

# Exploring the Relationship Between Gender and Competencies Development in Higher Education Institutions: Perspectives From a University in Zimbabwe

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This research explores challenges faced by female academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) as they strive to cultivate the competencies necessary for a sustainable future. To delve into these challenges, a qualitative case study was conducted at a Zimbabwean university. All 64 academics employed at the university participated in the study, employing focus group discussions, face-to-face interviews, and online questionnaires, adapting to COVID-19 restrictions. The findings uncovered a lack of gender integration in university programmes and initiatives, leading to unequal engagement and limited access to resources and opportunities. A substantial portion of female academics lacked essential competencies in research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and grant proposal writing. These imbalances stemmed from male academics holding influential roles and controlling significant resources. Consequently, the research concludes that the institution's prevailing culture, systems, and procedures impede the development of vital skills among female academics, restricting their ability to contribute fully to a better future.

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values. Gender equality is a fundamental component of development, and it is crucial to incorporate gender considerations into university policies and practices, addressing not only social justice and equality but also broader societal needs (Zvavahera et al., 2021).

## 1. Introduction

Despite their academic achievements, women still face obstacles while trying to succeed in a variety of professional fields, including academics. These obstacles stem from existing inequalities that are deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of families and institutional cultures that relegate the role of women to a subordinate position (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023; Moyo, 2021; Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2013; Sithole, Manwa and Manwa, 2013; Guzura and Chigora, 2012). Women's entry into higher education and their significant contributions to research and innovation and other areas have been impacted by this enduring influence (Oláh et al., 2018). A study by Calderon (2023) highlights that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 24.3% of university academics are female, impeding their progression to leadership roles and the development of critical competencies. Similarly, in the Netherlands, as of 2018, only 24.2% of full professors were women (LNVH, 2020) because they are perceived to be lacking the critical competencies and exposure to hold such positions. This is because female academics lack orientation and support from their male counterparts and their institutions (LNVH, 2016). Gender disparities undermine the core principles that universities are built upon. According to Portnoi (2003), for universities to serve as leaders and exemplars of democracy, they must actively embrace inclusivity and democratic

The representation of women in higher academic positions remains relatively low in the European Union. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, the proportion of female professors in the EU increased slightly from 24% to 26%. However, only 23.6% of higher education institutions heads were female in 2019 (European Commission, 2019). Japan reports the lowest percentage of female vice-chancellors at 2.3%, followed by Kuwait and India at 3%, Turkey at 7%, Malaysia at 15%, and the United Kingdom (UK) at 29%. In contrast, Hong Kong has one female vice-chancellor (Forestier, 2013). Female academics' success rates as academics of distinction are also impacted by discrimination and they are not given the opportunity to showcase their talent and zeal for excellence (Wittman et al., 2019; Bedi et al., 2012). This data paints a grim global scenario, indicating the impact of gender in the development of competencies in higher education institutions, particularly on female academics.

Academic staff is expected to contribute to the advancement of their disciplines through academic publications, innovation, securing research funding, delivering effective instruction, demonstrating service and leadership qualities, and progressing along the professional tenure recognition pathway (van Dijk et al., 2020). This academic journey needs support and mentorship from seasoned academics. However, female academics are found to be lacking in

most of these competencies because of a lack of support and mentorship from seasoned academics, particularly male academics (Zvavahera, 2021). This could be one of the reasons why most female academics do not hold influential positions in HEIs across the globe. Concerningly, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles within HEIs, which hinders the development of critical competencies required for sustainability (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023). Female academics encounter challenges in developing sustainable competencies because of male-dominated institutional cultures, a dearth of female mentors, and the struggle to balance family responsibilities arising from gendered domestic labour (Bunyi, 2003; Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023). Additionally, implicit and subconscious biases in recruitment, research allocation, peer review outcomes, and citation rates further compound these difficulties (Zvavahera et al., 2021). The push for increased female representation in academic leadership positions has been mainly influenced by neoliberal feminist ideologies, which emphasise gender parity and numerical balance (Adelabu and Adepoju, 2007). However, this perspective has a limitation in that it overlooks the real-life experiences of women academics within HEIs (Tsverukayi, 2023). Despite many countries setting gender equality as a top priority to achieve by 2030, a lack of commitment makes this objective a distant and fading dream (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020; Adelabu and Adepoju, 2007). Gender mainstreaming plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainability goals, necessitating affirmative actions by university leadership to support women and integrate gender perspectives throughout policy processes and implementation. A study conducted by Ilagan (2019) in the Philippines revealed that faculty members and administrators displayed a moderate level of awareness concerning gender-mainstreaming efforts at the university.

Even though Zimbabwe is committed to the elimination of all forms of inequality within its society, female academics continue to occupy subordinate positions compared to their male counterparts (Musasa, Nhekede and Koke, 2022; Zvavahera et al., 2021). Thus, for Zimbabwe's sustainable future, it is imperative to accelerate Sustainable Development Goal Number 5, which seeks to establish gender equality and empower female academics by fostering sustainable skills. The Government of Zimbabwe acknowledges the crucial role of women in the country's development agenda, which seeks to ensure inclusivity for all. With women comprising over half (52%) of the population (ZIMSTAT, 2022), their untapped potential becomes a significant asset. In line with the United Nations' (UN) vision, Zimbabwe shares the aspiration to uphold gender equality as an essential human right, recognising its indispensable role in fostering peace, prosperity, and sustainability. This is also consistent with Section 17 subsection (1) of Zimbabwe's Constitution, which stipulates that: The State must promote full gender balance in the Zimbabwean society and in particular:

- a. the State must promote the full participation of women in all spheres of Zimbabwean society on the basis of equality with men;
- b. the State must take all measures, including legislative measures, needed to ensure that-(i) both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level (p. 19).

