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# STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR ADDRESSING GENDER IMBALANCE PRACTICES AMONG ACADEMICIANS IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES IN UGANDA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

Gender imbalance remains a persistent challenge in African universities, limiting the full participation and representation of emerging female academicians in higher education. This conceptual paper explores strategic initiatives for elevating equality and addressing gender disparities among academicians in African universities, specifically focusing on Uganda and South Africa. This paper identifies key barriers based on a review of literature, policy documents, and empirical studies. It shows the challenges women academicians face as the basis for proposing strategic initiatives to promote gender equity and inclusion. By highlighting successful interventions, policy recommendations, and best practices from diverse contexts, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to create more equitable and gender-inclusive academic environments in African universities. The results from the review reveal historical, institutional, socio-cultural, and landscape barriers to gender equality. The review also reveals strategies for addressing gender imbalance, such as gender mainstreaming, promotion of gender-responsive research, enhancement of access to professional development and leadership training, creation of supportive work environments and flexible policies, and the fostering of mentorship and networking opportunities for female academics. Therefore, gender imbalance in

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African universities requires strategic and coordinated effort through advocacy and commitment to change. Implementation of policies, strengthening of mechanisms that support the needed change, and enhancement of data collection and monitoring systems are highly recommended.

**Keywords:** gender imbalance, academicians, African universities, gender equity, strategic initiatives, Uganda, South Africa

## **Introduction**

Gender equality, though a fundamental principle of human rights and social justice, remains a subtle goal in many sectors, including academia (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Thompson, 2020). In African universities, gender imbalance persists, with women underrepresented in academic leadership positions, research activities, and decision-making processes (Liani et al., 2020; Igiebor, 2021). This phenomenon stems from various social, cultural, and systemic factors that intersect to create barriers to women's advancement in academia. Literature attests that one of the major contributing factors is rooted in gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate traditional gender roles and expectations, often portraying academic leadership and research roles as primarily male domains (Liani et al., 2020; Mensah, 2023). The same authors believe that cultural beliefs about women's capabilities and societal perceptions of gender roles may limit women's access to educational opportunities, career advancement, and leadership roles within universities.

Despite advancements in education and efforts to promote gender equality, disparities persist, limiting the full participation and contributions of women in higher education. The need to address this issue is paramount, as gender equity fosters diversity and inclusivity and enhances the quality and effectiveness of academic institutions. Therefore, strategic initiatives addressing gender imbalance among academicians have emerged as essential pathways towards achieving greater gender equity within African universities. This conceptual paper seeks to address this critical issue by examining strategic initiatives for elevating equality and promoting gender equity among academicians in African universities, focusing on South Africa and Uganda. These two countries have been used to exemplify the challenges in promoting gender equality in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. By analysing the root causes of gender imbalance, identifying key challenges faced by women academicians, and

proposing targeted interventions, the conceptual paper aims to contribute to advancing gender equity and inclusion in higher education across the continent.

Various scholars such as Ramohai (2014), Boateng (2018), Uduma (2018), Mahabeer, Nzimande and Shoba (2018), Griffin (2019), Liani, Nyamongo and Tolhurst (2020), Harris (2020), Mkhize (2022) and De Welde and Stepnick (2023) concur that discriminatory practices and unconscious biases are likely to further marginalisation of women, making it difficult for them to succeed and thrive in academic environments. Without adequate support systems and institutional interventions to address these challenges, women continue to face significant barriers to their participation and leadership in African universities (Griffin, 2019; Liani et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Mkhize, 2022; De Welde & Stepnick, 2023). We argue that addressing gender imbalance in academia requires comprehensive and multifaceted strategies that tackle underlying social, cultural, and institutional barriers. This may include among others implementing gender-sensitive policies and practices, promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives, providing mentorship and leadership development programs for women, and raising awareness about gender bias and discrimination (Nyoni & Yusuph, 2017; Dlanjwa, 2018; Garwe & Chikwiri, 2021; Igiebor, 2021; Smith & Sinkford, 2021; Diab & Bulani, 2023; Dhiman, 2023; Shuayto & Walters, 2023). By addressing systemic issues and promoting gender equality within universities, African universities can create more inclusive and equitable academic environments that empower women and promote excellence in research, teaching, and leadership. Hence, the paper focuses on strategic initiatives for addressing gender imbalance among academicians in African universities, with special reference to South Africa and Uganda.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This conceptual paper explores the strategic initiatives that can elevate equality and address gender disparities among academicians in African universities, specifically focusing on Uganda and South Africa.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was anchored on the Social Ecological Model (SEM) proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s, articulating the intricate connections and relations between an individual and their multiple social and physical settings throughout human growth

