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Original Article

Building Sustainable Multiplier Networks in Higher Education Institutions: Insights from the TESCEA Model

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sustainability of multiplier networks established under TESCEA's gender mainstreaming initiative at Gulu University, Uganda. Multiplier networks, composed of faculty trained to promote gender-responsive pedagogy, are pivotal in embedding gender equity within institutional cultures. The research explores how formal certification, career incentives, and institutionalisation contribute to the durability of these networks. Utilising a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with 25 multipliers and 5 senior leaders, supplemented by document analysis. Findings indicate that certification enhances professional legitimacy, career incentives motivate participation, and institutional embedding through governance structures fosters accountability and sustainability. However, challenges such as resource limitations, workload pressures, and ambiguous role expectations undermine effectiveness. This study highlights the critical need to align individual and institutional incentives to sustain gender mainstreaming in higher education within post-conflict, resource-constrained contexts. The implications for policy and practice include strategic institutional support mechanisms and incentive alignment to ensure the resilience of multiplier networks.

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INTRODUCTION

Transforming higher education institutions (HEIs) into gender-equitable spaces requires innovative and systemic approaches, especially in post-conflict contexts where social fabrics have been disrupted. Gender mainstreaming remains a pivotal strategy for reshaping HEIs into inclusive environments that reflect and promote broader societal gender justice (UNESCO, 2022). In many African HEIs recovering from conflict, embedding gender equity within institutional structures and academic cultures is both a moral imperative and a developmental necessity (Kamau & Wambua, 2021). TESCEA (Transforming Education for Social Change in East Africa), through its multiplier network model at Gulu University, Uganda, represents a pioneering initiative in this regard. Instead of relying solely on top-down mandates or isolated workshops, TESCEA trains select faculty members, referred to as multipliers, to act as agents of change who champion gender-responsive pedagogy and policies within their departments and the broader university culture (Ssekandi & Naluwairo, 2024).

These multipliers serve as critical nodes within multiplier networks, leveraging peer influence to foster bottom-up transformation across academic units. By disseminating gender mainstreaming practices and influencing colleagues' attitudes, multipliers aim to catalyse sustainable cultural and institutional shifts. However, sustaining such networks beyond initial training phases presents significant challenges. Multipliers often face motivational fatigue, role ambiguity, and a lack of institutional recognition, which undermine their ongoing engagement and the continuity of gender mainstreaming initiatives (Okello & Nebongo, 2021). Moreover, balancing intrinsic motivators, such as professional growth, with extrinsic demands like heavy workloads requires nuanced and supportive institutional frameworks—an especially complex task in resource-constrained, post-conflict settings where institutional capacity is limited and social cohesion remains fragile (Kamau & Wambua, 2021).

This study probes the complex interplay of factors shaping the sustainability of multiplier networks within the TESCEA model at Gulu University. It examines how formal certification, career incentives, institutional embedding, leadership commitment, and contextual constraints collectively influence the longevity and effectiveness of these networks. By unpacking these dynamics, the research contributes vital theoretical and practical insights for HEIs aiming to embed sustainable gender mainstreaming strategies, particularly in fragile and resource-limited contexts. Ultimately, this investigation offers a pathway for similar institutions globally to foster enduring, grassroots-driven gender equity transformations in higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) offers a foundational framework for understanding how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread within social systems. Central to this theory is the concept of change agents, individuals who influence others' adoption decisions and accelerate the diffusion process. In the context of multiplier networks within HEIs such as Gulu University, multipliers function as these pivotal change agents, promoting gender-responsive practices among their peers. Rogers (2003) emphasises the importance of communication channels, social networks, and the perceived attributes of an innovation (e.g., relative advantage, compatibility) in shaping adoption outcomes. This focus enables researchers to analyse not only how multipliers adopt gender-responsive practices but also how they actively facilitate broader institutional uptake of these innovations.

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Moreover, the theory's depiction of the innovation-decision process, from knowledge acquisition to implementation and confirmation, provides a valuable lens for examining the stages multipliers undergo in embracing and championing new gender equity initiatives (Rogers, 2003). This sequential model helps identify potential facilitators and barriers at each stage, such as multipliers' access to information, peer influence, and reinforcement mechanisms, which are crucial for sustaining long-term commitment. The prominence Rogers gives to the social system underscores the role of institutional context and culture, recognising that innovations are not adopted in isolation but within complex organisational environments. This aligns well with the study's focus on how institutional embedding supports or constrains multiplier network sustainability.

