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# Gender, Academic Freedom, and Institutional Cultures in Africa: Transforming Practices to Foster Inclusion and Equity

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**Abstract**

*This paper explores the intricate relationship between gender, academic freedom, and institutional cultures in Kenyan higher education institutions. The study delves into how patriarchal norms and institutional hierarchies affect women's access to leadership, equity, and academic freedom. It highlights the systemic barriers women face, including biases in institutional policies, informal practices, and the challenges of navigating male-dominated academic spaces. Drawing on existing literature and a conceptual framework grounded in feminist theory, this paper offers insights into the interplay of gender and institutional cultures in shaping academic experiences. The study concludes with recommendations for fostering inclusive institutional practices and policies to ensure equity and safeguard academic freedom for women in Kenyan universities.*

**Key Words:** Gender, Feminism, Academic Freedom, Institutional Cultures, Institutions of Higher Learning

## 1.0 Introduction

Academic freedom refers to the liberty of scholars, educators, and students to engage in teaching, learning, research, and dissemination of knowledge without undue interference from institutional, political, or societal forces (Altbach, 2001). In African higher education, academic freedom encompasses the right of faculty members to determine the content and methods of teaching, conduct research on topics of their choice, and publish findings without fear of censorship or retaliation (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). It also involves the autonomy of higher education institutions to govern themselves and set academic priorities free from state control (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

In many African contexts, however, academic freedom has been historically constrained by political interference, restrictive state policies, and institutional challenges. For instance, post-independence African governments often perceived universities as tools for nation-building and political socialization, leading to state control over curricula, appointments, and research priorities (Mamdani, 2007). This legacy continues in some countries, where dissenting academic voices are sometimes suppressed (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Furthermore, gender dynamics and hierarchical institutional cultures can shape who has access to academic freedom within universities. Women scholars, for example, may face additional constraints due to gender biases and societal expectations that limit their ability to freely pursue research and academic leadership (Mama, 2003). Efforts to safeguard and promote academic freedom in African universities have gained momentum, with advocacy for institutional reforms, greater university autonomy, and international collaborations aimed at fostering academic freedom (Teferra, 2014). Ensuring academic freedom is essential for fostering intellectual innovation, critical inquiry, and the development of inclusive, equitable higher education systems across the continent.

This paper examines the intersection of gender, academic freedom, and institutional cultures in Africa's higher education institutions. It explores the challenges faced by women in academia as a result of the institutional cultures of African universities. Mama (2005) observes that Africa's universities remain steeped in patriarchal institutional cultures in which women are generally vastly outnumbered, and their intellectual contribution relegated to the fringes or steadfastly ignored. I discuss feminist perspectives in knowledge production in order to examine the marginalization or exclusion of women from knowledge production and propose strategies that can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive academic environment, that

values diverse perspectives and ensures that knowledge production is not only gender-sensitive but also actively works towards dismantling systemic gender inequalities.

The paper adopts an integrative literature review approach combined with a critical feminist lens to analyse the intersection of gender, academic freedom, and institutional cultures in African universities. This approach is particularly suited for examining social and cultural phenomena that are contextually grounded and require theoretical synthesis (Snyder, 2019).

The study seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to transform institutional practices and policies by analysing how systemic barriers influence women's experiences, thus, promoting inclusion and equity. Grounded in feminist institutionalist theory, this paper underscores the need for intentional reforms to dismantle structural inequities and foster environments where all scholars can thrive.

The following section explores how the social relations of gender and institutional cultures in Africa's institutions of higher learning influence women's career progression and academic freedom.