(Townsend & Foster, 2013; Alghzawi & Ghanem, 2021) to explore the strategic initiatives for addressing gender imbalance among academicians in African universities. The Social Ecological Model emphasises the interconnectedness of various levels of influence on individual behaviour and outcomes (Bodin, 2017; Masterson et al., 2017). It comprises multiple levels: the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal. In addressing gender imbalance among academicians in African universities, the SEM provides a lens for understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing gender equality. At the individual level, personal beliefs, attitudes, and experiences shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours toward gender equality (Joshi & Maharjan, 2020; Serra et al., 2023). The interpersonal level considers the influence of interpersonal relationships, including mentorship, networking, and support systems, on women's career development and advancement in academia (Jones, 2016; Mondragon, 2019). At the institutional level, organisational policies, practices, and cultures significantly promote or hinder gender equality (Jones, 2016; Mondragon, 2019). Strategic initiatives such as gender-responsive policies, mentorship programs, and leadership training can be analysed within this framework.

The community level encompasses broader societal norms, cultural values, and community attitudes toward gender roles and expectations (Bodin, 2017; Masterson et al., 2017). Understanding cultural contexts and societal expectations regarding gender can provide insights into women's academic challenges and the strategies needed to overcome them. The societal level considers broader structural factors such as laws, policies, and socio-economic conditions (Joshi & Maharjan, 2020; Jones, 2016) that influence gender equality outcomes in academia. Analysing national policies, legislation, and institutional practices within this framework can highlight systemic barriers and opportunities for promoting gender equality. The Social Ecological Model offers a comprehensive framework for conceptualising and analysing the multifaceted nature of gender imbalance among academicians in African universities and identifying strategic initiatives to elevate equality, deemed suitable for this conceptual paper.

Using the Social-Ecological Model as a theoretical framework allowed the current study's researchers to explore how strategic initiatives for gender equality operate at multiple levels of influence. It helped us to identify barriers and facilitators to gender equity within African universities, explain the interplay between individual agency

and social context, and inform the design and implementation of interventions that target specific levels of influence to promote meaningful and sustainable change.

## **Methodology**

This conceptual study used desktop research that used available policy documents in South African and Ugandan universities. Policy documents provided a framework for the researchers to understand institutions' official stance and priorities regarding gender equality in academia. By analysing policy documents from South Africa and Uganda, the researchers identified key policy initiatives and strategic objectives related to gender equity in higher education. These documents offer insights into the policy context within which strategic initiatives for addressing gender imbalance among academicians operate, helping to contextualise and inform the conceptual study.

The researchers further made use of empirical studies. These provided empirical evidence and data-driven insights (Sheu & Bordon, 2017) into the factors influencing gender inequality in academia, the effectiveness of existing initiatives, and the outcomes of gender equity interventions. By reviewing empirical studies conducted in South Africa, Uganda, and other African countries, the researchers managed to identify trends, patterns, and gaps in the literature related to gender imbalance among academicians that gave birth to the themes that emerged. Empirical studies offer valuable insights into female academicians' experiences, perspectives, and needs, as well as the impact of strategic initiatives on promoting gender equality in African universities.

