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 Gender inequalities and academic leadership in Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom: A systematic literature review (2013-2023)

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Gender inequalities and academic leadership in Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom: A systematic literature review (2013-2023)

Abstract

This study provides the first systematic review of the literature on women's leadership in higher education in Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. The primary aim of the review was to identify themes related to barriers and explore strategies suggested in the literature to overcome obstacles hindering women's academic leadership. The study undertook a systematic literature review of 37 articles published in the decade between 2013 and 2023 arising from an externally funded research project on gender equality. Three databases (ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science) were searched using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) protocol to select eligible articles. The findings revealed a predominance of qualitative studies in existing scholarship, with a specific focus on the lived experiences of women. Recurring barriers identified were gender bias and stereotyping, family-work conflicts, heavy workload and financial constraints, male-dominated leadership culture, the intersection of race and gender, and lack of role models. The literature proposes several measures to address the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions. These measures are classified into professional development and training, the policy agenda and organisational change, and support mechanisms and networking. The insights gained from this review aim to shed light on the barriers faced by women academics and the strategies proposed to overcome these challenges in the three target countries, providing higher education institutions with recommendations to address gender inequalities within their organisations.

Introduction

Arising from the turn toward social justice and equality, diversity and inclusivity scholarship (EDI) in educational research, a growing number of studies have explored research on women's leadership in higher education (Aiston & Kent Fo, 2021). Numerous studies have tracked issues related to women's empowerment and their leadership in academic institutions from both within specific countries and from an international perspective (Ekine, 2018; Mankayi & Chenteni, 2021; Vancour, 2023). Findings from these studies suggest that there are a range of complex factors that hinder women academics from acquiring leadership positions in academia, that women are still underrepresented in leadership roles and underpaid in comparison with their male counterparts (Manfredi et al. 2019; Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2020). Research has investigated the reasons for this underrepresentation, particularly involving senior higher education leadership roles, such as department heads, deans, and vice-chancellors, where individuals are responsible for strategic decision-making (Maürtin-Cairncross, 2014; Shepherd, 2017).

However, as Norander and Zenk (2023) highlight, much of the current literature on women and leadership has explored western higher educational institutions, and "focuses on cisgender, white women and reinforces a gender binary" (p. 15). In response to this, scholars have started to examine how intersecting identities affect the representation of women in academia and called for more studies of low and middle income country (LMIC) contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as well as comparative studies. This shift in focus enables scholars to question the absence of women with disabilities, trans and non-binary persons, and racially minoritized women within senior positions in academia (Garrett et al., 2022; Lee, 2021; Motanpanyane & Shankar, 2022; Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020).

Arising from a British Council Gender Equality Partnership (GEP) grant that specifically funds research on gender equality and higher educational leadership in low and middle income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), this paper presents the findings of a systematic literature review conducted during the first phase of the project on women's unequal representation in higher education leadership in Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (UK). There are only a few systematic reviews of this issue addressing the African context (Adewale & Potokri, 2023), and fewer still that focus specifically on either Nigeria (Igiebor, 2021a) or South Africa (Moodly & Toni, 2015). Studies comparing a high

income HE context such as the UK with two low and middle income contexts are equally rare (Westoby et al., 2021).

The study explored here is the first to address these three HE contexts in a comparative study of women's leadership, and is significant for highlighting the need for more research on low and middle income countries. Addressing the three focal HE contexts, the review aimed to identify: (a) the challenges faced by women academics who currently hold or have recently held academic leadership positions, and (b) the measures suggested in the literature that can be put in place to enhance gender equality in leadership. Academic leadership positions refer to any leading roles of academics in shaping policies and developments in the institutions. The following questions guided the study:

1) What are the common barriers and challenges faced by women in academic leadership positions in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK?
2) What measures are suggested in the existing literature that can be put in place to enhance gender equality in academic leadership?

The systematic review approach was chosen as it enables researchers to grasp the scope of existing research and identify areas that require further exploration (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The intended outcome of the review is to provide insights for higher education institutions and policymakers, enabling them to implement explicit measures to achieve greater gender equality in the focal countries and to raise the profile of comparative studies across high and low income contexts.

Background

Gender inequality in the UK HE leadership

In the UK, several initiatives have been introduced to tackle gender inequalities and enhance the representation of women in leadership roles. Among these are the Athena SWAN (Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network), as well as the Aurora and Leadership Matters development programmes. While these initiatives have provided valuable frameworks for institutions to address barriers for women's advancement and leadership (Barnard et al, 2022; UNESCO, 2022) and proven effective in increasing gender diversity in managerial leadership (Xiao et al, 2020), scholars argue (O'Connor, 2020; Shepherd 2017) that, without structural and institutional changes, these programmes are unlikely to achieve greater gender equality in higher education. This is evident in the Advance Higher Education Staff Statistical report (Advance HE, 2023), which indicates that, compared to male staff, a larger proportion of

female staff were employed part-time, and in lower salary bands. Moreover, the proportion of male professors (70.3%) is still significantly greater than the proportion of their female equivalents. The report further indicates that the majority of academic senior managers were male (62.1%). In the *Women Count: Leaders in Higher Education* report (Jarboe, 2018), the situation of women in key leadership roles across higher education institutions was starkly highlighted:

