting the collected data to the research topic. The study used secondary data analysis instead of conducting new interviews and surveys. This thematic data analysis provided critical insights into employing affirmative action, such as constitutionally managed quotas, to improve the representation of women in top educational management and leadership positions. Literature Review: A wide-ranging literature review was undertaken to gather and analyse existing research on how women leaders construct their leadership identities in response to gendered expectations. The aim was to highlight women's challenges in leadership roles and success stories. Secondary Data Analysis: The study relied on secondary data analysis instead of conducting new surveys or interviews. The information was drawn from existing survey datasets, research studies, and educational reports. These secondary data sources provided detailed information about the importance of understanding leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon. The implications of practice include the need for supportive networks that acknowledge and validate women's constructed experiences.

Findings

The following visualisations provide a detailed look at gender representation across various leadership roles in Kenyan secondary schools and universities from 2019 to 2023. These tables reflect trends in the percentage of men and women occupying positions as Principals, Vice-Chancellors, Heads of Departments, and chairs of Boards of Governors. The visualisations uncover persistent gender disparities and incremental changes that signal progress toward gender equity in educational leadership.

Figure 1: Gender Representation among Heads of Departments in Kenyan Secondary Schools and Universities (2019–2023)

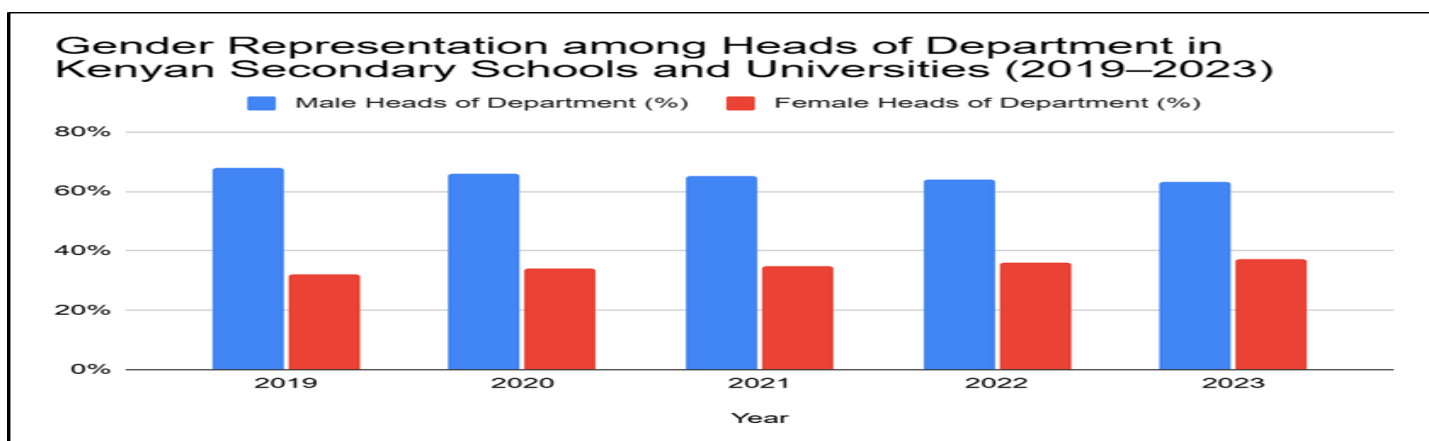


Figure 1 focuses on the heads of departments in secondary schools and universities, a critical role that directly impacts the educational direction and policy implementation. The data shows male representation declining from 68% in 2019 to 63% in 2023, while female representation increased from 32% to 37%. Though progress has been made, men still occupy most department head roles. Key Insight: The slower increase in female department heads compared to principals highlights the potential influence of institutional networks and selection biases. This suggests that more effort is needed to support and promote women into these influential positions.

Figure 2: Gender Representation among Chairs of Boards of Management in Kenyan Secondary Schools (2019–2023) years. By 2023, female representation had risen to 20%, indicating a gradual but consistent increase in women's participation in governance roles. This trend may reflect a shifting awareness of the importance of female perspectives in institutional governance.

Key Insight: Although progress is evident, most male board chairs suggest that women may face significant barriers to accessing governance roles. Cultural expectations, biases, and limited access to influential networks may contribute to the slower pace of change in this area. Figure 3: Gender Representation among Principals in Kenyan Secondary Schools (2019–2023) years. In 2019, only 28% of principals were women, with 72% being men. However, the data shows a gradual shift: by 2023, female representation increased to 35%, with a corresponding decline in male representation to 65%. This trend reflects a modest but notable improvement in gender inclusivity within secondary school leadership, suggesting ongoing efforts to promote women to these roles.