## 2.0 Gender and Institutional Cultures

Institutional cultures in higher learning institutions are defined by the values, norms, and practices that shape the day-to-day operations and social interactions within universities (Acker, 1990). In African higher education, these cultures are often patriarchal, hierarchical, and exclusionary, creating environments that disadvantage women in various aspects of academic life, including leadership, research opportunities, and career advancement (Mama, 2003). Mama writes that women have never been excluded from Africa's post- independence universities, a fact to be proud of, however one cannot take pride in the fact that universities have remained highly male dominated spaces, culturally and numerically (Mama 2007). Morley (2005) affirms that very little is being done to promote the participation of women in knowledge production in institutions of higher learning globally. Some of the challenges that women researchers face pertains to lack of support from their universities and peers (Fathima et al. 2020). Thus, gender inequalities abound in various aspects of life: in gender-blind governance policies, student, worker and faculty numbers, and institutional cultures that objectify women as sexual (Britwum et al. 2015).

The contests around gender in the African university do not only involve management, curricular and pedagogical issues. Sadly, they also involve the bodily expressions of inequitable power relations. Attention is increasingly being paid to the prevalence of sexual

harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) on African campuses (Zvavahera et al. 2021). This can be explained by the fact that many African societies have traditionally been patriarchal, with men holding positions of authority and power. This power dynamic can contribute to the normalization of male dominance and control over women, potentially fostering an environment conducive to sexual harassment and GBV. Also, traditional cultural values that prescribe certain behaviours and characteristics as masculine or feminine may lead to toxic masculinity which can contribute to the perpetuation of aggressive and violent behaviour, including sexual harassment (Aina 2010).

In their examination of institutional cultures and the career trajectories of women faculty Odejide (2007), Prah (2002) as well as Tsikata (2007) noted differences in the experiences of respondents indicating the existence of a gender climate capable of slowing down women's academic progression. Women's disadvantage with regard to time availability for their careers is particularly related to marriage and child-bearing, which for the majority occurs whilst they are still in post-graduate education (Beoku-Betts 2004). In most African contexts, women are socially identified as wives, mothers, and carers, and spend on average significantly more time caring for children and the elderly than men (Beoku-Betts 2004). Reproductive responsibilities reduce many women's opportunities to take up opportunities to study or work internationally, which can be an important source of academic capital and networks that support progression. A study in Rwanda reports that many women 'stuck' at junior levels turn down scholarships for studying abroad due to concerns about the impact on their marriage or having young children whom they are unable to leave behind because of lack of support at home (Masanja 2010). Professional women are therefore constrained in competing with their male counterparts in terms of allocating time to activities that contribute to career progression such as grant and scientific writing and publication (Beoku-Betts 2004). Since women are expected to play their traditional gender roles in the family, it becomes difficult to balance work and family life (Ngure et al. 2016).

Many women also face obstacles in the pursuit of academic careers and in achieving promotion once they have been hired (Liani et al. 2020). To some extent, the concentration of women in the lower academic ranks can be explained by the fact that they tend to take longer to complete their PhDs, spend less time on research and often have fewer publications. Research in Kenya found that men were promoted more quickly than women, especially in public universities even when they had joined the university at the same time and at the same rank. Interview panels for promotion are usually male-dominated, and female candidates for

managerial or professorial positions are often subjected to irrelevant, gender-biased questions (Onsongo 2006). The promotion criteria disadvantage women faculty since it places more focus on research at the expense of teaching and post-graduate student supervision activities that faculty members engage in on daily basis (Malelu et. al. 2017). Additionally, evaluative criteria for promotions may not account for the dual burden of academic and caregiving responsibilities often borne by women (Morley, 2005).

Institutional cultures also shape the academic freedom experienced by women scholars. Mama (2003) highlights that conservative institutional environments often limit the research topics that women can explore without facing social or professional backlash. These restrictions can stifle intellectual creativity and academic contributions from women scholars (Bennett, 2002).