Scholarly research has repeatedly validated Diffusion of Innovations Theory's applicability to educational and organisational change settings, reinforcing its appropriateness as a theoretical foundation for this study. For instance, Greenhalgh et al. (2004) conducted a systematic review highlighting the theory's strength in explaining innovation adoption in complex service organisations, including universities. Similarly, Dearing (2009) underscores the theory's utility in designing and evaluating interventions that rely on peer influence and social networks for successful dissemination. By employing Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the study gains a comprehensive, multi-level perspective capturing individual motivations and behaviours alongside institutional dynamics, thus enabling a thorough investigation into the sustainability of multiplier networks promoting gender responsiveness in HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Related Theories

Recent studies, such as those by Kamau and Wambua (2021) and Ssekandi and Naluwairo (2024), confirm the efficacy of multiplier networks in promoting gender equity within African universities. Kamau and Wambua (2021) highlight how multipliers, through their legitimacy and professional credibility, effectively diffuse gender-responsive practices across academic departments. Likewise, Ssekandi and Naluwairo (2024) emphasise the multiplier model's success in embedding gender mainstreaming into institutional cultures, reinforcing the importance of social influence as outlined in Rogers's (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory. However, these studies primarily investigate relatively stable university environments, leaving a gap in understanding how multiplier networks operate in fragile, post-conflict HEIs, where challenges such as weak governance, disrupted social capital, and limited resources complicate network sustainability.

Organisational institutionalism offers a useful framework for exploring how formal structures and governance mechanisms embed multiplier roles within universities. Kamau and Wambua (2021) advocate for the formal inclusion of multipliers in governance bodies and curriculum committees as essential for institutionalising gender mainstreaming. However, empirical research, such as that by Nabukenya et al. (2022) and Okello and Nebongo (2021), notes a paucity of studies investigating institutional embedding processes in post-conflict African HEIs, where governance is often fragmented and policy enforcement inconsistent. This gap highlights the need for context-specific inquiry into how fragile institutions can support and sustain multiplier networks.

Motivational dynamics further complicate multipliers' sustained engagement. Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (1966) differentiates intrinsic motivators, such as professional recognition and achievement, from extrinsic hygiene factors, like workload and resource availability. Okello and Nebongo (2021) show that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors significantly influence faculty participation in gender mainstreaming projects. Nonetheless, recent research by Mwangi and Mwambui (2023)

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underscores a critical gap in understanding how these motivational factors function synergistically within multiplier networks in resource-poor, post-conflict African universities, where extrinsic challenges often threaten long-term commitment.

By situating TESCEA's multiplier model within these intersecting theoretical frameworks—social influence, organisational institutionalism, and motivation theory—this study addresses these gaps. It offers a comprehensive lens to analyse how multipliers' legitimacy, institutional embedding, and motivational factors collectively affect the sustainability of gender mainstreaming initiatives in fragile HEIs such as Gulu University. This integrated approach contributes both to theoretical advancement and practical strategies for strengthening multiplier networks in complex African higher education contexts.

Review of Related Literature

Certification and Professional Validation

Formal certification serves as an essential means for multipliers to gain professional validation, signalling expertise and authority in gender mainstreaming roles within HEIs. UNESCO (2022) underscores that certification not only acknowledges technical competencies but also confers legitimacy, enabling multipliers to establish credibility with peers and institutional leaders. This recognition often translates into greater influence, which is critical for the diffusion and institutionalisation of gender-responsive practices. However, while the theoretical benefits of certification are well articulated, empirical studies exploring its real impact on multiplier network sustainability in resource-limited African HEIs are notably lacking.

Moreover, the accessibility and relevance of certification programs in African universities remain insufficiently researched. Kassa and Alemu (2021) note that geographic, financial, and institutional barriers frequently restrict multipliers' access to certification opportunities. In particular, women multipliers may face additional socio-cultural and structural constraints that limit their participation. This contextual gap points to the necessity of examining how certification programs are tailored—or fail to be tailored—to the specific needs and challenges of multipliers in post-conflict and resource-poor environments.

