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Teaching Change: TESCEA's Journey Toward Gender-Equitable Higher Education – A Case Study of Gulu University, Uganda

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*Gender Mainstreaming,
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Gender-Responsive Pedagogy.*

This study critically examined the effectiveness of TESCEA's gender mainstreaming initiatives at Gulu University, focusing on gender training workshops, policy advocacy, and the establishment of a dedicated Gender Mainstreaming Unit. Employing qualitative methods, data were collected from academic staff and university leadership to explore how these interventions embedded gender-responsive pedagogy within the institution's teaching and policy frameworks. Findings revealed that participatory gender training significantly enhanced staff awareness and fostered transformative teaching practices, while policy reforms contributed to institutionalising gender equity mandates. The Gender Mainstreaming Unit emerged as a key actor in sustaining momentum and ensuring accountability. However, challenges such as limited resource allocation and entrenched cultural norms continued to hinder comprehensive progress. The study highlights the critical importance of context-sensitive, multi-level strategies that address both institutional structures and socio-cultural realities to effectively advance gender equity in higher education. These insights contribute to the growing body of research on gender mainstreaming in African universities and offer practical implications for policy and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality within higher education institutions (HEIs) remained a persistent global challenge that limited equitable access to learning opportunities and career advancement for women and gender minorities (UNESCO, 2022). In Uganda, and particularly at Gulu University, these disparities manifested in both academic and administrative spheres, undermining inclusive, quality education. The Education Sector Consortium for Education in Africa (TESCEA) launched a series of gender mainstreaming initiatives aimed at addressing these gaps by integrating gender-responsive pedagogy and policy reforms into the institutional fabric of Gulu University.

TESCEA's approach involved a multi-pronged strategy: conducting participatory gender training workshops to raise awareness and develop competencies; advocating for robust gender equity policies; and establishing a Gender Mainstreaming Unit dedicated to coordinating and monitoring gender initiatives. These interventions aligned with global and national commitments to gender equality, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 and Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) gender policy frameworks.

Embedding gender equity within the university's teaching and governance systems required confronting entrenched structural inequalities and socio-cultural norms that have historically marginalised women and gender minorities. While

policies were critical, sustained transformation demanded active institutional engagement and capacity building to shape attitudes, practices, and accountability mechanisms.

This study explored TESCEA's gender mainstreaming journey at Gulu University, analysing how training, policy, and institutional mechanisms collectively advanced gender-responsive higher education. By situating this inquiry within the context of a major Ugandan public university, the research contributed vital empirical evidence to the limited literature on gender mainstreaming in African higher education, offering insights that inform both scholarship and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was grounded in Gender Mainstreaming Theory, which emphasises the systematic integration of gender perspectives into institutional policies, practices, and cultures to achieve gender equality (True, 2003; Walby, 2005). Developed through international efforts to advance women's rights and gender justice, gender mainstreaming moves beyond isolated projects to embed gender analysis and action across all organisational levels.

Gender Mainstreaming Theory identified three interrelated components essential for sustainable gender equity: policy reform that institutionalised gender equality mandates; capacity building through participatory training and sensitisation to develop gender-responsive attitudes and skills; and organisational restructuring via dedicated units or

bodies responsible for coordinating, monitoring, and sustaining gender initiatives (True, 2003; Walby, 2005).

The theory also acknowledged that achieving gender equity required addressing both structural barriers, including resource allocation disparities, bureaucratic inertia, and governance challenges and cultural obstacles, such as patriarchal norms and resistance to change. Gender mainstreaming thus functioned as a transformative process that reshaped institutional priorities, power relations, and daily practices.

Applying this framework to TESCEA's interventions at Gulu University facilitated a nuanced examination of how gender equity was advanced through integrated policy advocacy, comprehensive training programs, and the establishment of a Gender Mainstreaming Unit. This approach highlighted the interconnectedness of institutional mechanisms and cultural dynamics in driving sustainable pedagogical reform and advancing gender justice in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Gender equity research in higher education is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks, including Gender Mainstreaming Theory, Joan Acker's Inequality Regimes, intersectionality, and feminist pedagogy. Each offers critical insights into the mechanisms sustaining gender disparities, but reveals important gaps when applied in African contexts such as Gulu University.