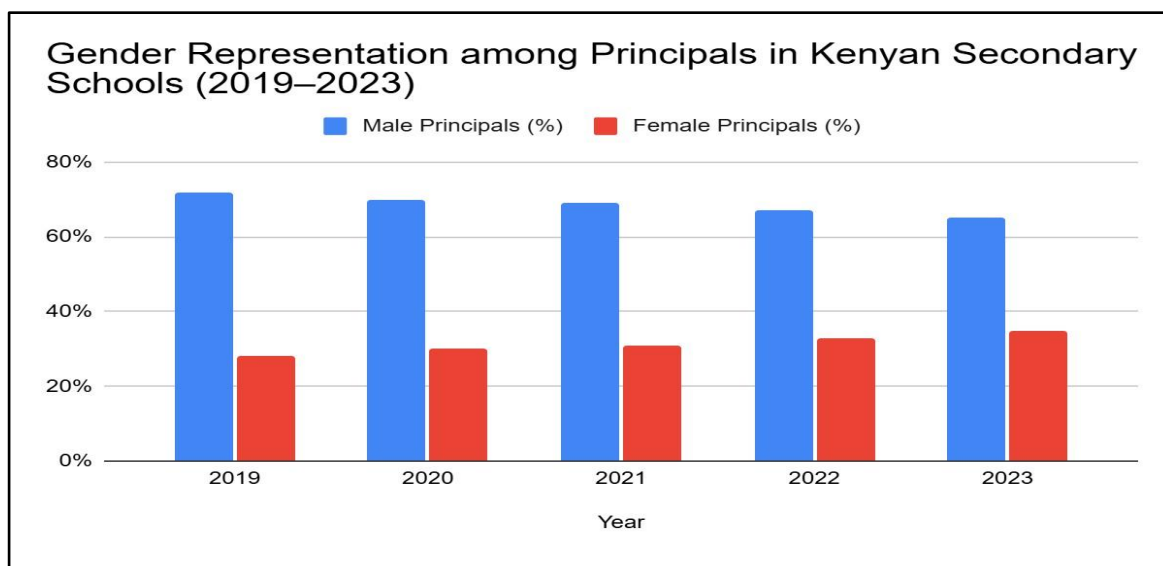
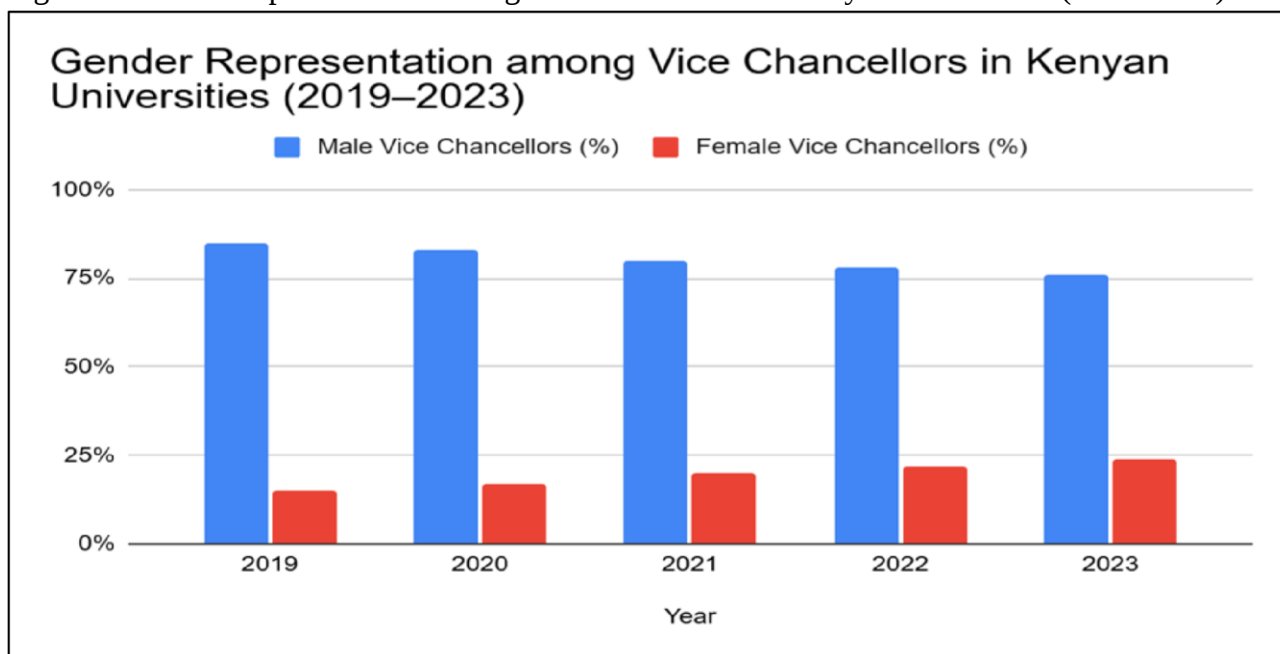


Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of male and female principals in Kenyan secondary schools over five

Figure 4: Gender Representation among Vice Chancellors in Kenyan Universities (2019–2023)



Vice chancellorships in Kenyan universities continue to be male-dominated, as shown in this figure 1D. In 2019, a significant 85% of these positions were held by men, with only 15% held by women. While female representation has increased to 24% by 2023, the data reflects a slower change rate than observed for secondary school principals.

Key Insight: The lower female representation in vice chancellorships suggests that cultural, structural, and possibly systemic barriers may be more pronounced at the university level, potentially reflecting longstanding biases that affect the highest leadership tiers in education.

Overall Analysis

Across all roles, the data highlights that while gender representation in Kenyan educational leadership is improving, men hold the most senior positions. The rate of progress varies by role, with higher increases in female representation observed among secondary school principals and heads of departments than among vice-chancellors and board chairs. This discrepancy points to deeper cultural, systemic, and structural factors that disproportionately impact women at the highest leadership levels. In 2024, an analysis across 35 public universities, 10 national polytechnics, mixed national secondary schools and mixed extra county secondary schools, as shown below, still affirms the need for affirmative action.

Figure 5. Gender Representation of Principals in Mixed Extra County Secondary Schools

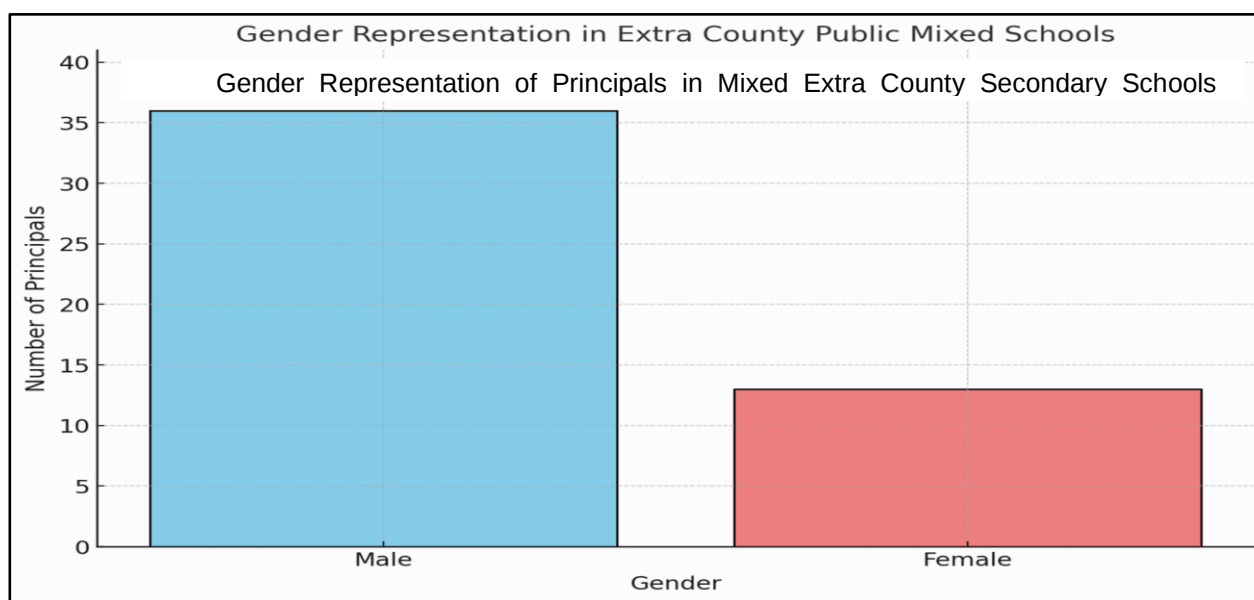
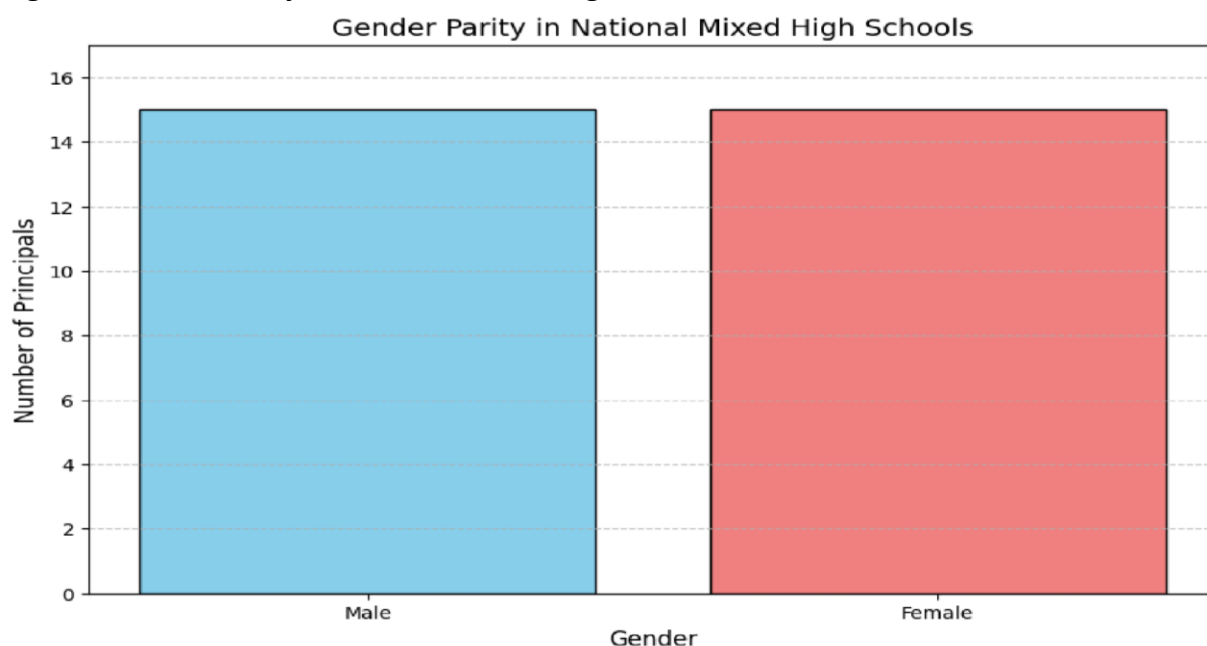