This study contributes to a deeper academic understanding of how gender dynamics influence the development and acquisition of competencies within HEIs. This understanding is valuable not only in Zimbabwe but also in other similar contexts globally. It further offers insights that could inform policies and initiatives within the Zimbabwean university system, helping institutions create more

inclusive and equitable educational environments that empower all academic staff to develop their competencies regardless of gender. By shedding light on any disparities and challenges faced by different genders in higher education, the study contributes to discussions and actions aimed at improving gender equality within HEIs, ultimately promoting diversity and inclusivity. Empirical data and insights gained from this study could provide a valuable foundation for future research, helping researchers build upon and expand the knowledge base in the field of gender and competencies in higher education.

This study is aimed at investigating the relationship between gender and the development of competencies in a Zimbabwean university, with the goal of providing insights into the potential challenges, opportunities, and areas for improvement in fostering gender-inclusive competency development within higher education institutions. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. Assess the current level of gender mainstreaming in the institution under the study;
- ii. Evaluate levels of sustainable development competencies of staff in the institution under the study; and
- iii. Identify challenges affecting the development of sustainable competencies in academic staff in the institution.

## 2. The Theory of Intersectionality

The theoretical foundation of this study's literature is underpinned by the theory of intersectionality, which recognises that gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity, leading to distinct experiences of privileges and discrimination. The rationale is that the theory assists in understanding the viewpoints of disadvantaged female academics and sheds light on the complex mechanisms at play. Because of these societal and institutional marginalisations, Zvavahera et al. (2021) propose supporting female academics, considering their disadvantaged position in both society and the workplace, and their significant contribution to reducing the gender gap and promoting academic equality in HEIs. Spreitzer and Porath (2012) argue that developing competencies in HEIs can only be achieved when efforts are made to improve the future for everyone, particularly women and girls, through fair education, equal opportunities, and resources. When examining the impact of the theory of intersectionality between gender and sustainable development competencies in HEIs, it is critical to consider the following:

### 2.1. Diversity and Inclusiveness

Intersectionality recognises that individuals possess multiple identities, and the interplay of these identities influences their life experiences and professional journey. This understanding allows HEIs to acknowledge the diverse make-up of academic staff, leading to an appreciation of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by both male and female academics (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023). As a result, there is a greater opportunity for fostering a more welcoming and supportive environment for all. The global empowerment and social change movements heavily rely on higher education and research as the key pillars for socio-economic development. Apart from their primary role in education, universities also play a significant part in promoting gender equality, diversity, and inclusion within society as a whole. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that universities themselves are organisations that have both gender-specific and gender-related aspects that affect the development of critical competencies (Rosa, Drew and Canavan, 2020). Despite this, HEIs

remain pivotal in driving progress and positive change in society which is critical for sustainable development (Zvavahera, 2023).

### 2.2. Enhanced Understanding of Gender Issues

Traditional gender perspectives might overlook the diverse experiences of male and female academics but intersectionality appreciates that male and female academics transition into the world of work differently. Intersectionality theory helps in understanding how gender intersects with other factors such as socio-economic status, and how these intersections influence the sustainable development of competencies in both male and female academics in HEIs (Crenshaw, 1991). This leads to more comprehensive and nuanced approaches to addressing gender-related issues in HEIs and other sections of society.

### 2.3. Social Justice and Equity

Intersectionality emphasises the importance of addressing structural inequalities and social injustices. By applying this theory in higher education, institutions can take proactive steps to identify and rectify discriminatory practices, unequal access to resources, and power imbalances that hinder sustainable development efforts, particularly for female academics (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013).

### 2.4. Research and Curriculum Development

Intersectionality encourages more comprehensive research and curriculum development that considers the multidimensional nature of human experiences (Butler-Henderson, 2022). It promotes interdisciplinary approaches that consider gender, class, and other factors in sustainable development studies and related fields.

### 2.5. Engagement and Advocacy

HEIs play a vital role in shaping future leaders and change-makers (Showunmi, 2020; Nichols and Stahl, 2019). By integrating the theory of intersectionality into their programmes, projects, and activities, institutions can foster academics' and students' understanding of complex social issues negating gender equality and encourage them to advocate for sustainable development practices that are sensitive to the needs of diverse communities, in particularly women and girls.

### 2.6. Policy Formulation

Intersectionality informs policy development and implementation, guiding HEIs in creating more inclusive policies that promote gender equality and sustainable development on campus and in the broader community (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023). Incorporating intersectionality theory between gender and sustainable development competencies in HEIs can lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to addressing social and economic injustices between male and female academics. It helps in understanding the diverse experiences of both male and female academics, promoting equity and social justice, and enhancing the effectiveness of sustainable development efforts (Hawke, 2007). By embracing this perspective, HEIs can create positive impacts on their communities and prepare future generations to contribute to a more just and sustainable world. The following section provides a global overview of gender equality in HEIs.

## 3. An Overview of Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions

Gender inequality remains a pressing worldwide issue, notably affecting the representation and influence of female academics in higher education and the global development agenda (Musasa, Nhekede, and Koke, 2022; Zvavahera et al., 2021; Airini et al., 2011; Davidson and Burke, 2004), as men continue to dominate HEIs. Despite this concern, little progress has been made in promoting females' active involvement in knowledge production within higher learning institutions on an international scale, as highlighted by Morley (2005). Knowledge production encompasses a wide range of crucial activities, including research, innovation, creation, analysis, and documentation of valuable information aimed at addressing global challenges both presently and in the future. Unfortunately, these essential competencies are frequently found to be lacking among female academics across the globe as a result of a lack of support and exposure (Nketiah, 2019).