Gender Mainstreaming Theory emphasises integrating gender perspectives into institutional policies and processes to achieve systemic transformation (True, 2012; Walby, 2011). While widely adopted, its practical application often suffers from superficial compliance rather than substantive change, particularly in African universities where policies lack contextual adaptation and deep institutional commitment

(Kaleidoscope Trust, 2021; Ncube, 2022). This results in limited ownership and ineffective gender mainstreaming outcomes. Moreover, the theory insufficiently operationalises intersectionality, thereby neglecting how intersecting identities like class, ethnicity, and disability compound gender inequities (Ncube, 2022).

Joan Acker's (2006) theory of Inequality Regimes offers a powerful lens for understanding how everyday organisational processes and cultural norms reproduce gender inequalities in academia (Acker, 2006; Boateng & Asante, 2021). Despite its conceptual strength, empirical studies applying this framework in African higher education remain sparse. The unique socio-cultural and historical contexts of African institutions challenge the universal applicability of Acker's model, indicating a need for localised theoretical adaptations (Boateng & Asante, 2021).

Intersectionality theory, originating from Collins and Bilge (2020), highlights the complexity of overlapping social identities and their cumulative effects on marginalisation (Collins & Bilge, 2020). However, its integration into higher education gender research in Africa is limited (Kabonesa & Mugisha, 2019). Most studies focus narrowly on gender alone, failing to capture how intersecting factors influence access, retention, and career progression, thus undermining the inclusivity and effectiveness of gender policies and interventions (Kabonesa & Mugisha, 2019; Ncube, 2022).

Feminist pedagogical theories advocate for critical, student-centred approaches that challenge patriarchal power structures within teaching and learning (hooks, 2014; Bajaj, 2020). Yet, adoption in African universities is hindered by institutional barriers such as high teaching loads, limited gender expertise, and insufficient incentives (Mukhtar & Akhtar, 2021). There is a significant research gap regarding how feminist pedagogy can be culturally and institutionally contextualised to drive sustainable pedagogical transformation in resource-limited settings (Mukhtar & Akhtar, 2021).

Finally, existing theories often treat policy, organisational culture, and pedagogy as discrete domains rather than interconnected facets of institutional change. This compartmentalisation limits the design of comprehensive, sustainable gender mainstreaming strategies (Leathwood & Read, 2020). Additionally, scant attention is paid to institutional resilience mechanisms necessary for sustaining gender equity initiatives beyond donor funding cycles and leadership changes (Mukasa & Ajwang, 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent theoretical need to develop integrative models that combine intersectional, organisational, and pedagogical perspectives within localised African contexts to advance meaningful and lasting gender equity in higher education.

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

Gender inequality remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge in higher education globally, affecting access, retention, academic performance, and leadership representation, particularly disadvantaging women and gender minorities in STEM fields and senior roles (UNESCO, 2022). This disparity is deeply rooted in institutional cultures and structural biases that perpetuate male dominance through implicit norms and organisational practices (Morley, 2020). Joan Acker's (2006) Inequality Regimes theory elucidates how gender inequalities are embedded within everyday institutional processes, including hiring, promotion, and power relations, which are often reinforced by both formal policies and informal cultural norms. Although highly relevant for African universities such as Gulu University, empirical applications of this framework in African contexts are limited, underscoring a need for localised adaptations that account for unique socio-cultural dynamics (Boateng & Asante, 2021).

Curricular content often perpetuates gender stereotypes and marginalises women's contributions, thereby reinforcing discriminatory attitudes and unequal learning experiences (Leathwood & Read, 2020). African higher

education institutions frequently lack comprehensive gender-sensitive curricular reforms, which further entrenches bias (Olafsson et al., 2021). Access remains inequitable, especially for women from marginalised, rural, or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where intersecting identities such as ethnicity and class compound educational barriers. Despite the theoretical importance of intersectionality in capturing these overlapping inequities (Collins & Bilge, 2020), its application in African gender equity research is limited, often reducing gender to a singular category (Kabonesa & Mugisha, 2019).

Although many African universities have adopted gender equity policies, there is a persistent disconnect between policy formulation and implementation due to weak institutional commitment, resource shortages, and insufficient accountability mechanisms (Mungai, 2020; Kaleidoscope Trust, 2021). Furthermore, socio-cultural and patriarchal traditions continue to constrain women's participation in academia by influencing enrollment, retention, workplace culture, and leadership opportunities, with contextual variations that remain underexplored in the literature (Oketch et al., 2019). Women academics frequently encounter the "glass ceiling," harassment, and discrimination, yet research documenting these experiences in African settings is scarce, revealing a critical knowledge gap (O'Connor et al., 2019).