> Women are finding it more difficult to advance to the top two senior leadership roles of Chair and Vice-Chancellor. The percentage of female Chairs has more than doubled over five years but only 27% of HEI Chairs are women. The percentage of Vice-Chancellors who are women is only slightly better at 29%. (Jarboe, 2018, p. 5)

The same report underlined that it is important "to sustain the progress that has been made in advancing women into senior roles, to quicken its pace and to ensure that every HEI realises the benefit of diverse leadership" (Jarboe, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, scholars emphasise that beyond increasing the representation of women in senior positions within academia, further efforts are required to challenge and transform the prevailing styles, behaviours, policies and practices in academic environments. This broader transformation is essential to create a more supportive climate for women to train towards, apply for and assume leadership roles (Read & Kehm, 2016).

Gender inequality in South African HE leadership

Research on women in academic leadership in higher education institutions in South Africa has extensively documented the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Moodly (2022) highlighted that only six of the current 26 public university vice chancellors are women. According to the Council on Higher Education (2022) in 2018, of a total of 3,125 professors, men constituted 60% while women made up 40%. Herbst and Roux (2023) and Mdlenleni et al. (2021) underlined the gendered organisation and male-centredness of higher education leadership in the country. Indeed, Moodly and Toni (2018) pointed out, despite various legislative initiatives, women in higher education continue to face obstacles in advancing beyond middle management positions.

Gender inequality in Nigerian HE leadership

A similar situation can be observed in the Nigerian higher education system. According to the Nigeria University Statistical Digest (2019), there were 73,443 academics reported in the country in 2019, with 56,063 males and 17,380 females. Additionally, there were more male

professors (85%) compared to women (15%). As of 2019, women held fewer than 35% of senior academic positions, including principal officer roles (Kurga, 2022). In a study focused on women's leadership in Nigerian HE, Omotoso (2020) identified a rise in the representation of women in middle-level faculty positions but not in senior leadership roles. This suggests that decision-making and accountability positions within higher education are still predominantly occupied by men. Moreover, Okunola et al. (2017) investigated the factors influencing women's participation in university governance in Nigeria. Based on the analysis of responses gathered from both academic and non-academic staff working in 88 Nigerian public universities, the researchers concluded that socio-cultural beliefs and political factors in the selection processes were among the major obstacles that discouraged women from participating in governance positions.

Research Methodology

To provide an overview of the current state of women's academic leadership in Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom, we conducted a systematic literature review. In contrast to narrative reviews, a systematic review approach uses a structural system of inquiry to detect and review publications (Bearman et al., 2012). This review followed the PRISMA approach as it is highly regarded for its rigour and transparency (Page et al., 2021). The review consisted of several distinct phases. In phase 1, we reviewed the existing literature and performed a systematic search of specific databases. Then, we screened articles based on their titles and abstracts. In phase 3, we completed a full text review of the selected articles to determine if they met the eligibility criteria and appraised their quality. Following this, data were extracted from the included studies, and a qualitative thematic analysis method was employed to identify significant themes. Although these phases are presented here in sequential order, it is worth noting that this was an iterative process in which the search protocol was honed over time (Finfgeld-Connett & Johnson, 2013).

Search Strategy

For this systematic review, three electronic databases were searched: ERIC (via EBSCO), Scopus and Web of Science. The search was conducted on 9th July 2023. Scopus and Web of Science are comprehensive databases in the social sciences, while ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre) provides resources on education literature.

The targeted countries were limited to Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom with the time range for publications spanning the period from 2013 to 2023 as this was a key

element of the funded research project. The broad search terms defined for this study are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Defined search terms

Records were included if they met the following three eligibility criteria. First, only articles written in English were selected; secondly, only studies published in peer-reviewed journals were included; and thirdly, only articles published in the last 10 years (between January 2013 and July 2023) were retrieved. A systematic review approach requires an identification of a time period within which studies to be selected (Meline, 2006). This search was limited to 10 years to keep the size of the data reasonable, while maintaining a meaningful data pool for the analysis, and because the subject has attracted few, if any, comparative studies to justify a shorter time period. Articles were also included if they met the following study eligibility criteria:

- *Study design*: We included empirical studies involving all approaches (qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods). Theoretical and conceptual review papers were included if they met the exposure of interest criteria.
- *Topic, study population:* Studies had to explore, define and discuss topics in relation to gender equity, equality and women in academic leadership with a particular focus on the challenges faced by women academics, the strategies and policies implemented to address the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership, and the measures that had put in place. For the empirical studies involving participants, the study population was limited to academics from any disciplines that had leadership roles and responsibilities. Thus, empirical studies that did not solely involve participants with an academic leadership rank or position were excluded (e.g., Coetzee & Moosa, 2020; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Okunola et al., 2017).