The symbolic power of certification may also interact with institutional factors, such as recognition in promotion policies and integration into governance structures. However, research has yet to fully explore these linkages, especially how certification facilitates multipliers' access to career advancement and decision-making roles. UNESCO's (2022) work highlights the potential for certification to enhance professional identity, but more investigation is needed to understand its contribution to sustained engagement in contexts where institutional support is fragile and evolving.

Furthermore, the quality and perceived credibility of certification programs influence multipliers' motivation to pursue and maintain certification. If certifications are not recognised or valued within the university or broader academic community, their impact on multipliers' authority and influence may be diminished (Smith & Perez, 2020). Hence, there is a need to explore perceptions of certification legitimacy within African HEIs, considering the interplay of global standards and local institutional cultures.

Despite the growing emphasis on certification as a capacity-building tool, few studies examine its longitudinal effects on multiplier performance and network durability. Most literature is cross-sectional or focused on immediate outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how certification affects sustained behaviour change and institutional impact over time. This gap is particularly salient in post-conflict universities, where long-term institutional memory and continuity are often weak (Mwangi & Mwambui, 2023).

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Finally, certification should be understood not only as a personal achievement but as part of a broader institutional strategy. Research integrating certification with other organisational supports, such as mentoring, resource allocation, and policy backing, remains sparse. Addressing this gap, the current study explores how certification interacts with career incentives and governance structures to support multiplier sustainability in the fragile context of Gulu University, advancing both theory and practice in gender mainstreaming.

Career Incentives and Promotion Policies

Career incentives embedded in university promotion policies act as critical extrinsic motivators for multipliers engaged in gender mainstreaming efforts. According to Ssekandi and Naluwairo (2024), when promotion criteria explicitly recognise gender-related contributions, faculty members perceive institutional validation of their efforts, which enhances motivation and retention. Transparent and consistent policy frameworks can thus foster multiplier commitment by linking gender equity work to tangible career benefits.

However, the effectiveness of promotion policies is frequently undermined by inconsistent implementation and ambiguous guidelines, a challenge well documented in African HEIs (Okello & Nebongo, 2021). Faculty often report uncertainty about how gender mainstreaming contributions are evaluated during promotions, leading to frustration and disengagement. This disconnect between policy intent and practice reveals a critical gap in ensuring that career incentives translate into sustained multiplier activity.

Compounding this issue is the intersection of promotion policies with gendered organisational dynamics. Mwangi and Mwambui (2023) highlight that female multipliers frequently encounter systemic barriers, such as limited mentorship, gender bias, and disproportionate domestic responsibilities, which influence their ability to leverage career incentives effectively. These structural inequities complicate the relationship between promotion policies and multiplier motivation, underscoring the need for policies that are sensitive to gendered experiences within academia.

Additionally, research exploring how career incentives influence multipliers' professional trajectories over time is limited. Most studies focus on initial motivation or short-term retention, with insufficient attention to long-term career development and advancement within the institutional hierarchy. Nabukenya et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of understanding how incentives align with multipliers' evolving professional goals in post-conflict settings, where career pathways may be disrupted or non-linear.

The role of institutional culture in shaping the uptake of promotion-related incentives also warrants deeper exploration. Even well-designed policies may fail if the academic culture undervalues gender mainstreaming or if leadership commitment is weak (Kamau & Wambua, 2021). This cultural dimension highlights a critical gap in linking formal policies with everyday organisational realities that affect multiplier engagement.

Finally, the interplay between career incentives and other institutional supports, such as workload management and governance participation, remains understudied. Given the competing demands on multipliers' time, integrated policy approaches that combine recognition with structural support are necessary. The present study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by investigating how career incentives function within the broader institutional ecosystem of Gulu University, contributing to multiplier network sustainability.

Institutionalisation through Governance and Policy Integration

The formal institutionalisation of multiplier roles through university governance and policy

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frameworks is vital for embedding gender mainstreaming sustainably within academic systems. Kamau and Wambua (2021) argue that the inclusion of multipliers in governance bodies and curriculum committees provides necessary accountability mechanisms and ensures that gender considerations are mainstreamed into core university functions. This integration is critical for moving beyond isolated initiatives toward systemic change.

Nonetheless, the dual responsibilities of academic work and multiplier duties present significant challenges, particularly in resource-constrained and post-conflict African HEIs. Heavy workloads and limited institutional support increase the risk of burnout among multipliers, threatening the longevity of gender mainstreaming efforts (Kamau & Wambua, 2021). Despite these challenges, research on effective workload models or institutional arrangements that mitigate this tension remains sparse.