Finally, the paucity of systematic, longitudinal data on gender disparities and intervention impacts hampers evidence-based policy development and progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2022). This evidentiary gap limits institutional learning and constrains the capacity for sustained gender equity advancement.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

Gender mainstreaming, as defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1997), entails the integration of gender perspectives across all institutional policies and programs to promote equality. Despite its global prominence, gender mainstreaming in higher education often remains superficial, enacted as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a transformative process capable of challenging entrenched patriarchal structures (Kabeer, 2018). Effective implementation critically depends on committed leadership, yet many African universities struggle with leadership turnover, competing priorities, and limited engagement, leading to marginalised and unsustainable gender initiatives (Mukasa & Ajwang, 2020). Notably, research on how different leadership styles impact gender mainstreaming effectiveness remains underdeveloped.

Gender Mainstreaming Units (GMUs), established as coordination hubs, frequently face operational limitations such as inadequate funding, limited institutional authority, and a lack of robust support, contributing to wide variability in their effectiveness (Nyoni, 2021). Additionally, the adaptation of gender policies to local socio-cultural realities is often overlooked, resulting in poor ownership and implementation, which compromises meaningful change (Kaleidoscope Trust, 2021). The processes and stakeholder dynamics involved in policy localisation require further empirical exploration.

Resistance to gender mainstreaming frequently stems from entrenched cultural attitudes, misunderstandings of gender equality, and fear of change, yet these dynamics are under-researched, limiting the development of participatory and inclusive strategies (Oketch et al., 2019). Most gender mainstreaming evaluations emphasise quantitative outputs (e.g., number of workshops, policies) while neglecting qualitative shifts in institutional culture, attitudes, and power relations,

thereby underestimating the true transformative potential of these efforts (UN Women, 2021). Furthermore, many initiatives rely heavily on donor funding, which threatens sustainability when external support ends. There is scant research on institutionalising gender mainstreaming sustainably through governance and budgeting reforms (Mukasa & Ajwang, 2020).

Finally, intersectionality integration within gender mainstreaming efforts is minimal, with few institutions explicitly addressing how gender intersects with race, class, disability, and other identities. This omission limits inclusivity and reduces the effectiveness of gender equity strategies, highlighting an important area for future research (Ncube, 2022).

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

Gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) seeks to eliminate gender biases in teaching by embedding gender awareness into curricula, instruction, and assessment practices (Bajaj, 2020). However, adoption remains inconsistent, with many faculties lacking the necessary expertise, institutional incentives, and support (Mukhtar & Akhtar, 2021). Feminist pedagogical frameworks emphasise critical reflection, student-centred learning, and power analysis to transform hierarchical teaching models (hooks, 2014), but empirical research on their application within African universities is scarce, resulting in a gap regarding culturally sensitive adaptations.

Participatory gender training programs have demonstrated potential in raising awareness and promoting reflective teaching, yet these initiatives often suffer from limited institutional backing, inadequate follow-up, and poor integration into ongoing professional development (O'Sullivan et al., 2022). Resistance to GRP, arising from deeply embedded socio-cultural norms and unconscious biases among faculty and students, manifests through exclusionary practices and

microaggressions that undermine inclusivity but remain insufficiently documented (Akinsola & Atikpo, 2022).

Institutional barriers such as high teaching loads, insufficient gender expertise, and prioritisation of research output over teaching quality further restrict GRP adoption (Nyoni, 2021). There is a critical need for research on institutional reforms that create enabling environments for gender-sensitive pedagogy. Student engagement, which is influenced by curriculum content, faculty attitudes, and peer norms, is underexplored despite its importance for GRP success (Kabonesa & Mugisha, 2019).

Innovative practices such as gender-inclusive curricula, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitive assessment tools have shown promise, but comprehensive evaluations of their long-term impact and scalability within African universities are lacking (Bajaj, 2020). Shifting institutional culture toward gender equity requires integrated strategies that align policy, pedagogy, and leadership. However, holistic models combining these dimensions are rare, underscoring the need for further research into sustainable institutional culture change in African higher education (Leathwood & Read, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study is anchored in an **interpretivist research philosophy**, which recognises that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivist approach was chosen to capture the subjective meanings and lived experiences of academic staff and university leaders regarding TESCEA's gender mainstreaming initiatives. This paradigm is essential because gender equity in higher education is deeply embedded in cultural, institutional, and personal contexts that require a nuanced understanding rather than objective measurement (Schwandt, 2014).