- *Higher education setting*: Studies conducted only in higher education institutions were retrieved. Based on these criteria, studies on the exact exposure of interest but which included other settings along with higher education institutions or participants outside of academia (i.e., business or health sector), were excluded (e.g., Bachnik et al., 2023; Coleman, 2020; Mwagiru, 2019). Table 1 summarises the scope of the review.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Type of criterion	Review scope
Exposure of interest	**Include:** Any studies in relation to gender equity, equality and academic leadership with a particular focus on: • challenges faced by women academics who currently hold or have recently held academic leadership positions • strategies and policies that have been implemented to address the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions • measures that are put in place to enhance equality in leadership
Type of publication	**Include:** Peer reviewed journal articles **Exclude:** Book chapters, conference proceedings, dissertations, blog posts, briefing reports
Language	**Include:** English only
Dates of publications	**Include:** Between January 2013 and July 2023 **Exclude:** Older than 2013
Access	**Include:** Online **Exclude:** Printed
Geographic location	**Include:** South Africa, Nigeria, and the UK
Research methods	**Include:** All methods: Qualitative, quantitative, mixed
Type of study	**Include:** Studies containing empirical research, theoretical and conceptual review papers
Participants	**Include:** Academics with a leadership role or position
Settings	**Include:** Higher education institutions only

Selection Process

The systematic database search collected a total of 645 records (205 from Scopus, 342 from Web of Science and 98 from ERIC). Appendix A shows the details of database search strings and filters. A total of 45 duplicate records were removed automatically by using the Endnote Library system, leaving 600 publications eligible for first level title and abstract screening. Records were then uploaded to Rayyan (a web-tool designed for systematic reviews) and a

further 10 duplicates were removed, leaving 590 records for screening. Once titles and abstracts had been screened, a total of 493 records were excluded based on the eligibility criteria. A total of 97 articles remained eligible for full-text screening. Rayyan does not currently provide a practical way of hiding excluded articles after the title and abstract screening phase. For this reason, we created a new Rayyan review for full-text screening and imported the 'included' studies to the new project. We then uploaded full-text PDFs one by one into Rayyan using the 'private' setting, so that only the researchers had easy access to the full-texts on the same data management system. Overall, all 97 included studies were examined for their eligibility, and the full texts were reviewed. This final full-text review phase led to the inclusion of 37 articles. We excluded 60 articles based on the fact that they did not (i) come from the focus countries (n= 10), (ii) focus on gender and academic leadership (n= 19), (iii) meet the participant criteria (n=21), (iv) come from a peer-reviewed journal (n=5), (v) include higher education institutions (n=2); (vi) were not an eligible study type (n=2) or were a duplicate (n=1). Each stage of searching and selecting the literature was conducted by a single researcher. During all stages, all questionable cases were resolved through consultation with the project lead where appropriate. The flowchart for the search process is provided in Figure 2.
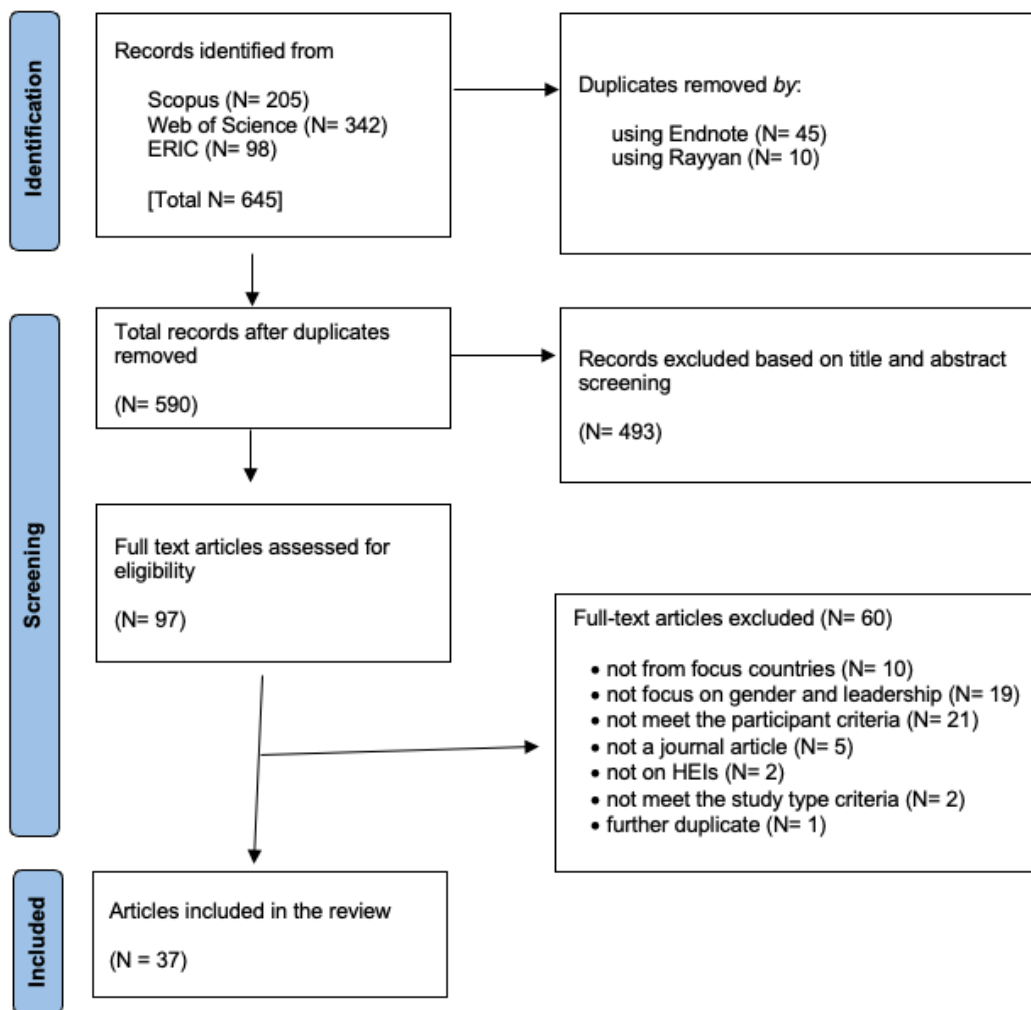
Figure 2. Overview of the search based on PRISMA guidelines