Figure 5 shows that 73% of principals in mixed extra county schools are male, while 27% are female. This

indicates a significant gender gap even at the high school level. Impact of Cultural Practices: In rural or less urbanised settings, traditional gender roles may still strongly influence hiring and promotion practices, perpetuating male dominance in leadership roles.

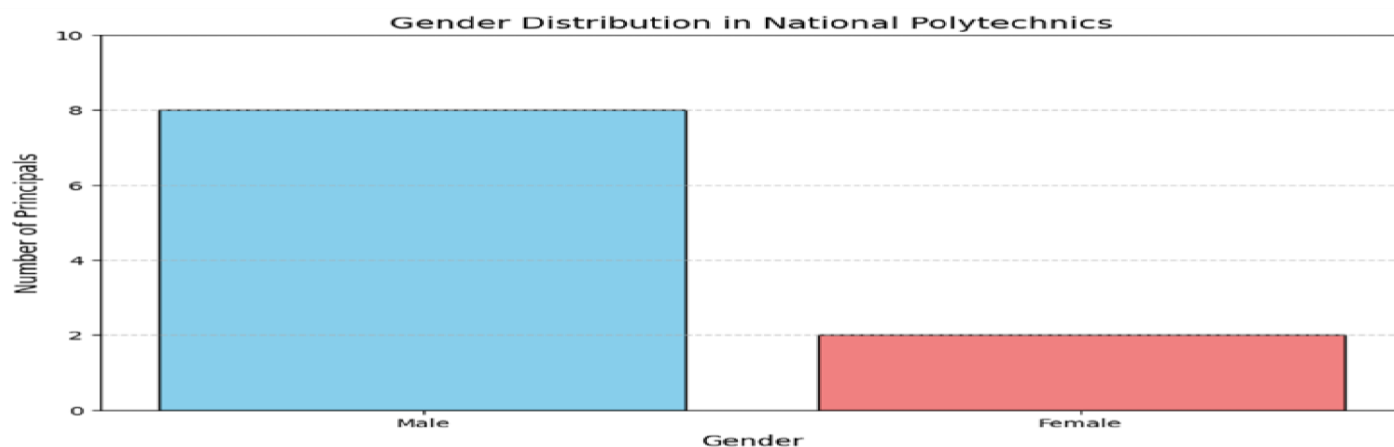
Figure 6: Gender Parity in National Mixed High Schools



In contrast, figure 6 illustrates complete gender parity, with 50% male and 50% female principals in national mixed high schools. This signals progress in gender inclusivity at the high school level.