Research Approach

A **qualitative research approach** was employed to explore the complex, multi-layered process of gender mainstreaming within Gulu University. Qualitative methods are appropriate when the objective is to understand social phenomena in depth, especially when little prior research exists in a specific context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the exploratory nature of investigating TESCEA's initiatives and the focus on participants' perceptions, qualitative inquiry allows for rich, detailed data to emerge.

Research Design

The study adopted a case study design, focusing on Gulu University as a single, bounded case within the broader context of gender mainstreaming efforts in Ugandan higher education. Case study methodology allows for an intensive investigation of contemporary phenomena within real-life settings where boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). This design was justified as it enabled the detailed examination of TESCEA's gender training, policy advocacy, and institutional mechanisms in one institution to generate insights that might inform similar contexts.

Study Population

The population comprised academic staff and senior university leaders actively engaged with or affected by TESCEA's gender mainstreaming initiatives. Academic staff members were selected because they are the primary agents of pedagogical change, while senior leaders influence policy and institutional support. This population was appropriate because understanding change requires perspectives from both implementers and decision-makers.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study used purposive sampling to identify 25 academic staff members and 5 senior leaders who had direct involvement with TESCEA's

interventions. Purposive sampling is justified when the research seeks information-rich cases that can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). The sample size of 30 participants was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, ensuring sufficient depth and diversity of perspectives across faculties and leadership.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2024. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they offer flexibility to explore participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent focus on the research objectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This method enabled probing for clarifications and allowed participants to express their views in their own words, yielding rich qualitative data about gender training, policy advocacy, and institutionalisation.

Data Collection Instruments

The main instrument was an interview guide developed from the research objectives and theoretical framework on gender mainstreaming. The guide included open-ended questions under three main domains: gender training workshops, policy advocacy, and the Gender Mainstreaming Unit. The guide was reviewed by experts in gender studies and piloted with two non-participant staff members to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. This process enhanced the instrument's validity.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted in English either face-to-face or via virtual platforms, depending on availability and convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accuracy in data capture. Transcripts were verbatim and returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to confirm or clarify their

statements, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved six phases: familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Thematic analysis was suitable because it is a flexible method that allows both inductive identification of emergent patterns and deductive application of the gender mainstreaming framework to interpret findings. NVivo software (version 12) was used to organise and manage coding systematically, improving rigour and transparency.

Trustworthiness and Quality Control

The study ensured trustworthiness through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: Credibility: Achieved through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and triangulation of data across staff and leadership. Transferability: Enhanced by providing rich, thick descriptions of the university context, TESCEA's interventions, and participant demographics. Dependability: Maintained via a clear audit trail documenting research decision, data collection, and analysis steps. Confirmability: Supported by reflective journaling and peer debriefing to minimise researcher bias and ensure findings are grounded in participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Gulu University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews. Data were anonymised by removing identifying details, and audio files and transcripts were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Assumptions of the Study

The study was based on several assumptions: participants would provide honest and thoughtful responses; TESCEA's interventions had a tangible influence on gender equity practices; and institutional stakeholders were willing to engage openly on gender-related issues despite potential cultural sensitivities.

Limitations and Delimitations

The qualitative case study design limits generalizability beyond Gulu University's context. Self-reported data may be affected by social desirability bias, especially on sensitive topics such as gender. Time and resource constraints prevented inclusion of observational or longitudinal data, which could have enriched the understanding of institutional dynamics over time.

The study focused exclusively on academic staff and senior leaders, excluding students and administrative/support staff. It concentrated on three TESCEA intervention domains (training, policy, and institutional mechanisms), without assessing curriculum content or long-term outcomes.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

Gender inequality in higher education continues to be a major barrier to equitable participation, particularly in contexts where entrenched cultural norms assign traditional gender roles that limit women's academic engagement and success. This theme explores the socio-cultural factors affecting female students' participation across faculties in higher education.