Data Extraction and Analysis

After the completion of initial title and abstract screening and then full-text screening phases, selected studies were reviewed for the purpose of data extraction. To facilitate this process, an Excel template was designed by the researchers. The extraction form was dived into two primary units: (1) identification features of the study, and (2) study characteristics. With respect to the identification features of the study, the following information was extracted from each included study: title, author, year of publication, journal, type of publication, full bibliographic reference and the country of origin. Regarding study characteristics, the following data were extracted: research question(s) and specific aims/objectives, research design and methodologies employed, study population, sampling size, data analysis techniques, key conclusions drawn from the studies and any identified limitations.

The data extraction form provided a basis to examine the key attributes of the literature reviewed for the present study. Specifically, we examined and reported the year of publications, each study's country of origin, research designs and the study samples. For the purpose of further analysis and reporting, a thematic approach (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to generate themes and subthemes to interpret various aspects of the included studies, to investigate which issues about women and academic leadership were highlighted, discussed, explored or unexplored in the literature. Following the process suggested by Thomas and Harden (2008), the analysis took the form of three stages: the coding of the findings of included studies; the organisation of descriptive themes; and the development of analytical themes.

Quality Appraisal

PRISMA guidelines require a critical appraisal of the included studies (Page et al., 2021). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) ([version 2018](#)) was employed to critically appraise the included studies in this review as it provided a single tool that includes criteria covering several study designs. The tool includes two screening questions and five assessment criteria for each research design. Empirical studies (with qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches) included in this review were assessed based on a nominal scale (Yes/No/Can't tell). It is important to note that MMAT is limited in that it focuses on the methodological quality of the studies, and does not provide a checklist for an overall weight of studies. Therefore, the quality appraisal process provided an overview of the methodological quality of the included studies and no study was excluded based on quality appraisal. Overall, the quality of reviewed studies was deemed outstanding: 25 of 34 empirical studies met all the MMAT quality criteria relevant to their research type.

Findings

(1) Features of the included articles

Publications by year

Figure 3 shows the publication year of the articles (2013-2023) that were included in this review (N=37). As can be seen, research on women's academic leadership reached a peak in 2021. The articles were collected until July 2023 (the end of the project), and therefore, the number of studies in 2023 will not be representative of all those published in this year.
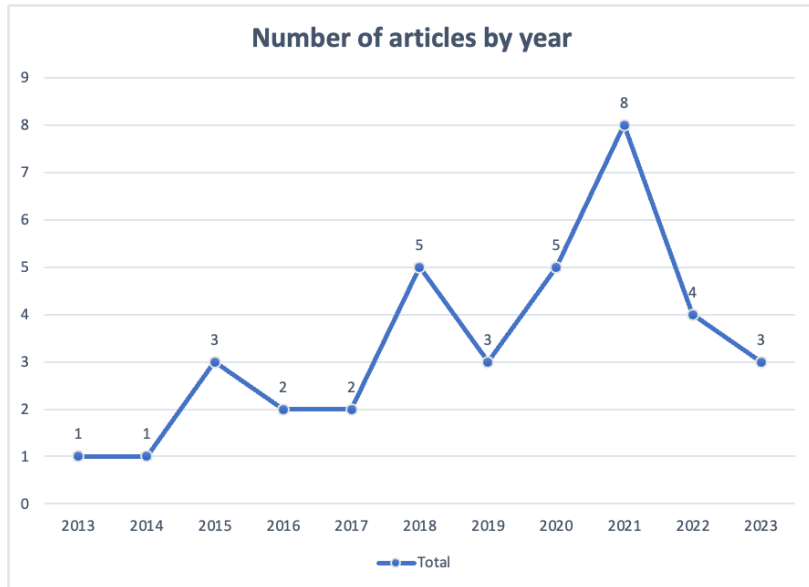
Figure 3. Number of articles per year

Publications by country

The distribution of articles by country of origin can be seen in Table 3. For this review, we collected articles specifically from Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Articles with multiple countries were also included if they involved at least one focus country. Overall, the majority of articles were from South Africa (n=16). There were 8 articles included from the United Kingdom and 4 from Nigeria.