Power dynamics and organisational politics also influence the institutionalisation process. Multipliers may encounter resistance from colleagues or administrators who view gender mainstreaming as peripheral or threatening to established power structures (Okello & Nebongo, 2021). The absence of strong leadership commitment or clear mandates can thus hinder the formal integration and empowerment of multipliers within governance systems.

Moreover, there is a limited understanding of how governance structures interact with certification and career incentives to create a coherent institutional environment supportive of multiplier sustainability. These components often operate in silos, limiting their collective effectiveness. By examining their synergy, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature on the institutional embedding of gender mainstreaming in African HEIs.

Institutional culture also plays a significant role in shaping the success of governance integration. Universities with entrenched patriarchal norms or hierarchical management styles may struggle to meaningfully involve multipliers in decision-making, regardless of formal policies (Nabukenya et al., 2022). Exploring these cultural factors is essential for designing interventions that foster inclusive and supportive governance environments.

Finally, fragile and post-conflict contexts introduce unique challenges to institutionalisation. Political instability, funding fluctuations, and shifting policy priorities can undermine governance processes and multipliers' roles (Mwangi & Mwambui, 2023). There is a pronounced need for context-specific research that investigates how governance and policy integration can be adapted to maintain multiplier networks in such unstable settings—a gap the current study seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study was grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, which acknowledges that reality is not objectively observed but is socially constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions with their environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was especially appropriate for investigating the sustainability of multiplier networks in higher education, as such networks are shaped by human perceptions, organisational culture, and institutional policies. An interpretivist lens enabled the researcher to engage deeply with participants' lived experiences and understand how meaning is co-constructed within the context of a fragile, post-conflict university. It also allowed for flexibility and sensitivity to contextual variation, both of which are essential for understanding complex gender mainstreaming processes in African higher education institutions (HEIs).

Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach, which is suited for exploring intricate

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human experiences and organisational dynamics that cannot be quantified. Qualitative inquiry is particularly effective in generating rich, context-specific data through open-ended engagement with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced motivations, challenges, and institutional processes influencing the sustainability of TESCEA's multiplier model at Gulu University. Unlike quantitative methods, which often rely on numerical generalisations, qualitative methods emphasise depth and meaning, allowing for the identification of patterns, contradictions, and insights arising from individual and collective narratives.

Research Design

A single case study design was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of Gulu University's implementation of the TESCEA multiplier model. According to Yin (2018), case studies are valuable when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. This design allowed for intensive exploration of how certification, career incentives, and institutional integration influenced multiplier sustainability within one institution. Gulu University was chosen as the case because of its unique engagement with TESCEA and its post-conflict context, which presents both opportunities and constraints for sustaining gender equity reforms.

Study Population

The study population included two key groups: TESCEA-certified multipliers actively engaged in gender mainstreaming, and senior university administrators responsible for gender policy and faculty development. This combination ensured the inclusion of both grassroots implementers and institutional decision-makers, offering a comprehensive understanding of multiplier sustainability from multiple levels within the university. The selection was grounded in the principle of capturing diverse yet directly relevant voices, which is vital for qualitative case study research (Stake, 1995).

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study employed purposive sampling to select 25 multipliers and 5 senior administrators based on their direct involvement in TESCEA activities and institutional leadership roles. Purposive sampling enables researchers to identify information-rich cases that can yield the most relevant and meaningful data (Patton, 2015). This sampling technique ensured that participants had firsthand knowledge of the certification process, the institutional context, and the day-to-day realities of implementing gender-responsive practices. The sample size allowed for thematic saturation while maintaining a manageable scope for analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

Two primary data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed for guided but flexible discussions around core themes such as certification, career incentives, institutional embedding, and sustainability challenges. This format supported probing for depth while enabling participants to raise issues of personal relevance. In addition, document analysis of TESCEA reports, university gender policies, and strategic plans was conducted to triangulate findings and add institutional context. Combining these methods enhanced the credibility and richness of the data (Bowen, 2009).