Mouzughi (2022) makes the case that leadership in HEIs should assume responsibility for the guardianship of merit-based development and promotion, given the dearth of female academic leaders worldwide. Since female academics are significantly underrepresented at all levels, gender disparities in academia continue unabatedly, which makes it difficult for them to assume leadership positions (LNVH, 2020; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013). Despite increased access to education for women, Mouzughi (2022) notes that this has not translated into greater representation in leadership roles or equal engagement with male counterparts in HEIs worldwide and this is blamed on a lack of competencies in most essential areas. Further research reveals that while performing comparable work, female academics in some parts of the world are paid less than their male counterparts (Brower and James, 2020; LNVH, 2016). Due to these and other challenges, female academics frequently experience stalled careers and ultimately decide to leave their jobs to focus on caregiving (LNVH, 2019; Shen, 2013; Ceci and Williams, 2011). According to a related study by van Veelen and Derks (2021), female academics in their early careers lack the greatest match, which reduces their level of job engagement. They also encounter occupational stereotypes and lack a sense of identity and direction. Female academics continue to face discrimination globally, especially in academia and they lack competencies in areas of research and innovation (Guzura, 2012). This demonstrates the lack of support from their male peers in developing the critical competencies for sustainability. The scarcity of female academic leaders worldwide necessitates that HEIs leadership take responsibility for recognising the efforts of female academics and reward them accordingly.

Unfortunately, female researchers face several challenges, including insufficient institutional and peer support (Cohn et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2006). Female academics have been denied research opportunities, lack mentorship, limited chances of promotion, and restricted attendance at international conferences (Fathima et al., 2020). The extent of this social exclusion is well demonstrated by Fahmy and Young (2017), who observe that the majority of articles published in the Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice are authored by male academics. More so, male academics tend to collaborate and publish with other male researchers, leaving female academics with fewer opportunities for mentorship and often leading them to publish in isolation (Fisher et al., 1998, p. 36). The literature also shows that women are underrepresented in PhD and master's programs globally, which has an impact on their employment and advancement to leadership and decision-making roles (Sax et al., 2002; Rice et al., 2007; Snell et al.,

2009). In the following section, attention is directed towards the Zimbabwean context.

## 4. The Zimbabwean Context

Zimbabwe is firmly dedicated to attaining gender equality and promoting women's empowerment. To uphold this commitment, the country endorsed several international and regional agreements focused on gender equality. These instruments include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), the African Charter on the Rights of Women, and the Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development (GoZ, 2017). The efforts to promote gender equality in Zimbabwe are supported by both the Zimbabwean Constitution and the National Gender Policy (NGP, 2017). It is evident that the realisation of full human potential and sustainable development hinges on ensuring that women are not deprived of their opportunities for sustainable growth. Consequently, empowering female academics becomes an essential priority, as this will allow them to develop critical competencies. The attainment of Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, which is to attain gender equality and empower all women and girls, will provide substantial momentum for addressing other development goals (Doroh, 2017). Gender equality serves as both a fundamental human right and an essential cornerstone for fostering a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.

Even though the Constitution of Zimbabwe calls for equal opportunities for all, female academics continue to face discrimination (Zvavahera et al., 2021; Mutambisi et al., 2021; Chauraya and Manyike, 2014)). A study conducted in a Zimbabwean agricultural institution reveals that the practical implementation of gender-specific practices has not received adequate attention (Dickens, Nhlengethwa and Ndhlovu, 2019). The Zimbabwe National Gender Policy requires HEIs and other organisations in the country to implement gender equality programmes through gender mainstreaming, with the aim of achieving gender equality. However, there are noticeable disparities between the intended practice and the actual implementation of gender mainstreaming in HEIs, as highlighted by Muchabaiwa and Chauraya (2022), not much is being done. According to Van Veelen and Derks (2021), female academics in the early stages of their careers lack support and face occupational stereotypes, hindering their job engagement and sense of identity and direction. This lack of support and orientation leads to a deficiency in critical competencies for sustainability.

In 1995, the University of Zimbabwe introduced an Affirmative Action Programme to address enrollment gaps between male and female students. While this programme aimed to empower historically marginalised girls by granting them access to the same degree programmes as their male counterparts, it fell short of fully integrating gender equality into its overall programmes and projects. Consequently, the lack of comprehensive integration of gender-responsive policies and practices throughout the institution's operations continues to perpetuate male dominance. Although universities have made efforts to address gender gaps in student enrollment and performance, little attention has been given to gender discrepancies in their management structures. As a result of the lack of gender mainstreaming, there is a significant female leadership gap in Zimbabwean HEIs (Zvavahera et al., 2021).

Demonstrating a lack of governmental commitment, the recent Education 5.0 Framework adopts a gender-neutral approach, thereby restricting the potential for female academics to make advancements (Muchabaiwa and Chauraya, 2022). Ochieng (2014) notes that Kenyan HEIs share similar concerns regarding

institutional settings and regulatory structures that hinder the realisation of gender equality and the cultivation of sustainable skills. This viewpoint finds additional validation from Musasa, Nhekede, and Koke (2022), who highlight that the quota system in Zimbabwean politics primarily prioritises numerical representation over substantial decision-making responsibilities. Neglecting gender equality at the highest echelons of power could communicate an inappropriate message to HEIs and other entities. Hence, it becomes imperative for HEIs' leadership to underscore the interconnection between women's educational achievements, economic progress, productivity levels, gender parity, and women's empowerment. HEIs assume a critical role as agents of change in shaping a more promising future for forthcoming generations through their leadership. The ensuing section delves into the study's methodology.