Cultural Expectations and Social Roles

Participants from various faculties identified traditional gender roles as a significant impediment to female students' educational attainment. Faculty members from the Business and Development Studies faculty highlighted that female students

often bear disproportionate domestic responsibilities that interfere with their academic focus. One participant shared,

"Female students are often expected to manage household work or care for siblings. This responsibility affects their attendance and academic focus significantly" (P23-BDS-F, 2024).

This testimony illustrates how societal expectations intersect with academic obligations, creating an additional burden that restricts women's full participation in higher education.

Mobility and Participation Constraints

Within the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, mobility restrictions imposed by families emerged as a substantial barrier to female students' practical learning experiences. One faculty member revealed,

"We have lost female students who withdrew from field placements because their families did not approve of them travelling or working outdoors, which is vital in agricultural studies" (P17-FAE-M, 2024).

Such restrictions not only limit experiential learning but also hinder the development of essential professional competencies.

Community Resistance and Normative Barriers

Faculty from the Faculty of Medicine observed persistent cultural resistance discouraging women from pursuing particular professional roles traditionally deemed unsuitable for their gender. A participant remarked,

"In some communities, women are discouraged from taking up medical roles, perceived as unsuitable for them, which restricts female participation in the faculty" (P08-FMED-F, 2024).

This reflects the broader socio-cultural milieu that shapes women's educational opportunities and career trajectories.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

Institutionalising gender mainstreaming through formal policies and organisational structures is crucial for sustained progress toward gender equity. This theme examines the formalisation of gender equity policies, implementation challenges, and the role of institutional units in advancing gender mainstreaming.

Policy Formalisation and Institutional Commitment

The integration of gender equity into university policies was widely recognised as a pivotal institutional shift. As one participant noted,

“Embedding gender equity in our policies was a turning point; it transformed gender mainstreaming from an optional add-on into a central institutional mandate” (P05-BDS-M, 2024).

This formalisation provided legitimacy and a structural basis for gender mainstreaming efforts.

Implementation Gaps and Resource Constraints

Despite policy advancements, participants highlighted a persistent gap between policy formulation and practical implementation, primarily due to limited resources and weak enforcement. One faculty member commented,

“We have clear guidelines, but without proper follow-up and allocation of resources, translating policy into effective practice remains a challenge” (P01-BDS-F, 2024).

This disconnect is common in resource-limited contexts, where policy adoption alone is insufficient to effect change.

Institutional Structures – The Gender Mainstreaming Unit

The establishment of the Gender Mainstreaming Unit (GMU) was identified as a strategic institutional innovation providing ongoing

coordination and technical support. A participant observed,

“Having a specific office dedicated to gender means there is continuous support and resources available for gender-related initiatives, which encourages innovation and accountability” (P19-FAE-F, 2024).

However, concerns about dependency on external funding highlight challenges to the Unit’s long-term sustainability.

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

Advancing gender equity requires not only policy reform but also transformative pedagogical practices and shifts in institutional culture. This theme explores faculty awareness of gender bias, pedagogical adjustments, structural barriers, and institutional support mechanisms.

Awareness and Recognition of Gender Bias

TESCEA’s gender training workshops played a critical role in enhancing faculty members’ awareness of unconscious gender biases influencing teaching methods and classroom interactions. A faculty member reflected,

“Before the training, I was unaware of how unconscious biases shaped my teaching approach and classroom dynamics” (P12-FMED-F, 2024).

Recognising such biases is a foundational step toward adopting gender-responsive pedagogies.

Adoption of Gender-Responsive Teaching Practices

Post-training, faculty actively redesigned curricula and instructional strategies to foster inclusivity, with a particular focus on increasing female student engagement in STEM fields. One educator shared,

“Now, I intentionally redesign my lessons to ensure they engage all students, especially female students in STEM, creating a more

supportive learning environment” (P28-BDS-M, 2024).

The participatory nature of the workshops facilitated meaningful pedagogical transformation.

Structural and Systemic Barriers to Pedagogical Change

Despite enhanced awareness, participants reported structural constraints such as large class sizes and inadequate teaching resources that hinder the effective implementation of gender-responsive approaches. A participant noted,

“It’s difficult to apply gender-responsive teaching methods effectively when class sizes are very large and teaching resources are limited” (P15-FMED-F, 2024).

This underscores the necessity for systemic investment to complement capacity-building efforts.