Trends Over Time: Policies aimed at achieving gender equity, such as the 1/3 constitutional requirement for representation, may have driven this balanced distribution.

Figure 7: Gender Distribution in National Polytechnics



Out of 10 polytechnics, 80% are led by male principals and 20% by female principals. Despite the smaller sample size, the pattern remains consistent with male dominance in education management.

Impact of Cultural Practices: Cultural perceptions that undervalue women's leadership abilities and limited access to mentorship opportunities contribute to this imbalance. Female representation, it remains minimal, indicating systemic barriers.

Figure 8: Gender Distribution of Vice Chancellors in Public Universities

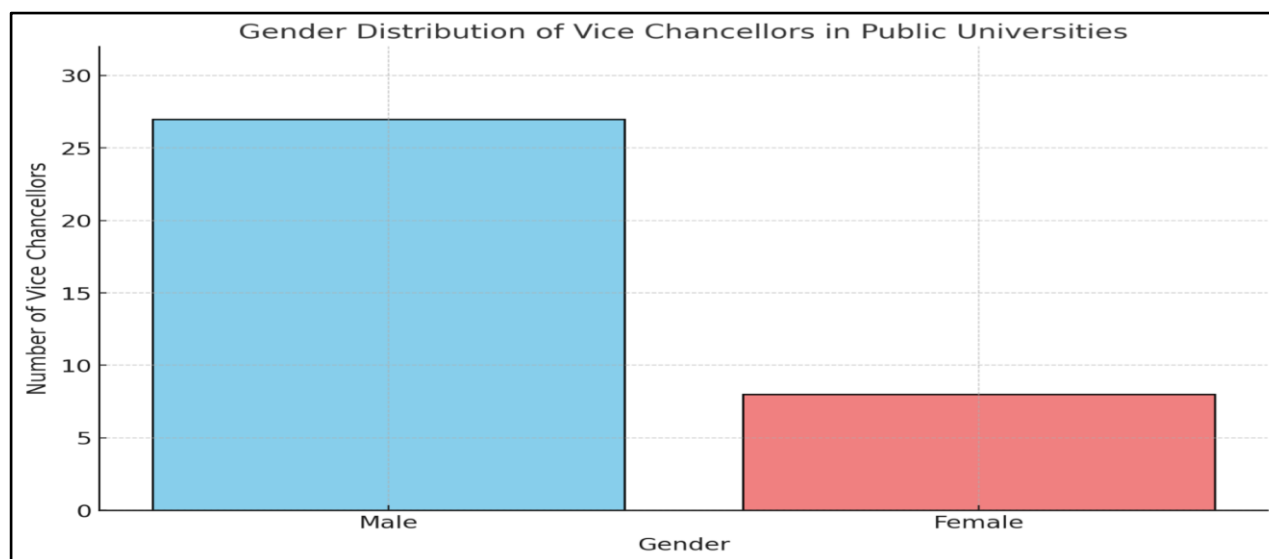
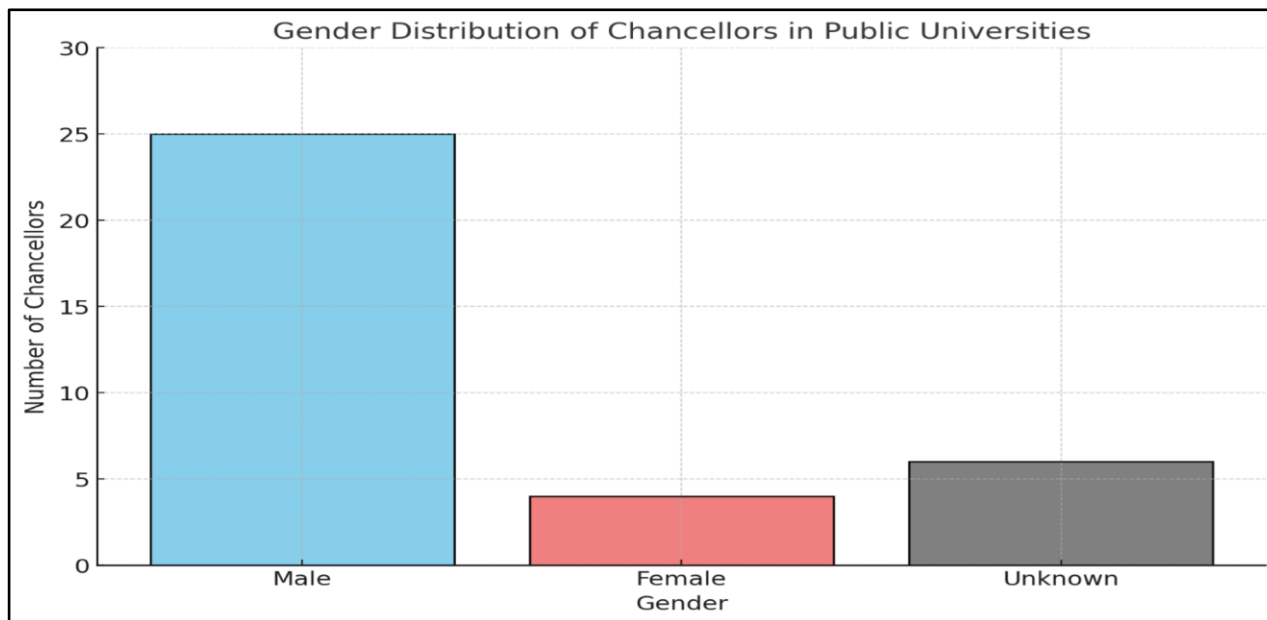