## 5. Methodology

The study utilised the qualitative methodology to assess the influence of gender on the development of competencies in a university in Zimbabwe. The qualitative approach was employed because it facilitated an exploration of the experiences, beliefs, attitudes, interactions, and behaviours of academics in a higher education setup. A single university was selected due to its capacity to facilitate an in-depth and thorough examination of this particular case, producing valuable insights that could have been diluted or missed when investigating multiple institutions. This institution possessed distinctive attributes, including a diverse academic staff representing a wide range of nationalities, races, religions, cultures, ages, genders, and educational backgrounds.

The study involved the entire academic staff population of the university, consisting of 64 academics. Due to the limited size of this population, no sampling was done. An online semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 51 respondents and 43 responded. The questionnaire offered a blend of standardised questions and the chance for participants to expand upon their responses.

To gain a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the challenges faced by academics by gender, in developing critical competencies within the institution, one focus group was formed consisting of 5 male and 5 female academics. The objectives of these discussions were twofold: firstly, they aimed to generate an extensive dataset and knowledge base, ensuring that the data saturation point was reached. Additionally, responses from the focus group served as a means of validating the information provided by online participants and Deans. Secondly, this session was designed to enhance the study's credibility by incorporating peer reviews, debriefing, member verification, and providing detailed descriptions of the findings. The ten participants were purposefully selected based on:

- Willingness of the respondents to participate in the focus group discussions;
- Academics with five years or more in a university; and
- Gender—the effect of gender on the development of critical competencies

The University had three Deans and they were presented with an open-ended questionnaire, enabling them to furnish elaborate and nuanced responses. This encouraged the Deans to articulate their perspectives authentically, potentially unveiling unforeseen insights. The researchers subsequently probed specific areas requiring a more profound comprehension of the challenges confronted by male and female academics in cultivating crucial

skills. The decision to interview the Deans was based on their assumed responsibility for academic and administrative leadership in matters within their respective faculties, as well as their role in recommending and evaluating programmes aligned with institutional and national goals. The participation of the Deans in the interviews helped enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. This combination of methods provided a comprehensive vantage point for examining the subject at hand. The total number of academics that participated in the study was 56 representing an 88% response rate.

To ensure the protection of participants' identities, no names or email addresses were collected, and the responses were anonymised when posted online. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to uphold the integrity, validity, and significance of the research findings. Both the respondents and the institution provided informed consent after being informed about the study's objectives, methods, potential benefits, drawbacks, and their rights. Participants had the freedom to choose their involvement in the study and could withdraw at any time without needing to provide a justification. The rights and welfare of the participants were safeguarded, and the researchers upheld research integrity to ensure the study's responsible conduct and its potential to benefit academics, society, and policymakers.

The findings of the study were presented using narratives and tables, which facilitated a concise and straightforward representation of the results. The presentation and discussion of the findings followed the sequence of the study's objectives. The three Deans were identified as Dean 1, Dean 2, and Dean 3, with Dean 1 being female and Deans 2 and 3 being male.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are fully analysed and discussed in this section, with emphasis placed on their importance, constraints, and ramifications. This is important because it enabled the researchers to participate in academic discussions, advance knowledge, and offer insightful information for future research.

### 6.1. Statistics on the Respondents' Demographics

Background data about the respondents' age, education, and work experience are provided here. Among the respondents, 59% were male, while 41% were female. In terms of age distribution, 46% of

the respondents fell within the 51-60 age bracket, 28% belonged to the 41-50 age group, 24% were in the 31-40 age range, and 2% were in the 20-30 age category. Sixty-eight had between 6 to 15 years of work experience, and 25% possessed more than 16 years of experience, whilst 7% had between 0-5 years of work experience. Regarding academic qualifications, 65% of the participants held PhDs, with 45% being male academics and 20% being female academics. Additionally, 13% of the male respondents held master's degrees, along with 22% of female participants (refer to Table 1 for details).

Based on the background data, a significant 59% of the respondents were male academics, while female academics constituted 41%. This suggests a potential disparity in the distribution of authority positions within the institution, with men possibly dominating the majority of such roles. The following section presents and discusses data related to objectives 1, 2, and 3.

Age range	Male	Female	Total	As a %
20-30	1	0	1	2
31-40	7	4	11	24%
41-50	8	5	13	28%
51-60	11	10	21	46
Total	27	19	46	100

  

Experience in years	Male	Female	Total	As a %
0-5	2	1	3	7
6-10	9	7	16	34
11-15	10	6	16	34
16 and above	6	5	11	25
Total	27	19	46	100

  

Educational level	Male	Female	Total	As a %
PhD	21	9	30	65
Masters	6	10	16	35
Bachelors	0	0	0	0
Total	27	19	46	100

Table 1. Demographic Data of the Respondents

**Objective 1:** Assess the current level of gender mainstreaming in the institution under study

Table 2 illustrates the University's workforce composition, distinguishing between academic and non-academic staff. Within the academic category, males comprise a larger proportion at 61%, while female academics represent 39%. In the non-academic staff category, males make up 55%, while females constitute 45%.

Categories of staff	Zimbabwe		International		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Academic staff	31	22	8	3	64
Non-teaching staff	158	131	3	0	292
<b>Total</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>356</b>

**Table 2.** Staff Complement

Table 3 shows information from the Human Resources Department that illustrates the gender-based distribution of senior positions in the University, revealing a rather somber scenario with 21 male academics and only 8 female academics occupying such positions.