Despite increased publicity and discussions surrounding the inequalities women face in the workplace, there remains a tremendous amount of work to be done to close the gender gap especially in University management (Onyambu 2019). Women are rare in senior management posts due to the normative masculinity of management (K'Odipo 2013) which is attributed to the fact that in the past, top management and leadership positions in African countries, have always carried the notion of masculinity and the overall belief that men make better managers and leaders than women (Kiamba 2006). Little wonder that there is a wide gender gap in University Senate (the highest decision-making body which brings together senior academic and administrative staff of the University). This critical finding supports Mutunga (2015) assertion that women's low participation in decision-making is as a result of low academic and professional qualifications, thus; confining them to lower level academic and administrative positions. It is thus not surprising that the traditional societal conventions regarding gender and institutional management have always excluded women from occupying managerial positions (Maurtin-Cairncross 2014). Even in the contemporary times, culturally, in most African societies, it is believed that men should always lead and women must oblige (Kiamba 2006).

The paucity of women involved in the leadership levels of HEIs compounds the lack of gender-responsive policies. Where there are policies in place, their translation into practice is not adequately or effectively done or monitored, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo (FAWE 2015). Without bodies or persons designated to ensuring that these policies are acted upon, they often remain reference documents that are used to show that efforts have been made to address gender inequality rather than demonstrating commitment to action (FAWE, 2015). Women's capacity to participate in and influence the decisions that affect their lives – from the

household to the highest levels of political decision making – is a basic human right and a prerequisite for responsive and equitable governance. Increasing women's representation and participation at all levels is essential for advancing issues of importance to women on national and local agendas.

Studies have shown that even though academic institutional cultures in many African contexts are visibly opening to women's participation, they continue to perpetuate working cultures that are not favourable to women's social and cultural experiences (Mabokela and Mlambo 2015). The literature that exists suggests that gaining an academic position in an African university is challenging for women, and that maintaining it is even more difficult (Barnes 2007). This has been matched by a lack of respect demonstrated to them in what Morley and others have termed micropolitics – the "subtext of organisational life in which conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power imbalances influence everyday transactions in institutions" (Morley 1999, 25). Reflecting on their early career experiences in a public university in Ghana, participants experienced some form of belittling or discrediting as women, including a female assistant professor being addressed as 'Mrs' whilst male colleagues were addressed as 'doctor' (Beoku-Betts and Wairimu 2005,16). The gender relations of family are also carried over into the workplace, with female academics reporting male colleagues taking a negative attitude towards women who prioritise their careers over marriage and family obligations (Beoku-Betts and Wairimu 2005) and undermining their status and expertise by expecting them to "serve them like their wives would at home" (Mabokela 2003, 22).

Traditionally, women also do not get support from their male counterparts or their employing institutions (Chen et al. 2006; Cohn et al. 2014). The social and professional capital and networks, including peer groups/collegial networks, mentors and role models, are highly influential on scientific career progression (Liani et al. 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that compared to men, women tend to have weaker social capital and networks, particularly as a result of limited mobility for conference attendance due to reproductive responsibilities (Obers 2015). White (1992) observed that women academicians lack in influential organizations and informal career networks, where men have learned the unwritten rules of success. Women face seclusion in such networks through overt ridicule or informal meetings that are held in social places traditionally perceived not fit for women, such as bars. This perception of women has affected their access to research funding and mentorship by their male counterparts and superiors who make decisions on these matters.

In addition to the constraints on taking up networking opportunities, 'old boy' networks tend to exclude women when discussing career progression matters such as promotions and scholarships informally over lunch or evening drinks, as reported by a study in Kenya (Raburu 2015). Men also want to co-author and publish with fellow men, and this leaves women with no mentors and so they end up as solitary publishers (Fisher et al. 1998). Unequal access to research funding and resources can limit women's ability to engage in knowledge production. If women face challenges in securing research grants or accessing necessary facilities, it can hinder their contribution to academic scholarship (Rathgeber 2013).