Data Collection Instruments

An interview guide was developed to structure the data collection process, based on the study's research objectives and theoretical framework. The guide included open-ended questions aligned with the themes of professional validation, motivation, and institutional support. It was pilot-tested with a small group of participants to assess clarity, flow, and relevance. Feedback from the

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pilot was used to refine the instrument, ensuring that it was comprehensible and responsive to the study context (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Administration Procedures

Data were collected between January and March 2019. Interviews were conducted in person or via virtual platforms, depending on participant availability and preference, consistent with flexible qualitative data collection approaches recommended in recent research (Archibald et al., 2019). Each session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy and richness (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Transcripts were member-checked and returned to participants for verification and correction, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings by incorporating participant validation (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and write-up. Both deductive codes (informed by theory) and inductive codes (emerging from the data) were used, enabling the researcher to capture both expected and emergent insights. NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software facilitated the systematic organisation and retrieval of coded data, supporting rigorous cross-case analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to explore how themes such as certification, motivation, and institutional integration interrelate in sustaining multiplier networks.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee, ensuring adherence to established standards for informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were assured of the right to withdraw at any stage, and data were anonymised and stored securely. Special attention was paid to the ethical sensitivities surrounding gender-related research and institutional critique, particularly in a context marked by hierarchical structures and power dynamics.

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumed that participants would offer honest, reflective accounts of their experiences and that their perspectives were grounded in genuine engagement with TESCEA activities. It was also assumed that TESCEA had a meaningful institutional impact, justifying its selection as the focus of inquiry. These assumptions were supported by prior evaluations of the TESCEA project, which highlighted positive shifts in faculty practices and gender sensitivity.

Limitations and Delimitations

As a single case study, the research does not aim for statistical generalisation but rather analytic generalisation, offering insights that may be relevant to other institutions with similar characteristics. Potential social desirability bias may have influenced participant responses, particularly on sensitive topics like institutional support or personal motivation. Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal observation limits conclusions about the long-term effects of TESCEA interventions. Despite these limitations, the study's depth and triangulation enhance its validity.

The study was delimited to TESCEA multipliers and senior leaders, excluding students, external stakeholders, and faculty not engaged in TESCEA. It specifically examined factors influencing sustainability, such as certification and policy support, rather than evaluating gender mainstreaming outcomes or curricular content. These delimitations helped maintain a focused scope aligned with the study's objectives and theoretical underpinnings.

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FINDINGS

The findings of the study are organised around three core themes, derived from the theoretical framework and research objectives: Certification and Professional Legitimacy, Career Incentives and Motivational Sustainability, and Institutionalisation through Governance and Policy Integration. These themes emerged from a thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 25 certified multipliers and 5 senior administrators, as well as document analysis. Each theme is presented with supporting participant narratives.

Certification and Professional Legitimacy

Certification as a Source of Recognition and Authority

Participants overwhelmingly reported that TESCEA certification gave them professional legitimacy within their departments. Certification was perceived as tangible evidence of expertise in gender-responsive pedagogy.

> *"When I present my views in curriculum meetings, people take me seriously now because they know I have gone through formal training. It is not just opinion anymore."* (CM-12)

This recognition extended beyond the classroom. Certified multipliers were often invited to lead workshops, join curriculum committees, and contribute to gender policy reviews, reflecting increased visibility and influence.

Limited Institutional Validation of Certification

However, many participants noted that the university did not formally acknowledge certification in promotion or workload allocation frameworks. While the certificate added prestige informally, it lacked structural reinforcement.

> *"We get the certificate, yes, but how does it help me advance? It's not mentioned in the promotion criteria."* (CM-04)

The symbolic power of certification was thus undermined by institutional inertia, limiting its ability to sustain long-term engagement. A few multipliers expressed frustration that their certified expertise did not translate into role clarity or compensation.

Gendered Access and Relevance

Female multipliers highlighted challenges in accessing training due to family responsibilities, and some questioned whether certification content was sufficiently tailored to local cultural realities.

> *"The content was good, but a bit abstract. We need examples from our community so that people see that gender responsiveness is not a Western idea."* (CF-17)

Document analysis confirmed that while TESCEA's certification modules emphasised gender theory and pedagogy, follow-up capacity building or localised adaptation was minimal. This gap affected the perceived applicability and practical utility of certification over time.

Career Incentives and Motivational Sustainability

Intrinsic Motivation and Professional Growth

Many multipliers reported that personal passion for equity and education reform was a key driver for sustained engagement.