Position	Male	Female	Total
Executive Cabinet	3	2	6
Directors	6	0	6
Professors	4	1	5
Deans	2	1	3
Heads of Departments	6	4	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>29</b>

**Table 3.** Senior Positions by Gender

Dean 1 had this to say:

*Female academics are underrepresented in senior positions and decision-making at this university, hindering female academics' capacity. We have limited access to resources and opportunities depriving us of the chance to develop crucial skills that are important for our career progression. Even female students lack female role models in this institution. Because there is no emphasis on gender equality, incidences of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, still occur on campus, creating an unsafe environment for female students and staff. Another challenge is that the institution lacks a designated gender focal point and there are no established guidelines on whom to consult regarding gender-sensitive matters. The major challenge is the non-existence of gender mainstreaming.*

The data collected from both focus group discussions and online questionnaires confirmed the presence of sexual harassment within the institution. The individuals accused of such behaviours were identified as male members of the University staff. During the focus group discussions, a female academic disclosed that the University's practices and processes appeared to favour male academics. She went on to mention that when promotions for senior positions occurred, only one out of the five individuals promoted was female. Interestingly, a male participant in the focus group shared the viewpoint that female academics might not be proactively pursuing opportunities for self-development, which could affect their chances of being considered for promotion. However, it is worth noting that the majority of responses from online questionnaires and focus group presentations indicated that the University's policies were perceived as gender-neutral or impartial.

In terms of curriculum development and implementation, the Deans concurred that there were no regulations for integrating gender, meaning that gender mainstreaming was non-existent. Dean 2 said:

*We do not appreciate gender dynamics, even its influence on our students who are future leaders. Our programmes are gender-blind, which is a significant problem. We should be aware of the fact that women have historically faced discrimination and that the gender gap continues to widen because of a lack of commitment by university leadership. Developing and enforcing policies and procedures that prevent gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence within the academic*

*community, as well as promoting gender balance and diversity in leadership and decision-making positions is of paramount importance. We need equal opportunities in staff development programmes, research and innovation, and related initiatives.*

This sentiment was reinforced by the responses received through the online questionnaires and the focus group discussions. The focus group concurred that most programmes in the university were generally silent pertaining to gender and that academic staff was not familiar with gender mainstreaming. One female academic had this to say: "The major challenge is that no one appreciates that we have been historically disadvantaged and no one is caring to close the gap." Another female academic weighed in: "Most positions of authority are being occupied by male academics which makes it difficult for us to get to the top. This shows a lack of gender mainstreaming in recruitment, staff development, and promotion." However, there was consensus from the Deans that there were some programmes that were deemed aligned to a specific gender, for instance, nursing, child rights, social work, psychology, education, and sociology. It was discovered that male students were drawn to computer engineering while female students were drawn to degrees with a gender bias. Further to that, programmes such as agriculture and environmental science had also some components of environmental sustainability. A male academic expressed, "The preference for programmes exhibiting gender bias among our female students highlights the entrenched challenges of gender inequality within higher education institutions."

The University under the study painted a somber image because the majority of senior posts were held by male academics, leaving little room for female academics to occupy positions of authority, despite Zimbabwe's efforts to promote gender equality (Doro, 2019). The concerns that were raised about gender-insensitive policies were confirmed to be true by all the categories of the respondents. It is evident that leadership in this university did not place a high premium on gender equality. Gender equality in HEIs is supported by the Zimbabwean Constitution and the National Gender Policy as amended in 2017. It is disturbing to note that the University's curriculum and other initiatives were gender-blind.

The majority of male academics holding positions of authority and controlling resources could lead to decisions favouring their male counterparts, as argued by Witteman et al. (2019) and Bedi et al. (2012). These studies suggest that discrimination significantly affects the success rates of female academics, limiting their opportunities to showcase their talents and dedication. Additionally, it was disheartening to note the prevalence of sexual harassment within the university, underscoring the severity of the situation faced by female academics. The existence of gender-biased degrees

attracting more female students confirms the persistence of perceived gender-specific domains, possibly undermining the effectiveness of affirmative policies in some Zimbabwean HEIs. This situation may imply the continued existence of gender stereotypes in Zimbabwean and other countries' HEIs (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023).

Supporting the theory of intersectionality, this study highlights how gender interacts with other social categories, leading to specific experiences of privileges and discrimination. In this case, male academics enjoy privileged positions and resources while female academics face obstacles resulting from deeply rooted inequalities within families and institutional cultures. Various studies (Zvavahera and Chirima, 2023; Moyo, 2021; Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2013; Sithole, Manwa and Manwa, 2013; Guzura and Chigora, 2012) corroborate these findings, emphasising the need for HEIs to foster diversity, gender equality, and sustainability through inclusive policies and practices. This includes assisting female academics to develop sustainable competencies that will allow them to assume leadership roles and become more empowered.

Disturbingly, the study's responses indicated the absence of gender mainstreaming in the University's programmes and projects. The promotion of equality, justice, and sustainable practices, therefore, depends on the inclusion of gender mainstreaming and sustainable development capabilities in HEIs (Ilagan, 2019). These findings contradict the principles of the intersectionality theory, which emphasises the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the unique challenges and advantages faced by male and female academics in the workplace (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023).

This entails building inclusive working and learning settings, addressing gender-based violence, and supporting female academics' participation in decision-making processes so they can develop leadership skills. HEIs should challenge gender stereotypes, empower female academics, and promote an egalitarian society by incorporating gender issues in projects and programmes, giving equal access to resources and opportunities. Developing sustainable competencies in female academics and gender mainstreaming both seek to advance social justice and equality in HEIs and this is supported by Rosa, Drew, and Canavan (2020). According to the findings of this study and the theory of intersectionality, social justice and equality in the institution were found to be lacking.