Table 3. Number of articles by country

Country	N= 37
South Africa	16
Nigeria	4
United Kingdom	8
Articles with more than one country	
United Kingdom and Australia	2
United Kingdom and Italy	1
United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland	1
United Kingdom, Austria, Canada	1
United Kingdom and Germany	1

United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia	1
Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, *the UK*, the US	1
Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, Egypt, Lesotho, *South Africa*, Benin, Cameroun, Ghana, *Nigeria*	1

Publications by academic journal

Table 4 shows the academic journals with the highest number of publications and corresponding articles. A list of all journals can be found in Appendix B. The articles were published across twenty-eight academic journals that featured articles from a broad range of disciplines in social sciences. The findings indicate that among these journals, *Gender and Education, Perspectives in Education* and *Management in Education* were the academic journals which have published at least three articles on the topic of women's academic leadership from focus countries.

Table 4. Publications by academic journals

Journal name	Number of publication
Gender and Education	**3**
Acker & Wagner (2019)	
Drake (2015)	
Spanò (2020)	
Perspectives in Education	**3**
Moodly & Toni (2017)	
Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan (2020)	
Ramohai & Holtzhausen (2022)	
Management in Education	**3**
Moodly (2022)	
Seale et al. (2021)	
Shepherd (2017)	

(2) Study characteristics of included articles

Figure 4 shows the distribution of research designs in the included studies. Of 37 articles, 3 were non-empirical papers based on conceptual reviews (Lee, 2021; Mdleneni et al., 2021; Moodly & Toni, 2015). There were 4 quantitative studies (Oti, 2013; Pillay, 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2017; Seale et al., 2021) and 6 mixed-method studies collected and interpreted

qualitative and quantitative data (Barnard et al., 2022; Burkinshaw & White, 2020; Davies et al., 2020; Eboiyehi et al., 2016; Herbest & Roux, 2023; Shepherd, 2017).
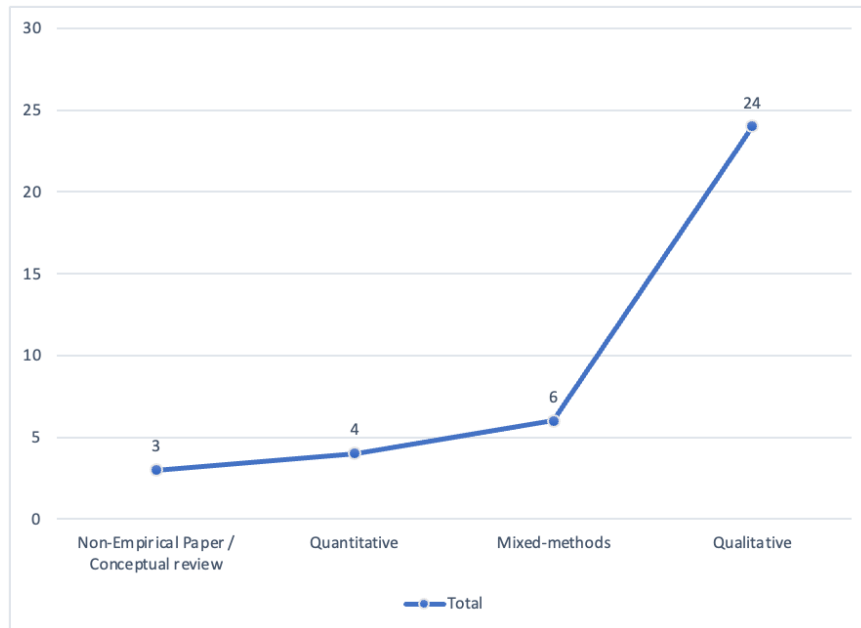

Figure 4. Research designs

As can be observed from Figure 4, a significant majority of studies (n=24) included in this review adopted qualitative approaches. Among the qualitative studies, a substantial number of studies utilised case study designs, narrative inquiries, and autoethnographies, relying on semi-structured in-depth interviews for data collection and thematic data analysis. The number of participants involved in these studies varied, with some as low as one or two academics (Linaker, 2023; Mackay, 2021; Watton et al., 2019) to forty-two (Babalola et al., 2021). Notably, many of these studies mentioned the small size of participants as a primary limitation of their research.

(3) Studies by emerging categories

In this review, the included studies were organised into four main interrelated categories based on the classification of the essential focus of each article. Table 5 presents these four categories, which were identified across all 37 articles.