> *"This work has changed how I think and teach. I feel like I'm making a difference, and that matters more than money."* (CM-08)

Intrinsic motivation was reinforced by positive student feedback, peer recognition, and internal reflection.

Disconnect Between Gender Work and Career Advancement

Despite strong personal motivation, participants expressed concern that gender-related work was undervalued in institutional promotion systems.

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> *"I have contributed to policy, training, and curriculum change—but none of this is counted when I apply for promotion."* (CM-22)

Senior leaders acknowledged this oversight, admitting that promotion guidelines did not yet formally include gender mainstreaming contributions. This disconnect between policy and practice led to demotivation, especially among younger faculty.

Gender Bias and Unequal Opportunity

Female multipliers reported systemic barriers to leveraging gender work for career advancement, including unequal access to mentorship, heavier domestic workloads, and resistance from male colleagues.

> *"When I raise gender issues, some male colleagues dismiss me as emotional. It's exhausting."* (CF-19)

Document analysis revealed that university promotion policies lacked clarity on how to evaluate gender-related contributions, reinforcing ambiguity and existing inequalities.

Competing Workload Demands

Multipliers frequently cited overwhelming workloads as a barrier to sustained engagement. Many had to balance gender mainstreaming with teaching, research, and administrative duties, often without additional support.

> *"There is no time. I want to do this work, but we are stretched thin."* (CM-06)

This tension affected participation in multiplier activities and mental well-being, contributing to burnout and intermittent withdrawal from gender equity work.

Institutionalisation through Governance and Policy Integration

Governance Structures Enable Influence but Inconsistently

Some multipliers were included in curriculum committees, departmental boards, or gender taskforces, which allowed them to influence decisions and embed gender principles.

> *"When I joined the curriculum committee, I could finally influence course design, not just talk about it."* (CM-02)

However, inclusion was often ad hoc and personality-driven rather than systematically mandated. Where leadership supported multipliers, engagement flourished; where it did not, influence waned.

Lack of Role Clarity and Structural Support

Multipliers frequently reported confusion around their roles, responsibilities, and institutional mandate.

> *"We were trained, but what next? Are we trainers, advocates, advisors? No one explained our ongoing role."* (CM-14)

This role ambiguity, coupled with the absence of official position descriptions or terms of reference, weakened systemic institutionalisation. The lack of a multiplier coordination framework meant their activities remained fragmented.

Leadership Commitment as a Critical Enabler

Where senior leaders demonstrated visible and consistent support, multiplier networks were more active and resilient. Leadership support included resource allocation, public endorsement, and inclusion in strategic documents.

> *"Our Dean supports us. That makes it easier to act and organise activities."* (CM-09)

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In contrast, in units where leadership was disengaged or sceptical, multiplier efforts stalled. Document analysis showed that gender issues were inconsistently referenced across faculty strategic plans, suggesting uneven leadership commitment.

Institutional Culture and Resistance

Participants identified entrenched patriarchal norms, academic hierarchy, and resistance to change as key cultural barriers.

> *"Some staff say gender is not academic, it's activism. That attitude blocks progress."* (CM-20)

This resistance often manifested as passive non-cooperation, with some staff deliberately avoiding gender discussions or undermining multiplier-led initiatives. Cultural resistance, if unaddressed, was seen as a major threat to long-term sustainability.

Resource Scarcity and Fragility of Gains

Participants emphasised chronic financial and institutional resource limitations as central constraints. Few funds were available for training, workshops, or monitoring, and COVID-19 disruptions further weakened engagement.

> *"We started well, but there was no budget after the first year. Everything paused."* (SA-03)

In the fragile, post-conflict context of Gulu University, even small disruptions had outsized effects. Without dedicated funding, multiplier networks were heavily dependent on individual goodwill and external donor support, limiting sustainability.

Cross-Cutting Insight: Synergy Determines Sustainability

The study revealed that no single factor-certification, incentives, or governance was sufficient to sustain multiplier networks. Their synergy was critical. Where certification was institutionally recognised, promotion policies aligned with gender work, and multipliers had clear roles within governance, networks thrived. Conversely, where these elements were disconnected, multiplier enthusiasm eroded. The interplay between individual motivation and structural support emerged as the central determinant of network sustainability.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The present study explored the factors influencing the sustainability of gender equity multiplier networks in a post-conflict university context. The thematic analysis revealed three interrelated themes: Certification and professional legitimacy, career incentives and motivational sustainability, and institutionalisation through governance and policy integration, each offering critical insights into the complex dynamics at play.