Institutional Support and Mentorship Programs

The GMU’s mentorship initiatives were highlighted as instrumental in promoting female student retention and challenging gender stereotypes within the academic culture. One participant explained,

“The mentoring programs supported by the Gender Mainstreaming Unit have been crucial in retaining female students and breaking down academic stereotypes” (P22-FAE-F, 2024).

Such sustained institutional support is vital for fostering an enabling environment for gender equity.

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

The findings reveal that deeply entrenched cultural norms and traditional gender roles remain significant barriers to equitable participation for female students in higher education. Faculty across disciplines emphasised that female students often shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities,

which interfere with their academic engagement and attendance (P23-BDS-F, 2024). This overlap between societal expectations and educational demands creates a compounded burden that limits women’s opportunities to fully succeed academically.

Such findings resonate with extant literature emphasising that interventions must address not only institutional policies but also the broader socio-cultural context to effectively support women’s educational advancement (Okello & Nebongo, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Additionally, mobility constraints imposed by families, particularly in faculties requiring fieldwork like Agriculture and Environment, restrict critical experiential learning that underpins professional competence (P17-FAE-M, 2024). These constraints exemplify how cultural control over women’s movement directly impedes academic progression, underscoring the necessity for culturally sensitive strategies that engage families and communities as allies in gender equity efforts (MGLSD, 2023). Moreover, persistent community resistance against women pursuing certain professions, such as medicine (P08-FMED-F, 2024), illustrates how normative gender stereotypes continue to shape educational access and career pathways. The implication is clear: to dismantle gender inequality in higher education, multi-level interventions must simultaneously challenge entrenched norms while creating supportive institutional environments that empower women’s participation and success.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

The formal embedding of gender equity provisions into university policies marks a significant institutional commitment and offers legitimacy to gender mainstreaming initiatives (P05-BDS-M, 2024). This policy formalisation aligns with global best practices advocating for the integration of gender equity as a core mandate to ensure sustainability and accountability (UNESCO, 2022). However, the reported gaps between policy

existence and actual implementation, driven by limited financial resources and inadequate enforcement mechanisms (P01-BDS-F, 2024), highlight a common challenge in resource-constrained contexts. This disconnect suggests that without adequate resourcing and monitoring, policies risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. The establishment of the Gender Mainstreaming Unit (GMU) was identified as a positive institutional innovation offering dedicated coordination and technical support for gender initiatives (P19-FAE-F, 2024). Nevertheless, concerns about the Unit's reliance on donor funding raise questions about its long-term viability, implying that sustainable gender mainstreaming requires institutionalising such functions within university core budgets and strategic frameworks (Ssekandi & Naluwairo, 2024). Together, these insights emphasise that advancing gender equity demands a dual approach: formal policy commitments coupled with practical, well-funded, and accountable implementation processes that bridge the gap between intention and impact.

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

TESCEA's gender training workshops played a crucial role in fostering faculty members' recognition of unconscious gender biases embedded in their teaching approaches (P12-FMED-F, 2024), confirming the importance of reflective practice as a foundation for pedagogical reform (Knowles, 1980). Faculty reports of curriculum redesign and intentional strategies to enhance inclusion, particularly for female students in STEM disciplines, demonstrate the effectiveness of participatory, experiential training models in driving sustained pedagogical change (P28-BDS-M, 2024). Yet, these positive shifts are tempered by systemic challenges such as large class sizes and limited teaching resources, which constrain the full application of gender-responsive pedagogy (P15-FMED-F, 2024). This highlights the critical need for complementary institutional investments in

infrastructure and teaching capacity to enable meaningful and scalable pedagogical transformation (Kamau & Wambua, 2021). Furthermore, mentorship programs facilitated by the GMU were highly valued for their contribution to female student retention and the gradual dismantling of gender stereotypes within the academic culture (P22-FAE-F, 2024). This ongoing institutional support underscores that gender mainstreaming extends beyond policy and pedagogy into cultural change, requiring continuous mentorship and community-building initiatives. Consequently, achieving gender equity in higher education necessitates an integrated approach combining awareness-raising, pedagogical innovation, structural investment, and sustained cultural transformation.