Table 5. Overarching categories emerged from the analysis of included studies

Emerging categories	Citations
Studies that highlighted the lived experiences of women academics in leadership positions (n=21)	Acker & Wagner (2019); Babalola et al. (2021); Bayaga & Mtose (2021); Bonzet & Frick (2019); Burkinshaw et al. (2018); Drake (2015); Ekine (2018); Linaker (2023); Mackay (2021); Mankayi & Cheteni (2021); Maürtin-Cairncross (2014); Mayer et al. (2018); Moodly & Toni (2017); Moodly (2022); Plessis et al. (2018); Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan (2020); Ramohai & Holtzhausen (2022); Rodriguez et al. (2023); Thompson (2015); Watton et al. (2019); Zulu (2022).
Studies that addressed institutional changes, policies and strategies on gender inequalities in HE leadership (n= 7)	Davies et al. (2020); Igiebor (2021b); Mdleleni et al. (2021); Moodly & Toni (2015); Pritchard & Morgan (2017); Shepherd (2017); Spanò (2020).
Studies that linked to leadership representations, styles, and attitudes (n= 6)	Burkinshaw & White (2020); Eboiyehi et al. (2016); Herbest & Roux (2023); Oti (Née Aderogba) (2013); Pillay (2020); Read & Kehm (2016).
Studies that focused on professional development programmes (n= 3)	Barnard et al. (2022); Lee (2021); Seale et al. (2021).

As shown in Table 5, a significant portion of research on women's academic leadership, within the scope of this review, revolves around the narratives and lived experiences of academics in leadership roles. The literature within this category delves into the experiences of women, focusing on their ongoing challenges, career trajectories and the strategies they employ to overcome barriers. The second category includes studies from Nigeria (Igiebor, 2021b), South Africa (Mdleleni et al., 2021; Moodly & Toni, 2015) and the UK (along with Italy, New Zealand and Australia) (Davies et al., 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2017; Shepherd, 2017; Spanò, 2020) that address policy documents, organisational and institutional barriers related to the underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership positions. Studies in the third category are linked to the leadership styles and attitudes as well as representations of leaders. Lastly, the fourth category encompasses studies focusing on development programmes, with a particular focus on women's academic leadership. These studies are

specifically from the UK (Lee, 2021), the UK and the Republic of Ireland (Barnard et al., 2022) and South Africa (Seale et al., 2021).

Discussion

RQ1: What are the common barriers and challenges faced by women in academic leadership positions in Nigeria, South Africa and the UK?

In addressing the first research question, we identified several recurring themes frequently mentioned as challenges faced by women academics in their leadership roles in the focal countries. These were gender bias and stereotyping, family-work conflicts, heavy workload and financial constraints, male-dominated leadership culture, intersection of race and gender, and lack of role models.

Gender bias and stereotyping: Issues related to gender bias and stereotyping were among the highly mentioned barriers experienced by women academic leaders in the literature. To cite one, in a multi-site, qualitative study conducted by Babalola et al. (2021), data were collected from various African countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, Egypt, Malawi, Lesotho, Benin, Cameroun, and Ghana. The study aimed to investigate the organisational culture and challenges faced by women in STEM leadership roles across Africa. The researchers gathered information through an online questionnaire administered to 42 women leaders occupying senior management potions in their institutions. Among the key findings, gender discrimination emerged as one of the main challenges STEM leaders encountered across their organisations. In addition to gendered discrimination, participants also highlighted issues related to time management, balancing family demands, and facing lack of cooperation from colleagues in their leadership roles.

Family-work conflicts: In a study examining women leaders' perspectives, Bonzet and Frick (2019) directed their attention to women occupying leadership roles in the field of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in South Africa. Based on an interpretive narrative approach, the researchers conducted unstructured interviews with 10 women leaders. The study's findings again shed light on the various challenges faced by women in their leadership roles. These challenges included the struggle to balance family and professional responsibilities, as well as encountering bias and unfair selection criteria that hindered their advancement to top positions. Conflicts arising from balancing family and work responsibilities were the main challenges addressed in another study that reflected on

the personal narratives of three deputy vice chancellors with regard to their leadership journeys in the context of South Africa (Moodly & Toni, 2017).

Managing heavy workload and financial constraints: In a small-scale study that involved seven academics who had previously held or currently held an administrative position in a university in Nigeria, Ekine (2018) highlighted three key challenges based on the participants' responses. These challenges were issues related to gaining acceptance as a woman leader, managing heavy workload and financial constraints. This latter aspect was a concern that has been acknowledged in various studies. For example, Igiebor (2021b), in a study analysing gender equality policy documents from two top-ranking Nigerian universities, stated that "the absence of budget/ financial resources in the gender policy document of both universities shows an identified form of institutional resistance for the actualisation of gender equity" (p. 345). Similarly, in a study addressing the experiences of feminist research project leaders from various countries including the UK, Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand and the United States, Acker and Wagner (2019) also addressed funding-related challenges, particularly concerning the funding support available for conducting feminist research.