Policy documents and empirical studies helped the researchers to develop a contextual understanding of the gender dynamics and challenges facing academicians in South Africa and Uganda. This contextual understanding was essential for framing the conceptual study, identifying research gaps, and generating meaningful insights into the strategic initiatives needed to elevate equality in African universities. So, using policy documents and empirical studies in our conceptual study of elevating equality in African universities provided an evidence-based approach to understanding and addressing gender imbalance among academicians. By incorporating insights from policy analysis and empirical research, the researchers developed informed recommendations and strategies for promoting gender equity in higher education institutions in South Africa, Uganda, and beyond.

## **Gender Imbalance in African Universities: A Contextual Analysis**

### **Historical Context**

Gender imbalance in African universities, including those in South Africa and Uganda, can be traced as far back as the historical legacies of colonialism and patriarchal structures that have shaped higher education systems in the region. During the colonial era, access to education was largely restricted, with women often excluded from formal educational opportunities (Mfum-Mensah, 2017; De Haas & Frankema, 2018). Colonial education systems were designed to serve the interests of colonial powers, prioritising the education of men for roles in administration, industry, and professions deemed suitable for and beneficial to colonial subjects (Chege & Sifuna, 2006; Shizha & Kariwo, 2012; Wandela, 2014; Chuku, 2018; Adam, 2019). From the above-cited authors, this implies that women were marginalised and systematically excluded from educational and professional opportunities, perpetuating gender disparities as far as accessing higher education was concerned.

With the coming of independence in most African countries in post-colonial Africa, efforts to expand access to higher education were initially focused on addressing the legacy of colonial discrimination and promoting national development objectives (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuvaza, 2017; Muswede, 2017). Our observations are that gender inequalities persist, reflecting broader societal norms and cultural attitudes that downgraded women to subordinate and servitude roles within the family and society. Despite advances in women's rights and gender equality movements, women continued to face barriers to accessing and participating in higher education (Akala, 2019; Fontanini et al., 2020; Psaki et al., 2022), including limited access to resources, cultural expectations regarding gender roles, and discriminatory practices within educational institutions (Morley, 2012).

In South Africa, the apartheid regime further entrenched gender disparities in education, with policies of racial segregation exacerbating inequalities along gender lines (Phaswana, 2021). While the post-apartheid era brought significant reforms to dismantle institutionalized discrimination and promote equal access to education, gender inequality remained pervasive, particularly among historically disadvantaged groups (Liani et al., 2020; Phaswana, 2021). In Uganda, despite efforts to promote gender equality in education through policies and initiatives (Gender in Education Policy, 2009; Gender et al., 2022; Gender in Education Sector, 2016; Cavendish University Gender Mainstreaming Policy, 2018; Makerere

University Gender Equality Policy, 2008 & Kyambogo University Gender Policy, 2014), women continue to face barriers to accessing higher education, including socioeconomic constraints, cultural norms, and limited opportunities for girls' education in rural areas (Morley, 2012; Datzberger & Le Mat, 2018; Asire, 2024). This is not confined to students alone but to staff in higher learning, too, as the inequality practices persist.

The historical context of gender imbalance in African universities, therefore, underlines the complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors that have perpetuated disparities in access to higher education (Psaki et al., 2022). We believe addressing gender inequality in higher education requires holistic approaches addressing structural barriers, challenging cultural norms, and promoting gender-responsive policies and practices to create more inclusive and equitable academic environments.

### **Sociocultural Factors**

Sociocultural factors play a significant role in perpetuating gender imbalance in African universities, including those in South Africa and Uganda. Deep-rooted cultural norms, patriarchal attitudes, and societal expectations shape perceptions of gender roles and influence access to higher education for men and women (Liani et al., 2020; Mensah, 2023). This view aligns with the study's Social Ecological Model (SEM). The SEM talks about the community level encompassing broader societal norms, cultural values, and attitudes toward gender roles and expectations (Bodin, 2017; Masterson et al., 2017). Understanding cultural contexts and societal expectations regarding gender can provide insights into women's academic challenges and the strategies needed to overcome them.