However, it is also important to appreciate how managers in African universities argue for or against this exclusionist atmosphere and condition. It is not surprising that their perspectives are however, varied based on several factors, including institutional culture, local context, and individual beliefs. Some managers may argue that maintaining certain exclusionist practices is essential for preserving cultural or traditional values within the institution as well as contribute to stability and order within the university, suggesting that a more homogeneous environment may be easier to manage. Others might argue that limited resources, both financial and infrastructural, necessitate focusing on specific priorities, potentially leading to exclusionary practices (Assie-Lumumba 1996). Even with these kind of arguments, it is also important to note that there are managers who have made strides in creating diverse and inclusive environments by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and a broader range of perspectives among students and staff. This is as a result of the need for African universities to be globally competitive, and the fact that inclusivity can attract a diverse pool of talent, including international students and faculty. The arguments may also be based on legal and ethical grounds, for instance, national and international laws that promote equal rights and opportunities in education (Teferra and Altbach 2004)

Gender issues in African higher education are thus complex and require and deserve further study. As discussed above, a variety of initiatives have been implemented to remedy this unhealthy scenario. While a few of these initiatives have been productive, others have yet to achieve any real change. These initiatives continue to be plagued by subtle resistance, implicit and explicit oversight, a lack of serious recognition, and ignorance.

The following section discusses feminist perspectives and academic freedom and proposes strategies that can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive academic environment, that values diverse perspectives and ensures that knowledge production is not only gender-sensitive but also actively works towards dismantling systemic gender inequalities.

## 3.0 Feminist Perspectives and Academic Freedom

While addressing gender issues in education and academic freedom, the role of feminists thinking in shaping the theory of equality and equity cannot be ignored. Feminism is a global phenomenon which addresses various issues related to women across the world in a specific manner as applicable to a particular culture or society (Mama, 2017). Feminist theory is an approach to understanding and conceptualizing gender roles and advocates for the inclusion of women's interests in social organization. It is an understanding of gender inequality in structural and systematic terms and is committed to a transformation of intersectionally unequal power relations (Bustelo et al.,2016; Stachowitsch 2018). Feminist knowledge as we see it is also situated, plural, political and contested, reflexive and a product of engagement by feminist researchers, practitioners and activists (Bustelo et al., 2016; Stachowitsch, 2018).

I chose to write from a feminist perspective because feminist theories, first of all, explain and suggest directions for change in social and environmental factors that create or contribute to dilemmas and problems experienced by women. Second, they explain and propose interventions for women's intrapersonal and interpersonal concerns. Third, feminist theories provide a perspective for evaluating social and environmental experiences of groups and individuals, regardless of sex or gender. The emphasis placed on each of these three areas, along with the centrality of additional factors that influence marginalization, oppression, and unwarranted constraints, depends on which feminist theory is used (Okoli 2021).

There are different strands of feminism (Liberal, Radical, Marxist) which have emerged, all acknowledging patriarchy as an oppressive force against women's freedom but vary in relationship to creating possibilities of change (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). All the different strands agree on the importance of gender equality, but they disagree on how to achieve it (Freedman 2002). The first wave of feminism was called Liberal feminism which emerged in the early 1900s and advocated primarily for the equal rights of women (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Liberal feminists were concerned with women's rights in the public spheres, such as receiving fairer access to education and careers (Delamont 2003). According to Haralambos and Holborn (2000), liberal feminism aims for gradual change in the political, economic and social systems of western societies, with a focus on its cultures and the attitudes of individuals rather than in the structures and institutions. Liberal feminism however, ignores racial and class oppression and fails to address the entrenched nature of patriarchy.

The emergence of Marxist and radical feminism sought to improve women's rights through empowerment, emancipation and transformation (Delamont 2003; Hughes 2002). Radical feminism brought to light the idea of "the personal is political" as in Morley (1999, 3), a strong commitment to understanding a woman's personal experience in relationship to existing power structures and the oppressive forces within society at large. Marxist feminism does not attribute women's exploitation entirely to men, but they see capitalism rather than patriarchy as being the principle source of women's oppression. Like radical feminism, they see women's unpaid work as housewives and mothers as one of the main ways in which women are exploited.

