GENDER DYNAMICS AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ADVANCEMENT IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BENIN AND THE UNIVERSITY OF BENIN TEACHING HOSPITAL

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Abstract

This study examines how organizational and cultural barriers, mentorship and policy support, and professional experience influence women's leadership advancement in Nigerian public institutions. Focusing on the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH), data were collected from 340 female staff through a Google Form survey and 12 semi-structured interviews. Reliability and validity tests were satisfactory (Cronbach's α ≥ 0.81; KMO = 0.812; Bartlett's p < 0.001). Regression analysis revealed that barriers have a significant negative effect (B = -0.25, p < 0.001), while mentorship/policy support (B = +0.22, p < 0.001) and professional experience (B = +0.15, p = 0.003) exert positive effects. The model explains about 49% of variance in leadership advancement (R² = 0.49). Thematic analysis corroborated these results, highlighting opaque promotion practices, exclusionary networks, and stereotype penalties as key barriers, while mentorship, sponsorship, and enforceable policies served as enablers. The study concludes that institutionalising sponsorship, reducing bias through transparent criteria, and linking professional experience to measurable merit can strengthen women's progression. Recommendations are made for HR departments and policymakers to operationalise inclusive selection systems and accountability frameworks.

Keywords: *Women's leadership, organisational barriers, mentorship, policy support, professional experience, Nigeria, public institutions.*

Introduction

Women's leadership remains critical for sustainable institutional and national development. Despite high educational attainment and professional competence, women in Nigeria remain

underrepresented in leadership positions across sectors (World Economic Forum, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Patriarchal norms, organisational biases, and inadequate enforcement of gender policies persistently restrict women's advancement. Public institutions such as the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH) provide essential contexts for studying this issue, as both represent the dual pillars of education and healthcare in Nigeria.

Although these institutions employ highly qualified women, few occupy senior decision-making positions. Structural and cultural barriers, including opaque promotion systems, exclusion from informal networks, and gendered expectations, continue to impede progress (Olatunji et al., 2021; Bahrami et al., 2023). However, recent initiatives such as mentorship programmes and policy reforms have created emerging opportunities for women's advancement (Okeke & Eze, 2022; Munive et al., 2023). This study explores the interplay between barriers, mentorship/policy support, and professional experience to understand how these factors shape women's leadership advancement in Nigerian public institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Overview

Gender dynamics in leadership reflect how social norms, institutional culture, and individual agency intersect to determine leadership opportunities (Dewi et al., 2024). Organisational barriers include biased promotion systems and exclusionary networks (Adebayo & Olaleye, 2020), while cultural barriers stem from traditional expectations linking authority with masculinity (Ojo & Ilesanmi, 2021). Mentorship and sponsorship provide guidance and advocacy essential for advancement (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023), but their absence perpetuates inequality. Similarly, policy support when effectively implemented can institutionalise gender equity (Sabarwal et al., 2023). Professional experience, although a core component of human capital, does not always translate into recognition due to entrenched biases (Toyin-Thomas et al., 2024).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which posits that bias occurs when societal expectations of women conflict with leadership stereotypes. Supplementary insights are drawn from Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which links gender disparities to socially prescribed roles, and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), which explains how education and experience contribute to career advancement. Integrating these theories allows a holistic understanding of how perceptions, social roles, and professional capacity interact to influence women's leadership outcomes.

2.3 Empirical Insights and Gaps

Studies reveal that women face systemic barriers in leadership despite formal equality frameworks (Adebayo & Olaleye, 2020; Galizzi et al., 2024). Research in Nigeria emphasises how patriarchal cultures and weak policy enforcement constrain progress (Olayanju & Mordi, 2022), while mentorship and sponsorship programmes, when structured, significantly enhance career trajectories (Shen et al., 2022). Yet, evidence from African public institutions remains limited, especially regarding how mentorship and policy support jointly influence women's leadership in education and healthcare. This gap underscores the need for context-specific studies integrating both barriers and enablers.

Methodology

A mixed-method design was adopted, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The population included female academic, administrative, and clinical staff of

UNIBEN and UBTH. Using stratified random sampling, 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 340 valid responses were analysed. Additionally, 12 semi-structured interviews provided qualitative depth.

Reliability and validity tests showed strong results (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$; KMO $= 0.812$; Bartlett's $p < 0.001$). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and thematic coding. The regression model specified women's leadership advancement (Y) as the dependent variable and organisational/cultural barriers (X1), mentorship/policy support (X2), and professional experience (X3) as predictors:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \mu$$

Results and Discussion

Regression results indicate that organisational and cultural barriers significantly reduce women's leadership advancement (B = -0.25, $p < 0.001$), while mentorship and policy support (B = +0.22, $p < 0.001$) and professional experience (B = +0.15, $p = 0.003$) significantly enhance it ($R^2 = 0.49$). These findings confirm that barriers weigh most heavily, yet structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes can counterbalance their effects. Thematic analysis further revealed four recurring patterns: opaque promotions, exclusionary networks, stereotype penalties, and undervalued experience.

Women at UNIBEN described committee gatekeeping as a key obstacle, while respondents at UBTH emphasised time rigidity and family-role conflicts. Across both institutions, participants distinguished mentorship (guidance) from sponsorship (advocacy), asserting that the latter had a more tangible impact on advancement. These insights reinforce the argument that institutional support must move beyond symbolic compliance to measurable accountability (Gröschl et al., 2024).

The study's findings align with Role Congruity Theory, demonstrating how perceived incongruence between femininity and leadership fosters bias. They also support Human Capital Theory, which highlights experience as a predictor of advancement, albeit moderated by cultural and organisational conditions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's leadership advancement in Nigerian public institutions is significantly hindered by organisational and cultural barriers but enhanced by effective mentorship, policy support, and recognition of professional experience. Progress depends on translating equality rhetoric into operational reforms.

Recommendations:

1. **Institutionalise transparent promotion frameworks**: Develop published criteria and audit mechanisms for leadership appointments.

2. **Embed sponsorship within mentorship systems**: Pair emerging women leaders with senior advocates accountable for concrete advancement actions.

3. **Operationalise gender-equity dashboards**: Track recruitment, training, and promotion statistics to ensure compliance.

4. **Recognise experience as measurable merit**: Link training and tenure to defined promotion points and post-training placements.

5. **Cultural reorientation and policy enforcement**: Implement anti-bias training and enforce gender-sensitive HR procedures.

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