**Objective 2:** Evaluate levels of competencies of staff in the institution under the study

The following competencies were the emphasis of this objective: professional growth and networking; research and innovation; collaboration with stakeholders; outreach and education, curriculum development, and gender mainstreaming.

Data from the online questionnaires showed that the University did not adequately support staff development, and the three Deans and the focus group confirmed this. Dean 1 stated that the University did not help academic staff who wished to improve their careers or academic standing, particularly female academics. Additionally, it was revealed that despite the Human Resources Policy's clear career path and staff development, female academics felt prejudiced because promotion procedures were not being followed. Further interviews with the Deans revealed that those who wanted to continue with post-doctoral studies and sabbatical leave were denied the chance. One female academic from the focus group stated:

*I have noticed a pattern where some academic staff has been denied the opportunity to attend international conferences and get exposure, especially those not sponsored by the conference organisers. Yet another thing I*

*have noticed is that some "special people" receive full financial support from the University to attend international conferences and workshops. Here, discrimination based on gender is the norm.*

It was revealed by Dean 1 that only 5% of academic staff was actively engaged in research and 1% were female academics, highlighting the disparity in research competencies. Responses from online questionnaires and focus group discussions revealed that most female academics found it challenging to plan, carry out research, analyse data, and add to the body of knowledge since they lacked essential abilities. One female academic had this to say: *"Being involved in innovations is my dream. The challenge is limited opportunities."* Subsequent discussions with the focus group indicated that females' prospects for personal development and participation in international conferences were extremely limited, if not nonexistent. It was also noted that only two female academics had funded projects across the entire university. A disconcerting revelation emerged that these two female academics were predominantly mentoring male counterparts, rather than collaborating with their female colleagues. According to Dean 2, female academics faced significant obstacles in cultivating their research and innovation proficiencies, primarily because their male counterparts were hesitant to engage in collaborative efforts with them. All respondents unanimously agreed that research and innovation stood as pivotal pillars for the sustained growth of HEIs and the global economy. The study further revealed that a significant portion of academics (86%) faced constraints in accessing funded projects and research funding, hampering the development of their skill sets in this area. While exact figures were not provided, Dean 3 accentuated that the impact was felt most profoundly by female academics. Collectively, the Deans agreed that the limited capacity impeded the involvement of only a handful of academics in impactful research endeavours. Dean 1 had this to say:

*Because female academics do not hold senior positions in the institution, male academics continue to control the research funds choosing who should benefit. This situation is disheartening for many academics, especially females, as it has led to a dearth of innovations from their side. The reasons behind our lack of progress are the lack of opportunities and access to resources. The situation for female academics is dire in this institution.*

Interviews with the Deans, subsequent discussions with the focus group, and data from online questionnaires all indicated that only two female academics possessed experience and exposure in the art of drafting funding proposals. Dean 2 indicated that the rest needed more training and exposure. Moreover, the respondents concurred that due to the reluctance of male academics to involve their female counterparts in capacity-building endeavours, opportunities for female academics to cultivate expertise in this domain were notably constrained expressed it.

Shifting focus, it was highlighted by 67% of the participants that the University maintained robust external collaborations, a vital element in nurturing the advancement of academic staff competencies. As per the insights shared by the Deans, numerous partners were supporting university initiatives encompassing programmes, projects, innovations, and research. Nevertheless, a noteworthy observation emerged: male academics were spearheading these initiatives, while their female counterparts assumed subordinate positions with limited impact.

One male academic from the focus group had this to say:



*The institution has the best malaria laboratories in the country, and it is recognised as the Centre for Malaria Research in the country. We also have an innovation hub where academics and students should assist with innovative ideas and develop them into successful enterprises or solutions to the current challenges facing the world. Academic staff and students are unable to fully utilise the innovation hub due to a lack of resources due to lack of support.*

Dean 3 weighed in by adding a different perspective:

*Despite our strong focus on interdisciplinary collaborations, there appears to be a disconnect when it comes to competencies development in academic staff. Many of us feel uneasy about this particular area. The lack of ability among academic staff to think across disciplines and integrate different perspectives hinders our capacity to address sustainability concerns effectively.*

It was discovered that the University had strong outreach and education initiatives. Dean 3 indicated that the institution was making every effort to develop academic staff the competencies necessary for outreach and education, as well as for raising consciousness and encouraging equality among staff, students, and the wider public. Interestingly, this was not supported by the responses from the online questionnaires and responses from the focus group. Responses from the questionnaires and the focus group revealed that there was no difference from other initiatives that discriminated against female academics from taking leadership roles.

## 6.2. Staff Development

Denying almost half of the country's population, which constitutes 52% of the population (ZIMSTAT, 2022), an equal opportunity to access resources and opportunities results in depriving them of the ability to contribute to the sustainable development of the global economy. One major concern was the lack of support in developing the capacity of female academics. Given the constantly evolving environment, it is crucial for the institution to focus on enhancing the capabilities of its staff, particularly in research and innovation (Zvavahera et al., 2021; Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2013; Sithole, Manwa and Manwa, 2013; Guzura and Chigora, 2012). This contrasts with the findings of (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023), who emphasise the importance of understanding and appreciating the unique challenges and opportunities faced by both male and female academics in order to effectively develop competencies in historically disadvantaged female academics. The lack of appreciation for diversity and inclusivity, coupled with a limited understanding of gender issues, leads to social injustice and inequity in HEIs (Crenshaw, 1991; CIDA, 2008; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). Women were found to be lacking competencies in most critical areas that are important for sustainable development. Consequently, it falls upon the leadership of HEIs to take responsibility for providing faculty members with training and capacity-building programmes. These programmes should aim to incorporate perspectives on gender and sustainable development into their teaching, research, and community engagement endeavours. By fostering equal collaborative efforts, possibilities for community engagement and shared sustainability projects can emerge.