The realization that women's experiences are to a large extent influenced by their location and context has led to feminists like Spivak (2000) to advocate the use of different feminist perspectives in the analysis of women's oppression. The diversity of women's location has meant that feminists developed different strategies to overcome their oppression. This has led to the emergence of other feminist perspectives such as postcolonial feminism, postmodern feminism, and African feminism (Beasley 1999). This paper draws on African feminism because there are certain aspects of African culture that continue to play an important role in determining women's participation in the social, economic and political development. Another reason for drawing on African feminism is the fact that, often there are assumptions made especially in early western feminist writing that imply that women in low income countries lack organised forms of addressing issues affecting women (Mama 2017).

It is important to highlight the diversity in African feminism just as there are different strands in western feminism as Nnaemeka (2005) observes that, the plurality of African feminism reflects the fluidity and dynamism of the cultural imperatives, historical forces and localised realities conditioning women's activities and movement in Africa. However, Nnaemeka (2005) further notes that there are commonalities too and shared beliefs among the different African feminisms. Because African feminism is based on African culture and is resistant to western feminism, it has different characteristics and objectives. For example, African feminism is distinctly pro-natal, meaning that African feminism values the reproductive roles of women and the ability to give birth is not considered subordinate to other roles women play in society (Mikell 1997). The pro-natal aspect of African feminism is reflected in the fact that in many parts of Africa, women strive to bear and rear children in addition to having economic and political roles (Mikell 1997).

While western feminism tends to emphasise autonomy for women, African feminism has tended to emphasise culturally linked communal forms of public participation (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 2000). The language of African feminism is one of collaboration and negotiation with men and sometimes involves a compromise. It therefore, 'does not seek to disrupt, deconstruct and eliminate patriarchy as is advocated by radical western feminism' (Nnaemeka 2005, 6). The underlying framework for this points out that, the forces of patriarchy which pervade the majority of African societies skew the balance of rights to mainstream development in favour of the male gender (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 2000).

Although there have been attempts to redefine the concept of gender in African development to include not only the direct and overt violations of the rights of women, these have been shattered by the dominant patriarchal ideologies by governments and communities (Mama 2006). However, postcolonial feminism in Africa is characterised by the fight against male domination and inequality. Typical to this is the fight against gender-based violence, traditional practices that are harmful to women, property and inheritance rights, equality in education and equal participation in governance. A major tool was advocacy, lobbying and activism. It was during this era that the African continent realised the springing up of several civil society groups and non-governmental organizations that sought to promote the rights of women (Olutayo and Yalley 2019). The line of argument in this paper has been to identify and discuss the impact of the various feminist movements in Africa on knowledge production.

University education is an ideal environment for the production of scholarships on women and gender issues. Therefore, the women's studies are the academic arm of the women's movement in the 1960s and exist in tandem with feminist scholarship. It is a key example of new intellectual arena as it emerges as a study in many Universities in Africa. Women's Studies functioned to develop a woman-oriented understanding of the world, to seek out the causalities for the oppression of women and examine the strategies for change. The field has been motivated to transform society in order to achieve equality for women (Mama, 1996). Gender studies emerged out of women studies. Feminists, especially liberal feminists contended that the total liberation, equality, and development of women can best be achieved when both men and women are considered in the development process. Thus the philosophy of gender and development became prominent in the quest for women's development (Olutayo and Yalley 2019).

It is important to note that numerous universities have made efforts to increase the participation of women both as students and faculty members. Often, these efforts have come

as a result of lobbying and activism by feminists. Affirmative action strategies undertaken by public universities have included reducing the entrance requirements for women; providing remedial courses for women; and/or providing financial assistance specifically for female students. However, assessments of the value of affirmative action strategies have been mixed. On one hand, they have led to slightly higher levels of female participation but on the other hand, they have sometimes backfired against women with male accusations of favouritism and assumptions of female intellectual inferiority (Pereira 2017).