Figure 8 shows that 77% of Vice Chancellors are male, compared to 23% female. While there is some

Figure 9: Gender Distribution of Chancellors in Public Universities



The figure 9 highlights the gender disparity among Chancellors. With 71% of these roles held by men and only 11% by women, this illustrates the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership. The 17% "Unknown" indicates potential gaps in data transparency. Impact of Cultural Practices: Cultural norms that favour male leadership may explain the predominance of male Chancellors, as traditional views often discourage women from pursuing such roles.

Table 1: Recruitment and Promotion Trends for Leadership Positions in Education (2019–2023)

Year	Number of New Leadership Appointments	Male Appointments (%)	Female Appointments (%)
2019	150	82%	18%
2020	160	80%	20%
2021	140	77%	23%

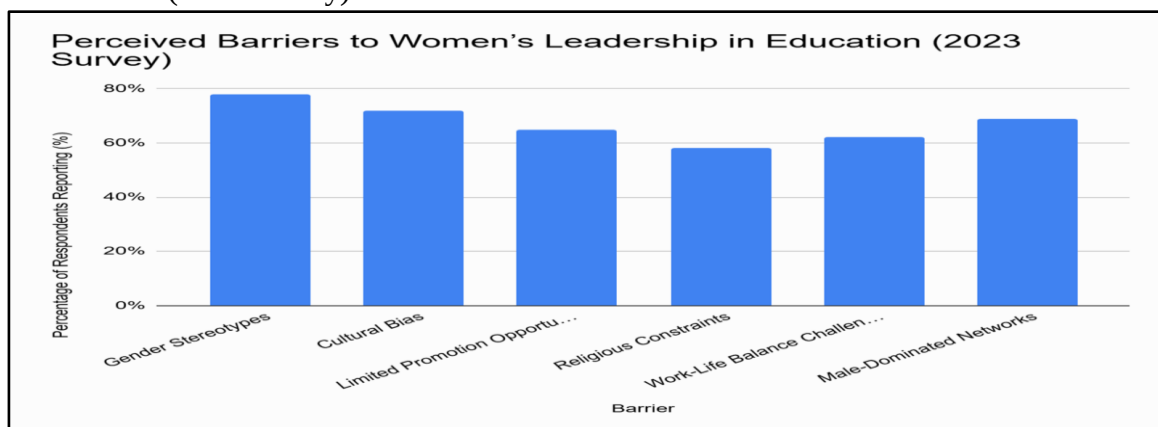
Current Research and Innovations
Journal