## 6.3. Innovation and Research

The lack of research and innovation competencies among female academics is disheartening, indicating a deficiency in critical skills required for impactful research leading to the sustainable development of the global economy. This issue disproportionately affects female academics, as highlighted by Schiltmans and Davies (2023), who attribute it to the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in higher education institutions (HEIs). Consequently, female academics face obstacles in developing sustainable competencies due to male-dominated institutional cultures, a scarcity of female mentors, and the challenges of balancing family responsibilities, which are often influenced by gendered domestic labour (Bunyi, 2003). Moreover, implicit and subconscious biases in recruitment, research allocation, peer review outcomes, and citation rates exacerbate these difficulties (Zvavahera et al., 2021).

To advance knowledge and address current and future challenges, all academic staff members, regardless of gender, should demonstrate expertise in research project planning, data collection and analysis, and the effective dissemination of research findings.

## 6.4. Curriculum Development

Given that the majority of respondents indicated a gender-blind curriculum, it becomes the responsibility of the institution's leadership and academics to infuse gender mainstreaming and inclusivity principles into the curricula, programmes, and projects. This involves integrating sustainability-related lessons, case studies, and opportunities for hands-on learning across academic areas. This aligns with the findings of Muchabaiwa and Chauraya (2022) and Ochieng (2014), which highlight that many HEIs still develop gender-neutral programmes, possibly indicating a lack of leadership support. Additionally, incorporating gender and sustainable development perspectives into various subjects and courses can enhance the knowledge and comprehension of both staff and students.

## 6.5. Outreach and Education

Despite the University's involvement in outreach programs, it was evident that these initiatives were predominantly led by male academics, highlighting their dominance across various domains. This observation aligns with the findings of Zvavahera et al. (2021) and Oláh et al. (2018), who argue that cultural norms ingrained within society and institutions contribute to the perpetuation of inferior positions for female academics within HEIs because of a lack of support from their male counterparts.

## 6.6. Gender Mainstreaming

Although Deans suggested that a lack of resources and opportunities could hinder the development of critical competencies, this viewpoint was largely opposed by other academics. A concerning issue emerged as the limited available resources were predominantly allocated to male academics, depriving most female academics of the chance to grow and participate in programmes that would develop their capacities. Discrimination also affects the success rates of female academics, as they are not given opportunities to showcase their talents and dedication to excellence (Bedi et al., 2012; Witteman et al., 2019).

The academic journey requires support and mentorship from experienced academics, yet female academics often lack such guidance, especially from male academics. Zvavahera et al. (2021) and Musasa, Nhekede, and Koke (2022) point out that neglecting

gender equality at high levels, both in government and institutions can continue perpetuating oppression. Therefore, it is crucial for HEIs' leadership to recognise the profound connection between women's educational success, economic development, productivity levels, gender equality, and women's empowerment. HEIs, as change agents, have a pivotal role in shaping a brighter future for upcoming generations through their leadership. With reference to intersectionality theory, leadership in the University lacks appreciation of gender issues leading to social injustice and inequality (Schiltmans and Davies, 2023; Crenshaw, 1991).

**Objective 3:** Identify challenges affecting the development of sustainable competencies in academic staff in the institution

Face-to-face interviews with the Deans revealed that the institution was being faced with budgetary constraints hindering the implementation of comprehensive staff development programmes and related initiatives. Conversely, feedback from online surveys and insights gathered from the focus group indicated that the administration was falling short in fostering the skillsets of academic staff, especially in the domains of research and innovation. Notably, a female participant in the focus group highlighted that the limited opportunities available primarily favoured male academics and that these individuals were not inclined to collaborate with their female counterparts.

Challenges that were highlighted were a lack of gender mainstreaming, and the heavy workloads, including teaching, research, administrative duties, care work, and other commitments. The issue of sexual harassment was also a recurring theme. All three Deans concurred that finding time for professional development was challenging, and faculty members could be prioritising other tasks over developing their competencies. This is because the majority of the respondents (74%) bemoaned the lack of incentives even after struggling to acquire relevant higher qualifications or skills. A male academic said: *"If faculty members do not have clear incentives or rewards to participate in development programmes, they may not be motivated to invest time and effort in improving their competencies."* A female academic from the focus group added another dimension:

*Faculty development programmes often focus on teaching competencies, but academics are also engaged in research, innovation, community service, and other roles. Recognising and supporting these diverse activities is crucial in fostering well-rounded faculty members. Yes, we are involved in outreach programmes but male academics take the leadership role, and sadly female academics mostly play a subordinate role.*

Gender mainstreaming in higher education plays a vital role in achieving gender equality, fostering diversity, and fostering a more inclusive and progressive society, as emphasised by Zvavahera et al. (2021). This challenge is not unique to a specific institution, as Ochieng (2014) highlighted similar issues in Kenyan HEIs, suggesting it could be a global concern. Despite the intent of gender mainstreaming to ensure equal access to educational opportunities, resources, and support for both male and female academics, Muchabaiwa and Chauraya (2022) found that it fell short in the institution they studied. Despite the presence of a strong foundation in the country, such as the Constitution of 2013 and the NGP (National Gender Policy), there seems to be a possibility that this university is not adequately supporting female academics. When women's voices are included and heard in the research process, it can lead to innovative solutions to societal challenges and drive progress in various areas. Gender equality in higher education is essential for overall social and economic development. By providing

equal opportunities to all, societies can harness the full potential of their human capital, leading to economic growth and prosperity. Gender mainstreaming encourages the representation of women in various leadership roles within academia. This representation provides role models and mentors for female students, inspiring them to pursue ambitious goals and overcome obstacles in their academic and professional journeys. Many international organisations and governments have committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Gender mainstreaming in higher education is a critical step toward fulfilling these global commitments. Gender mainstreaming fosters an inclusive culture within higher education institutions and society, where all members feel respected, valued, and supported regardless of their gender identity as highlighted by Butler-Henderson, 2022. The next section provides the conclusions of the study.