Despite the growth in feminist scholarship, masculinist thought continues to dominate intellectual work and this has restricted the character of knowledge produced. Gender continues to be absent from the analysis and this is seen, firstly, by simply not placing women's presence and concerns on the agenda of intellectual work, or by doing so in ways that are limiting and distorted. The second mode involves ignoring how masculinities may be inscribed in structures, processes and practices of domination. Pereira (2017) notes that most scholars show astoundingly little or no awareness of concepts and perspectives arising out of feminist scholarship. Contributions also reflect highly uneven levels of gender awareness, with one or two writers demonstrating far more sensitivity to theory and concepts that focus on gender than the vast majority. What this suggests is that feminist thought and imagination are permeating the work of some scholars but that this influence, among the present generation of scholars, remains relatively rare. It is important to acknowledge the potential for feminist scholarship to transform the ways in which African realities are understood, with attendant implications for progressive social change. However, this possibility has patently not materialised, despite the rapid expansion of feminist intellectual work inside and outside the academy since the early 1980s (Pereira 2017).

These notwithstanding, many universities have established programmes in gender studies and/or women's studies and/or centres. The programmes were set up to meet different types of needs. Although the number of women's and gender studies centres at the universities has grown, they have had limited impact on changing gender relations at their institutions. They often operate in isolation from other departments and the mainstream activities of the universities; they lack adequate staff and resources to run gender sensitisation programmes; and their directors sometimes have little knowledge of or interest in gender issues (Rathgeber 2013). As Diaw, (2007) and Shackleton (2007) observe, these centres were established in ways that muted their effectiveness and the problem arises from the low institutional priority accorded gender in universities. Such low prioritisation arises out of ignorance about gender

issues, an absence "of serious engagement with the realities of gendered power relations or theorisation around gender in the workplace" (Shackleton 2007, 36). These attitudes which underscore institutional cultures result in a persistent institutional reaction that tend to neutralise attempts to confront "specific gender challenges" (ibid.). This confirms that in spite of official approval, gender centres have to continuously engage institutional cultures expressed in personal attitudes and actions of key persons within the university administration in order to avoid marginalisation or outright rejection. Notwithstanding such problems, over the past two decades, these centres have produced a cadre of trained feminist scholars and activists who now bring their skills and knowledge to different facets of their societies (Ampofo et al. 2004).

**4.0 Strategizing Gender Equity in African Universities**

As we think about our Universities as sites of knowledge production in the 21st century, we ask: if the universities remain unequal and difficult places for women, what kind of male or female citizens are they now turning out? Has enough been done to decolonize the structures, expectations and horizons of our universities? If social burdens imposed on women students and faculty, which prevent them from taking their places in traditionally-configured academies are actually increasing, where should our priorities now lie? It is clearly time to rethink and take action and support the work of transnational feminist networks and organizations (Barnes and Mama 2007). It imperative, therefore, that rigorous feminist work requires considerable reflexivity about the assumptions used to make sense of "what is": social realities and the ways in which these realities are re/presented in knowledge production.

The necessity for gender and feminist studies to deal with masculinist and patriarchal domination in an environment where substantive representation of women is shunned and administratively stifled cannot be overemphasized. Thus, applying a feminist perspective is crucial for addressing equity and equality in knowledge production in universities in Africa (Carotenuto et. al. 2014). Universities have the potential to accelerate this process by undertaking a set of strategic activities which include: adopting an intersectional approach that considers the interconnectedness of gender with other social categories such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 2000). This perspective recognizes that individuals may experience multiple forms of discrimination and privilege simultaneously which allows for a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and helps in addressing multiple dimensions of inequality. In the same vein, feminist perspectives encourage a critical

examination of power structures within universities. This involves questioning and challenging hierarchical systems that perpetuate gender-based inequalities, both in academic positions and decision-making roles.