Another noteworthy aspect in the literature was the impact of neoliberal marketized approaches to university education on the persistent challenges faced by women leaders. For instance, Thompson (2015) shed light on the challenges faced by women academics in middle and senior positions, particularly concerning excessive workload, within the contemporary climate of market-led regimes prevalent in UK academia. The study revealed that managers, who advocated for 'people-centred' approaches, find themselves marginalized. On the other hand, those who thrived in such an environment tended to embrace and align themselves more comfortably with neoliberal discourse and management styles.

Male dominated leadership culture: The study by Herbst and Roux (2023), on the other hand, shifted its focus to examine the presence of toxic culture as a potentially influential factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women leaders in higher education institutions. Employing a mixed-methods study, the researchers collected data from women leaders across 18 different higher education institutions in South Africa. The findings of the study indicated a concerning situation, with women leaders reporting high levels of exposure to toxic leadership practices. The authors argued that this toxic climate could lead to serious

and enduring harm for women's mental health and well-being and well as for universities' working environments.

Intersection of race and gender: On the other hand, research conducted in South Africa on the intersection of race and gender (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021; Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020; Zulu, 2022) shed light on the unique and intersecting challenges faced by Black women academics. For instance, one significant obstacle to the career trajectory of Black women academics, according to Ramnund-Mansingh and Seedat-Khan (2020), is the presence of a masculine culture within academia. As noted by these authors, "the old boys' network is an example of gender-based exploitation that is masked in several ways by the increased pressure and manipulation of female academics" (p. 61).

Lack of role models: In a review of women and higher education leadership, Moodly and Toni (2015) discussed the issue of the lack of role models for women leaders in higher education. The authors argued that access to higher education alone does not guarantee the achievement of leadership in the absence of role models that inspire women to follow career paths towards challenging leadership positions. Lack of support from colleagues was also mentioned as one of the prominent challenges encountered by female faculty deans in South Africa (Mankayi & Chenti, 2021).

RQ2: What measures are suggested in the existing literature that can be put in place to enhance gender equality in academic leadership?

In the existing literature, several measures have been proposed to tackle the unequal representation in leadership positions within academia. These measures can be classified into three primary categories: professional development and training, policy agenda and organisational change, and support mechanisms and networking.

Professional development & training

Several studies discuss the need for the advancement of women leaders in academia and highlight the significance of professional development in achieving this goal. One such study by Seale et al. (2021) points to the South African Higher Education Leadership and Management programme (HELM) as a suitable place to address gender-based inequalities and the unique challenges faced by women leaders. The aim of HELM is to assist leaders and advance women leadership, particularly through Women in Leadership programmes. The authors argue that a comprehensive woman in leadership programme, which encompasses strategies to tackle gender disparities as well as issues related to

management and leadership skills, could empower women leaders to "counteract existing bias, recognise their role within it and lead the context towards a gender-fair transformative leadership culture" (p. 143).

According to Barnard et al. (2022), leadership development programmes that broaden the notion of leadership and offer diverse role models can yield valuable outcomes for participants, empowering them to pursue further opportunities. Their study specifically illustrates the significant impact of leadership programs like AURORA in the UK on women's perceptions of leadership, motivating them to take proactive steps in pursuing leadership roles. However, the authors also highlight that individual-focused leadership development efforts may only achieve partial success. They raise significant concerns about the resilience of gendered organizational structures and the limitations of development programmes in effectively addressing gender inequalities. These arguments align well with a recent publication by Walker (2023), which critically reflected on the extent to which professional development and mentoring schemes can effectively challenge gender bias in academic practice for women:

> In summary, professional development leadership programmes, networks, and initiatives such as mentoring have potential to develop skills, including leadership approaches, and confidence of women working in FE and HE. However, the extent to which they can break the bias of male-dominated senior leadership positions is hindered by the lack of career progression and opportunities within institutional structure, and cultures that need to change to allow the professional development offerings to have more sustained benefit for individuals and institutions. Therefore, institutions should address pathways for promotion, ensuring they offer equity and are free of bias (Walker, 2023, p. 47).

Policy agenda & organisational change

The measures proposed in this category concentrate on the policy agenda of institutions and aim to facilitate organisational change. One practical example of organisational change, as recommended by Wattan et al. (2019), involves the implementation of job sharing to promote women's leadership in the UK higher education setting. The authors emphasised the advantages of job sharing, particularly for women leaders, as it contributes to the retention and development of leadership capabilities within organisations.

In another study, Shepherd (2017) offered valuable insights into the persisting issue of underrepresentation at senior leadership levels. The research focused on problems deeply rooted in organizational structures, with particular attention to the appointment processes for academic managers. Instead of solely relying on leadership development programmes aimed at 'fixing' women, Shepherd (2007) highlights structural factors related to the selection processes for senior management roles. Similarly, in a qualitative study, Read and Kehm (2016) provided a comparison between the UK and German higher education settings. The study emphasised the importance of increasing the numerical representation of women in senior positions to reshape perceptions of leadership. However, the authors further highlighted the need for broader action to challenge the prevailing norms, valued styles, behaviours, policies, and practices. Collectively, these studies highlighted the importance of embracing a more holistic approach to address underlying issues and to promote gender equality and diversity in leadership roles.