Certification and Professional Legitimacy

The data indicate that TESCEA certification serves as a vital source of professional recognition for multipliers, enhancing their credibility and authority in academic and policy spaces. Participants reported that certification transformed their perceived legitimacy, enabling them to contribute more confidently to curriculum development and gender policy discourse (CM-12, CM-02). This finding aligns with Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which emphasises the role of visible and credible innovations in facilitating adoption within social systems.

However, while certification granted symbolic capital, the absence of formal institutional validation—such as recognition in promotion or workload policies—significantly undermined its potential to sustain long-term engagement (CM-04). This institutional gap suggests that certification alone is insufficient to drive systemic change unless embedded within formal reward and career advancement structures. This finding

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corroborates previous scholarship emphasising the necessity of aligning professional development with institutional incentives (Roos et al., 2020).

Moreover, concerns about the cultural relevance of certification content highlight the importance of contextualising gender training within local socio-cultural realities (CF-17). This points to a need for capacity-building initiatives that are both theoretically robust and practically resonant, reflecting local experiences and challenges.

Career Incentives and Motivational Sustainability

A salient finding is the prominence of intrinsic motivation as a driver of multiplier engagement. Many participants expressed a deep personal commitment to gender equity, viewing their work as transformative and meaningful beyond extrinsic rewards (CM-08). This resonates with Herzberg's (1966) Motivation-Hygiene Theory, which posits that intrinsic factors such as recognition and meaningful work foster sustained motivation.

Nonetheless, this intrinsic passion was counterbalanced by institutional neglect regarding career incentives. The pervasive disconnect between gender equity work and formal promotion criteria generated frustration and risked demotivation, particularly among female multipliers who additionally faced gendered barriers (CM-22, CF-19). This confirms that without structural alignment, individual motivation risks being overwhelmed by systemic constraints (Sumner et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the competing demands of teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, combined with limited institutional support, contributed to workload strain and burnout (CM-06). This echoes findings from similar contexts where gender mainstreaming is treated as an ancillary task rather than an integrated responsibility, thereby threatening sustainability.

Institutionalisation through Governance and Policy Integration

The findings highlight governance and leadership as pivotal determinants of multiplier network sustainability. Where multipliers were incorporated into decision-making bodies and supported by senior leadership, their influence and engagement flourished (CM-09). This reinforces the critical role of organisational institutionalism, which underscores leadership's power in shaping institutional norms and priorities (Scott, 2008).

However, widespread role ambiguity and the absence of formal coordination mechanisms compromised multiplier effectiveness (CM-14). This institutional fragmentation illustrates a lack of strategic planning necessary to embed gender equity work structurally. The findings suggest that without clear role definitions and accountability frameworks, multiplier efforts remain vulnerable to inconsistency and decline.

Cultural resistance rooted in patriarchal academic norms was another significant barrier. Participants' narratives of passive opposition and dismissal of gender issues as "activism" underscore entrenched challenges to institutional transformation (CM-20). This cultural dimension must be addressed through comprehensive change management strategies targeting underlying attitudes alongside policy reforms.

Lastly, resource scarcity emerged as a critical constraint, particularly in the post-conflict context of Gulu University. Reliance on external funding and individual goodwill is inherently precarious, highlighting the urgent need for dedicated institutional resources to sustain multiplier networks (SA-03).

Integrated Interpretation: Toward Sustainable Gender Equity Networks

Synthesising these themes, the study underscores that sustainability hinges on the synergistic interplay between individual motivation,

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institutional recognition, and governance support. Certification without institutional endorsement, or passion without structural incentives, cannot sustain multiplier networks in isolation.

The findings compel higher education institutions to adopt integrated strategies that simultaneously enhance professional legitimacy, align career incentives, and embed multipliers within formal governance structures. Only through this comprehensive approach can gender mainstreaming initiatives transition from isolated efforts to institutionalised, resilient practices.