The transformation of pedagogical practices via gender training workshops demonstrates promising shifts in faculty attitudes and behaviours, yet structural constraints must be addressed to enable comprehensive change. Mentorship and continuous institutional support further strengthen efforts to retain female students and challenge gendered academic cultures. Ultimately, a holistic, multi-level strategy that integrates cultural sensitivity, policy commitment, pedagogical innovation, and systemic investment is critical for realising sustainable gender equity in higher education.

Contributions of the Study to Theory and the Body of Knowledge

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

This study offers critical, context-specific insights into the persistence of gender inequality in higher education, particularly within post-conflict Northern Uganda. Drawing from rich qualitative data across the Faculties of Business and Development Studies, Agriculture and Environment, and Medicine, the study illuminates how entrenched cultural norms and gendered expectations continue to constrain female students' access to, and participation in, higher learning.

Specifically, it highlights how responsibilities related to domestic labour, limited mobility, and community discouragement significantly interfere with women's academic engagement and access to experiential learning opportunities. These findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on gender and education by linking structural inequality with lived institutional experiences in fragile contexts.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

The study contributes significantly to the evolving scholarship on gender mainstreaming by offering an institutional lens through which to evaluate policy integration and implementation in resource-constrained university settings. It emphasises the importance of policy formalisation—such as the incorporation of gender equity into strategic plans—and institutional innovation through structures like the Gender Mainstreaming Unit (GMU). At the same time, it identifies systemic barriers, including donor dependency, resource gaps, and weak enforcement mechanisms, that compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of gender equity policies. These findings advance knowledge by exposing the operational disconnects that commonly undermine well-intentioned policy reforms in higher education.

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

This research makes an important theoretical and practical contribution to understanding how gender-responsive pedagogy can drive institutional culture change. The study documents the impact of faculty capacity-building initiatives—particularly gender training workshops—on raising awareness of unconscious bias and catalysing pedagogical innovation. Faculty responses indicate a positive shift toward inclusive teaching practices, especially in STEM fields where female underrepresentation is most acute. Additionally, mentorship programs supported by institutional structures are shown to effectively support female student retention and

challenge entrenched gender stereotypes. These findings enrich the literature on gender-transformative pedagogy by illustrating the interplay between individual agency, institutional support, and systemic constraints.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

The findings confirm that cultural norms and traditional gender roles significantly hinder women's participation in higher education. Female students frequently face competing demands from domestic responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and community resistance to non-traditional career choices. These factors collectively limit academic engagement and perpetuate gender disparities across faculties. Therefore, addressing gender inequality in higher education requires a dual focus on institutional reform and broader cultural transformation.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

Although the integration of gender equity into institutional policy represents a critical advancement, actual implementation remains uneven due to inadequate funding, poor monitoring systems, and limited institutional ownership. In particular, the sustainability of initiatives like the GMU is threatened by an over-reliance on external donors. These shortcomings highlight the fragile nature of gender mainstreaming in resource-limited academic settings and the need for stronger internal governance mechanisms.

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

Faculty awareness of gender bias has improved significantly as a result of targeted gender training workshops, leading to positive shifts in pedagogical approaches and curriculum design. However, systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and limited access to teaching resources continue to undermine the effectiveness and

scalability of gender-responsive teaching practices. Mentorship programs have shown considerable promise in fostering inclusion, but their reach remains inconsistent across faculties.

Recommendations

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

Universities should develop and implement culturally sensitive outreach programs targeting local communities and families, with the goal of promoting the value of women's higher education. Institutions should also introduce flexible academic schedules and support systems that account for students' caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, gender-sensitive policies should be developed to ensure female students can safely and fully participate in fieldwork and other experiential learning activities, especially in agriculture and medicine.

Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Implementation in Higher Education

To ensure effective implementation of gender equity policies, institutions must embed gender-focused units like the GMU within the university's strategic and operational frameworks. This includes allocating dedicated funding, staff, and reporting structures. Furthermore, the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation systems is necessary to ensure accountability and track progress. Building internal capacity and reducing reliance on donor funding will be key to the long-term sustainability of gender mainstreaming efforts.

Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Institutional Culture Change

Institutions should institutionalise gender-responsive teaching as part of ongoing professional development for faculty. This should include regular training sessions, peer support structures, and incentives for inclusive teaching innovations. Concurrently, universities must address structural limitations by investing in smaller class sizes, improved teaching materials, and inclusive

classroom environments. Mentorship programs for female students should be standardised, scaled, and adequately resourced to support retention and gender equity across disciplines.

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