Research Article

2022	170	75%	25%
2023	180	73%	27%

This table provides a year-by-year breakdown of the recruitment and promotion trends for women in educational leadership roles, highlighting a slow but steady increase in female appointments. In 2019, 82% of leadership roles were awarded to men, with only 18% to women. Over the five years, there has been incremental progress, with female appointments reaching 27% by 2023. While the increase in female representation indicates progress, the data shows a clear majority of male appointments yearly. This imbalance suggests that recruitment practices may still favor men, possibly due to biases, network influences, and institutional practices prioritizing traditional, male-oriented leadership models. The 2023 figure of 27% female appointments marks the highest percentage within this period, signaling a slow but positive shift. However, this change's pace is insufficient to close the gender gap in the near term. Structural factors—such as subjective promotion criteria, male-dominated selection committees, and limited mentorship opportunities for women—likely contribute to the persistence of this gender disparity. Key Insight: While there is an upward trend in female recruitment and promotion, the relatively slow rate of change highlights the need for targeted recruitment policies, mentorship programs, and transparent promotion criteria to accelerate gender balance in education leadership further. According to the data collected above, it is noticeable that even though women have been qualified for a while in the Ministry of Education, they cannot be fully promoted in secondary schools and higher institutions of learning due to the following factors: To begin with, Gender stereotypes have been outlined as the leading barrier to women's leadership by 78%. Women have been perceived as lacking the male type or leadership qualities required for promotion to senior-level positions, such as principals, heads of departments, and board of management in secondary schools and vice chancellors in universities. Promotion criteria often focus on a preconceived notion of who should perform the role rather than the qualification requirements (Madeline, 2012). Cultural bias is the second leading barrier to women’s leadership in secondary schools and universities at 72%. Cultural norms often perpetuate the belief that leadership is a male domain, and women are frequently seen as less capable of handling leadership roles (Finstad et al., 2014). Cultural attitudes and societal expectations have been used to deny women appointments and promotional opportunities, an excuse that with their multiple roles, they are not able to fully commit themselves to leadership positions, therefore denying women equal benefits in leadership positions as their male counterparts. Furthermore, a male-dominated network is another barrier to women’s leadership by 69% in secondary schools and universities. Men still surpass women in having networks to learn about opportunities and find mentors and

sponsors to champion their advancement in leadership (Pyke, 2013). Women may have less access to influential networks crucial for their leadership opportunities due to fewer women leaders. Moreover, promotion opportunities are limited, and women's leadership is affected by 65%. It is noted that secondary schools and higher institutions of learning are areas that have an unclear set of criteria attached. The promotion process is still prone to all manner of abuse, including gender discrimination. Employers often believe that women are less able to undertake a full-time career compared to men due to their biological makeup rather than ability (Glick et al., 2015). When a promotion appointment arises, and an employer is given a choice between a man and a woman with equal qualifications, the woman is viewed as the greater risk. Working in male-dominated hierarchies is more likely to promote more managerial positions as men feel more comfortable with other men than they do with women. Also, work-life balance challenges affect women's leadership in secondary schools and higher institutions of learning by 62%. Women often bear a disproportionate share of family and caregiving responsibilities, which can limit their availability for demanding leadership roles (Haile et al., 2016). High levels of stress and anxiety at home may result in burnout and the inability to realise full potential at work and, most significantly, as a leader. Finally, leadership appointments are driven by religion in faith-based secondary schools and higher institutions of learning and affect women's leadership by 58%. Interpreting these institutions' policies, mostly found in the scriptures regarding male leadership (Naz et al., 2012), may hinder this. Similarly, appointments may tend to result from leadership looking for familiar qualities in a leader, thus closing the door on the potential change that a woman may bring to the post. Table 10: Perceived Barriers to Women's Leadership in Education (2023 Survey)



This summarises survey data on the key barriers women in Kenyan education leadership face, revealing how gender biases, cultural norms, and structural challenges continue to impact female leaders disproportionately. The survey results show that gender stereotypes were the most commonly reported barrier, affecting 78% of respondents. Stereotypes around women being less capable of leadership or unsuited to high-

stress roles often create a hostile environment for women seeking or occupying leadership positions. Cultural bias ranks the second-most cited obstacle, with 72% of respondents acknowledging its impact. In many communities, traditional views on gender roles persist, influencing how both male and female colleagues perceive women in authority. Limited promotion opportunities also surfaced as a significant challenge, reported by 65% of respondents, indicating that organizational structures and recruitment practices may limit women's upward mobility. Other prominent barriers include work-life balance challenges (62%), with many female leaders experiencing the dual demands of professional responsibilities and family obligations. Religious constraints were reported by 58% of respondents, highlighting how specific interpretations of religious doctrines reinforce patriarchal attitudes, especially within faith-based educational institutions. Lastly, male-dominated networks—reported by 69%—emerge as another impediment, as men typically have better access to influential circles that aid in career advancement. Key Insight: This data underscores the complex and overlapping barriers women face, revealing that biases are personal and institutional, embedded within cultural, structural, and religious frameworks. Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms and cultural shifts to create a more equitable environment in education leadership.