Implementing critical feminist pedagogy within academic programs to challenge traditional gender norms and power structures is critical (Amaefula 2021). This involves creating curricula that critically examine patriarchy, masculinist ideologies, and their impact on various aspects of society as well as the development of inclusive curricula that incorporate feminist theories and perspectives (Bennet 2003). The implication of this is the integration of diverse voices, acknowledging the contributions of women scholars, and addressing gender-related issues in various disciplines. Conducting research that exposes and analyses gender inequalities within the academic environment can serve as a basis for advocating policy changes and raising awareness about the need for substantive representation of women in academia (Pereira 2017). Engaging in institutional advocacy and activism to challenge gender-based discrimination as well as launching visibility campaigns that showcase the contributions of women scholars in various fields may assist in highlighting the achievements of women and can challenge stereotypes contributing to changing perceptions about women's capabilities and expertise. This may involve collaboration with women's rights organizations, student groups, and other stakeholders to press for policy changes and institutional reforms (Bennet 2003).

Establishing networking and mentorship programs that specifically support women scholars and building strong networks and mentorship relationships can provide women with the support and guidance needed to navigate a hostile environment (Carotenuto et. al. 2014). This may also include advocating for and working towards the implementation of gender-inclusive policies within academic institutions which includes policies related to hiring, promotion, tenure, and addressing gender-based discrimination Creating awareness by organizing workshops and training sessions on gender sensitivity, inclusivity, and the impact of masculinist and patriarchal ideologies can be a much needed strategy (Bennet 2008). Media platforms and public outreach can be utilized to raise awareness about the challenges women face in academic settings. This can create public pressure and draw attention to the need for substantive representation of women in academia and can contribute to raising awareness and fostering a more supportive and respectful academic culture (Rathgeber 2013).

Legal avenues to address gender-based discrimination may also be explored. Depending on the context, legal action or the threat of legal action can sometimes be effective in compelling institutions to address issues of inequality (Gaidzanwa 2007). Collaborating with

allies who share the goal of challenging masculinist and patriarchal domination can amplify the impact of advocacy efforts. This may include building alliances with like-minded individuals and groups, both within and outside the academic community as well as encouraging men within academic institutions to actively support gender equality initiatives (Rathgeber 2013). Engaging men as allies is essential for challenging and changing the norms and structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

The ways in which power and resources circulate serves, on one hand, to undermine feminist projects where they exist in universities, or on the other hand, to exclude gender conversations altogether through institutional norms and practices (Gaidzanwa 2007; Tsikata 2007; Benett 2003). Addressing masculinist and patriarchal domination requires persistence and a commitment to long-term systemic change. By employing a combination of these strategies, gender and feminist studies can contribute to transforming institutions and creating environments that are more inclusive, equitable, and supportive of substantive representation of women.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The examination of gender and institutional cultures within higher education in Africa reveals a complex interplay of patriarchal norms, hierarchical structures, and exclusionary practices that undermine women's full participation and academic freedom. Despite notable strides in expanding access to education, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions and face systemic barriers in recruitment, promotion, and research. Institutional cultures often perpetuate gender inequalities through informal networks, biased policies, and environments that tolerate harassment and discrimination.

To transform these cultures and promote gender equity, it is imperative to adopt comprehensive strategies, including gender-sensitive policies, capacity-building initiatives, mentorship programs, and the deliberate inclusion of women in decision-making processes. Fostering inclusive institutional environments not only ensures justice and equity but also enhances academic innovation, intellectual diversity, and social transformation. As African higher education institutions evolve, addressing the intersection of gender and institutional culture remains a vital pathway toward a more equitable and inclusive academic landscape.

By challenging entrenched norms and advocating for equitable practices, stakeholders in African higher education can build institutions that uphold academic freedom for all and empower women scholars to thrive as agents of knowledge creation and leadership.

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