## 7. Conclusions

This study investigated the connection between gender and the development of competencies within a university operating in Zimbabwean. The findings of the study indicated the persistence of gender discrimination in the institution, lack of gender mainstreaming, inadequate funding for staff development initiatives, sexual harassment of female academics, and lack of support from the University leadership. A significant disparity was observed in the representation of female academics in positions of authority, which hindered their transition into the professional world and limited their impact in the world of work. Additionally, the study revealed that a majority of female academics lacked essential skills in research, leadership, and grant writing. A small number of successful female academics were found to be mentoring male academics, thereby diminishing the aspirations of many female academics to excel in their academic careers. Despite the existence of laws and policies promoting gender equality in Zimbabwe, this study exposed their inadequate implementation. Consequently, the study concluded that gender inequality remains prevalent in HEIs and this could be a global concern. To achieve sustainable development, empowering female academics and women in various sectors is crucial. The study recommends that women and girls, with the backing of key stakeholders, should actively assert their rights and work towards diminishing the prevailing disparities.

This study has policy implications that can help Zimbabwe and other countries build educational policies that are more inclusive and egalitarian. Policymakers can establish policies to address potential gender inequities in access to educational opportunities and the acquisition of necessary skills by better understanding the connection between gender and competency development. This study can assist colleges and universities in creating gender-sensitive curricula and support structures that will give every employee, regardless of gender, an equal chance to succeed academically and professionally. Practically speaking, the findings can assist university administration in putting into place targeted interventions, mentorship programs, and support networks to improve the competency development of academic staff. In the long run, this research helps to promote a more diverse and talented workforce, which benefits both individuals and the socioeconomic advancement of the country.

## 8. Limitations

Given the distinct policies governing research, innovations, and staff development at various HEIs, the findings may not fully represent the entire landscape of universities in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, due

to the diversity within the university studied, the results can be applied not only within Zimbabwe but also beyond its borders. To mitigate potential researchers bias, the study employed a range of data collection methods, effectively minimising the influence of the researchers' personal perspectives on the study's design and interpretation of results.

It is worth noting that the study faced a limitation regarding its sample size, which was constrained to a single university in Zimbabwe. This limitation was addressed by integrating qualitative research techniques, including face-to-face interviews with Deans, the engagement of one focus group, and the distribution of online questionnaires.

## 9. Recommendations

HEIs leadership should develop and implement gender and sustainable development policies that provide a framework for integrating these principles into all aspects of institutional operations, including teaching, research, governance, and campus life. These policies should outline clear objectives, strategies, and mechanisms for mainstreaming gender, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Institutions should provide comprehensive awareness and training programs for staff members on gender mainstreaming, sustainability, and inclusivity. This can include workshops, seminars, and online courses to enhance their understanding of these concepts and develop the necessary competencies to integrate them into their work.

Management in HEIs should encourage interdisciplinary collaborations among staff members from different disciplines and departments to promote knowledge sharing and the integration of gender and sustainability perspectives. This can be done through the establishment of interdisciplinary research centres, organising interdisciplinary conferences, and facilitating interdisciplinary teaching initiatives.

Leadership in HEIs should designate specific individuals or offices within institutions as gender focal points or offices. These focal points can serve as resources for staff members, students, and the wider community on gender-related issues, provide guidance on gender mainstreaming initiatives, and monitor progress in integrating gender perspectives.

Institutions should encourage and support research that addresses gender-related challenges and contributes to sustainable development. This can involve providing research grants and incentives for research projects focused on gender and sustainability, organising research seminars, and establishing networks for collaboration and knowledge exchange. HEIs should create partnerships and collaborations with external organisations, government agencies, and civil society groups working on gender and sustainability issues. The collaborations can facilitate knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and joint initiatives that contribute to gender mainstreaming and sustainable development in higher learning institutions.

Management should establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the progress of gender mainstreaming and sustainable development initiatives in institutions of higher learning. Management should regularly assess the effectiveness of policies and interventions. It is important to collect data on gender and sustainability outcomes and use this information to make evidence-based decisions and adjustments.

By implementing these recommendations, institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe and beyond can enhance gender

mainstreaming and sustainable development competencies among their staff members, contribute to gender equality and sustainable development goals, and create inclusive and transformative learning environments.

## 10. Areas for Further Research

It is important to note that different higher learning institutions in Zimbabwe and other parts of the world exhibit varying degrees of gender mainstreaming. Therefore, conducting a more comprehensive study would entail closely examining different HEIs, their implementation of gender mainstreaming programs, and the challenges they have encountered.

Future research endeavours should involve the Government, students, and women's organisations to better understand gender issues from different perspectives. Conducting gender-sensitive research, data collection, and analysis would help identify and address gender disparities across various academic disciplines, thereby informing evidence-based policy reviews and development.

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