Gender Bias and Stereotypes

Gender stereotype is manifested in everyday life by attributing women to specific characteristics that men lack and vice versa. Women are considered caregivers and homemakers, while men are regarded as breadwinners and leaders. Women's world is thought to include particular labor like care and maintaining relationships, whereas men's world emphasizes individual thought, independent achievement, and success based on competition and hierarchy (Madeline, 2012). There is a perceived incongruity between the attributes stereotypically considered essential for positions that are gender typed as male and the qualities ascribed to men and women. Attributes such as achievement orientation and strength in decision-making are commonly ascribed to men. These traits are considered to be essential to fulfil management and leadership roles. Attributes such as nurturance, affiliation, and relationship orientation are more ascribed to women, and these traits are not associated with leadership or management roles (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). This is, therefore, so wrong and unfair to women since they already meet the qualifications to be promoted but are not considered due to gender bias and stereotypes.

Culture

The enduring set of beliefs, values, and ideologies underpinning structures, processes, and practices that distinguish one person from another. Discrimination against women is still widely embodied in customs. For instance, according to the Kalenjin community, a woman is restricted from working far from her matrimonial home. This implies that, given an opportunity for promotion, a woman will not take up the position even though she meets the qualifications. A similar study (Haile et al., 2016) revealed that despite the changing laws, the exclusion of women based on gender remains widespread and entrenched in higher institutions of learning and

secondary education through sociocultural values, perceptions, expectations, and attitudes that devalue women's personalities and accomplishments.

Religion

Leadership appointments in secondary schools and higher learning institutions are faith-based and may be hindered by interpreting these institutions' doctrines. Most of these are found in the scripture regarding male leadership. Religion forbids women from taking senior leadership positions since they are considered secondary options. Women are therefore required to 'submit' and serve under men (Ephesians 5:22-33). A traditionally male hierarchy in faith-based secondary schools and higher institutions of learning increases awareness that women are potentially sublimated to lesser roles based on religious beliefs, affecting these institutions' administrative structure (Culligan, 2012).

Male-Dominated Environments

The leadership culture is male-dominated in many secondary schools and higher learning institutions. In secondary education, chairs of the Boards of Management and Parents Association are chaired by 85% of males, even in girls' schools. Promotion and recruitment practices in the Ministry of Education lack transparency. The process can disadvantage women who may not be as adept at navigating these systems (UNESCO, 2021).

Recommendation

This paper has revealed that the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in secondary schools and higher learning institutions involves cultural, organizational, and individual factors. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies, including upholding the Constitution, policy changes, mentorship programs, and efforts to shift cultural norms. The challenge is to make the learning institutions gender sensitive. Unfortunately (Odhambo, 2011), the existing scholarship avoids adopting a more holistic perspective that can bring men and women together to address gender inequalities. Hence, the ills of organizational culture, religious beliefs, and informal practices that reinforce the glass ceiling against the promotion of women in Kenyan universities and secondary schools have become more entrenched. The urgency, therefore, is to identify areas for equity and diversity in staff recruitment and promotion and to enhance women academics' research capacities to change the culture of higher education with helpful insights into African feminism (Odhambo, 2011 & Chiweshe, 2018). Women should not remain passive victims but active and resilient to develop strategies to resist, subvert, overcome, and cope with the daily realities of life at the university as they encourage men to participate in breaking down the internal institutional mechanisms that have generated and perpetuated personal/professional identities and practices of gendered inequality. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should promote women based on merit and avoid affirmative action, which may create negative perceptions of women leaders. The government and various teacher organizations such as the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), should sensitize male teachers about the importance of having women leaders in the education system as most males have low

opinions as compared to women leaders. Finally, all administrators, especially the newly promoted ones, should be inducted into leadership (particularly women leaders) to guide them on the best leadership practices, which ensures negative attitudes towards their leadership styles may be minimized. Gender-sensitive training should be provided to men and women to promote non-discriminating working relationships and respect for diversity in work and management styles.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that even though women have been qualified in the Ministry of Education for a while, they cannot be fully promoted in secondary schools and higher education learning. Women continue to experience cultural deterrents to entry into leadership positions and encounter both direct and indirect discrimination. Although women cannot be dismissed for lack of higher education, their desire to teach and streamlining into teaching at the expense of publications, their exclusion from informal networks, and flawed, discriminatory recruitment and promotion processes constitute primary barriers. Apparent gains are patchy in that women tend to be confined to low ranks of the profession, and men still constitute a large majority of academic professors, so parity in teaching at a high level may be far off (Omondi, 2011). To recapitulate, attitudes and mindsets contribute to improving women's positions at a snail's pace. On the contrary, if women are assisted, encouraged, guided, and appreciated, they can blossom and show a vibrancy, curiosity, adventure, and boldness that has never been seen before. Society is advised to adopt an attitude that believes in the dictum, 'Whatever a man can do, a woman can also do.' Let society test this dictum and see whether women will disappoint us.

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