This study contributes to the broader discourse by illuminating how structural, cultural, and individual factors interact in shaping the sustainability of gender equity initiatives within challenging contexts. It emphasises that addressing these dimensions in tandem is essential for meaningful and lasting institutional transformation.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Contributions to Theory

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by synthesising three prominent frameworks: Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Organisational Institutionalism, and Motivation-Hygiene Theory to deepen understanding of multiplier network sustainability within higher education institutions (HEIs) operating in fragile, post-conflict contexts. While these theories have individually informed research on innovation adoption, organisational change, and motivation, their integrated application to the sustainability of gender mainstreaming multiplier networks is novel.

By situating these theoretical lenses within the unique socio-political and institutional dynamics of a post-conflict African university, the study extends theoretical boundaries, illuminating how individual motivation, institutional structures, and innovation legitimacy intersect to either enable or constrain sustained engagement. This integrated theoretical approach addresses a critical gap in the literature, where prior research has largely examined these elements in isolation or within stable, resource-rich environments.

Contributions to Knowledge

Empirically, this research provides new and contextually rich insights into the complex interplay between certification, career incentives, and institutionalisation as interdependent factors shaping multiplier network sustainability in fragile university settings.

The study highlights how certification functions not only as a personal credential but also as a mechanism for professional legitimacy and authority, thereby influencing multiplier effectiveness and visibility. It reveals the tension between intrinsic motivation and the structural undervaluation of gender work in academic career progression, underscoring systemic barriers faced by multipliers, especially women. Furthermore, the findings elucidate how uneven governance integration and inconsistent leadership support undermine institutionalisation efforts, exposing the fragility of gains made in gender mainstreaming initiatives in resource-constrained, post-conflict HEIs.

These insights contribute to the scant literature on post-conflict higher education reform and provide evidence to inform the design of gender equity programs that are responsive to contextual challenges.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's findings underscore certification as a pivotal legitimacy mechanism that empowers multipliers, granting them credibility and authority in advancing gender equity agendas within their academic departments. Certification acts as both a symbolic and practical validation of expertise, facilitating multiplier influence in curriculum development and policy discussions.

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However, the study reveals a significant disconnect between certification and institutional reward systems; career incentives tied to promotion and workload allocation remain misaligned with gender mainstreaming contributions. This misalignment dampens motivation and threatens the sustainability of multiplier engagement.

Institutionalisation emerges as a critical enabler, with formal integration of multipliers into governance structures such as curriculum committees and gender task forces promoting accountability and embedding gender equity efforts into university culture. Nevertheless, the lack of role clarity, inconsistent leadership support, and chronic resource scarcity hinder sustainable institutionalisation. Compounding these structural challenges are gendered barriers and competing workload demands that disproportionately affect female multipliers.

Collectively, these findings highlight that sustaining multiplier networks in post-conflict universities demands a holistic approach. Strategies must reconcile individual intrinsic motivation with robust institutional support mechanisms, encompassing clear role definitions, recognition, resource allocation, and leadership commitment. Without such integrative and context-sensitive approaches, gender mainstreaming initiatives risk being episodic and fragile in resource-poor, politically complex environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Recommendation for Policymakers

Policy makers should develop frameworks that formally recognise gender mainstreaming certification and related contributions as integral to faculty appraisal, promotion, and workload allocation. Policies should explicitly reward participation in multiplier networks and other gender equity initiatives, ensuring that systemic gender inequities in academic careers are addressed. Additionally, dedicated and sustainable funding mechanisms must be established to support training, workshops, monitoring, and evaluation of gender mainstreaming programs, protecting them from disruptions caused by crises or resource fluctuations.

Recommendations for Policy Implementers

University leaders and administrators should integrate multipliers into formal governance structures, such as curriculum committees, gender task forces, and decision-making bodies, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Workload adjustments should be implemented to accommodate multiplier activities without overburdening faculty, while mentorship and support programs, especially for female multipliers—can help mitigate gender-specific challenges and enhance career progression. Visible leadership support, including public endorsement and inclusion of gender initiatives in strategic plans, is essential to foster a supportive institutional culture and reduce resistance to change.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

Future research should explore the long-term sustainability and impact of multiplier networks on institutional gender equity, particularly in post-conflict and resource-constrained higher education contexts. Studies should investigate how professional certification affects multipliers' legitimacy, motivation, and ongoing engagement, while also examining the intersectional challenges related to gender, rank, and socio-cultural factors. Additionally, research should analyse the effectiveness of policy implementation, identifying gaps between formal guidelines and practical outcomes, to inform strategies for strengthening institutional support for gender mainstreaming initiatives.

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