The current situation of gender equality policies raises critical issues regarding their comprehensiveness and effectiveness. In this context, Igiebor (2021b) examined gender policy documents from two Nigerian higher education institutions. The research revealed the existence of areas of silence and absence in policy content, which inadvertently exclude women and perpetuate male dominance. Similarly, in their analysis of UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact cases for business and management studies, Davies et al. (2020) observed that, "there is an apparent lack of reflexivity in the higher education system and limited awareness of the disproportionately gendered implications of the research impact agenda in terms of everyday equality related to practices, workloads, time management, resources, recognition and reward" (p. 141). Overall, the recommendations related to the policy and organisational change highlighted the need to critically examine existing policies and adopt a broader policy perspective to drive significant and meaningful change at the institutional level.

Support mechanisms & networking

A recurring theme in scholarly works is the sense of isolation experienced by women in male-dominated academic settings. Consequently, it is strongly advised that organisations develop strategies to foster networking opportunities and provide mentoring support for women holding leadership positions (Maürtin-Cairncross, 2014). The importance of networking and support has been reiterated within the South African higher education context by several studies (Mankayi & Chenti, 2021; Moodly & Toni, 2017). In a study conducted by

Zulu (2022), which delved into the academic identities of Black women professors, the importance of creating a supportive environment to foster scholarship and student learning was a prominent finding. This study gathered insights from five Black women academics at two public universities in South Africa.

Lastly, social support was widely acknowledged as a crucial determinant of job satisfaction, but Oti (2013) draws attention to its significance as a predictor of career growth. Through a study conducted with academics from six universities in south-west Nigeria, the research findings revealed that both spousal support and parental influence play pivotal roles in predicting career growth and the attainment of leadership positions. This study highlighted the importance of personal support systems outside of the workplace in shaping the trajectory of women's leadership careers.

Limitations

While this was the first comparative systematic review of Nigeria, South Africa and the UK on women's higher educational leadership, there were several limitations. Following the PRIMSA approach, the review aimed to examine only high quality research studies in English by exploring only articles containing empirical studies and theoretical and conceptual reviews published in peer-reviewed academic journals. The review also limited its scope to three electronic databases (ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science). This approach excluded literature that were not indexed in these databases and publications in other formats such as book chapters, conference papers and reports or published on the subject in other languages. This comparative review also limited its scope to scholarly work from two low and middle income countries (South Africa, Nigeria) and one high income country (the United Kingdom). Consequently, relevant and informative literature from elsewhere (e.g., Aston & Fo, 2021; Morley, 2013; Motapanyane & Shankar, 2022) was not included. The review relied on a clearly defined period of 10 years (2013-2023) to keep the volume of studies manageable as well as comprehensive, We encourage future studies to adopt a wider and/or narrower scope to replicate our work. However, the included studies in this review were high quality, sourced from a diverse range of peer-reviewed journals, and covered a considerable time span, thus, contributing to the comprehensive and original nature of our review.

Conclusion

Although there has been a substantial amount of research on the subject of women in academic leadership, most have been in western contexts, and there have been few, if any,

systematic reviews of studies comparing data on our research questions from the UK, Nigeria and South Africa perspective. As the site of many high ranking international universities, the UK has been a leader on gender equality initiatives over the last decade that are worthy of investigation by Nigerian and South African policymakers. As two of the largest economies in Africa, with both the highest number of universities on the continent (Nigeria) and the highest ranking institutions (South Africa), the comparison is a favourable one that could help shape future gender equality policy. This study provides a review of studies on women's leadership in higher education in these countries, and therefore, it plays a critical role in knowledge construction by highlighting the barriers and the measures to overcome the challenges that have been identified.

The study provides a review of 37 articles exploring the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership. The review findings highlight a predominance of qualitative studies in the scholarship. Notably, studies addressing the lived experiences and narratives of women emerge as the overreaching category identified in this review. The identified obstacles were gender bias and stereotyping, family-work conflicts, workload and financial constraints, male-dominated leadership culture, intersection of race and gender, and lack of role models. The literature provides several measures and strategies to overcome these obstacles, including incorporating gendered issues into the professional development and training programmes, promoting organisational change and policy agendas that address gender inequalities, and enabling support mechanisms and networking opportunities for women academics. The findings of this review provide valuable insights for leaders in academia, shedding light on the barriers women face and the strategies proposed to overcome such obstacles in the three countries. The outcome of this review may also enable the governing bodies in higher education institutions, policymakers and governments to understand how to address and take action on issues related to gendered inequalities throughout their educational organisations.

Based on our exploratory review, it is recommended that future research shift its focus towards examining the implementation of such strategies, exploring success stories, and understanding the characteristics of resistance and failures in achieving objectives. Additionally, future research could broaden its scope by including more LMICs from Sub-Saharan Africa. Investigating the presence and also the outcomes of various strategies implemented to address gender inequalities in higher education across the continent would provide guidance for directing attention to the effectiveness of such strategies and identify areas for worthy of continual improvement.

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