In Uganda and South Africa, traditional gender roles often assign women primary caregiving and household duties such as child care (Marongwe et al., 2022), while men pursue further education and employment outside the home. These cultural expectations and practices limit women's access to education and contribute to disparities in enrolment and retention rates in higher education institutions (Psaki et al., 2022). Additionally, prevailing stereotypes about women's intellectual abilities and career aspirations discourage girls from pursuing higher education or dissuade them from pursuing certain fields of study perceived as "male-dominated" (Banchefsky & Park, 2018; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021; Psaki et al., 2022). Furthermore, socioeconomic factors intersect with sociocultural norms to exacerbate gender inequality in higher education. In many

African societies, women often face economic barriers, including limited access to financial resources, lack of support for education expenses, and unequal inheritance rights (Asire, 2024). These economic constraints hinder women's ability to enroll in and complete higher education programmes, perpetuating gender disparities in educational attainment.

It is well-documented that discriminatory practices and gender-based violence within educational institutions can create hostile environments that undermine women's participation and academic success (Banchefsky & Park, 2018; O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). For example, instances of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and discrimination may deter women from pursuing higher education or lead to their marginalisation within academic settings (Mahabeer, 2021; Lakshminarayanan & Košir, 2024). From the above views, addressing gender imbalance in African universities requires addressing entrenched and deeply rooted sociocultural norms and promoting gender equality at multiple levels. Efforts to challenge gender stereotypes, promote girls' education, empower women economically, and create safe and inclusive learning environments are essential to advancing equity in gender in Uganda's and South Africa's higher education institutions, and across the African continent.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Different scholars across the globe view institutional barriers as contributing significantly to gender imbalance in African universities, including those in South Africa and Uganda (Goetz, 1998; Morley, 2012; Datzberger & Le Mat, 2018; Ramohai, 2019). These barriers are embedded within higher education institutions' structures, policies, and practices, perpetuating inequalities and limiting opportunities for female academicians. One of the primary institutional barriers is the lack of policies and practices that are gender-responsive and the will to implement existent gender policies within these universities (Goetz, 1998; Morley, 2012; Datzberger & Le Mat, 2018; Ramohai, 2019). We also noted that many institutions have outdated or inadequate policies, hence the failure to address specific needs and challenges women academicians face (Altbach et al., 2019). This includes policies related to recruitment, retention, promotion, and leadership opportunities, which may inadvertently disadvantage women or perpetuate gender biases in decision-making processes (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021).

In addition to the above, institutional cultures and norms within universities often reflect patriarchal values and male-dominated leadership structures, which create hostile environments for women academicians (O'Connor, 2019; Moodly & Toni, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Bracken, Allen & Dean, 2023). Women face discrimination, harassment, and/or microaggressions in academic settings, undermining their confidence, career progression, and professional development opportunities (O'Connor, 2019; Moodly & Toni, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; Bracken, Allen & Dean, 2023). Additionally, institutional barriers related to work-life balance and family responsibilities can disproportionately affect women academicians (Marongwe, et al., 2022). The lack of childcare support, parental leave policies such as annual and maternity leave, and inflexible work arrangements force women to choose between their academic careers and caregiving responsibilities, leading to attrition or stagnation in their academic trajectories as Marongwe, Meki-Kombe, Kobusingye and Machingura (2022) discovered when they carried out a study in South Africa, Zambia, Uganda and Zimbabwe on hurdles faced by emerging female researchers in selected African universities. Their study established limited access to resources, research funding, and professional development opportunities which they established as hindrances to female's academic advancement within universities. Women also face barriers to accessing research grants, and laboratory facilities, to mention but a few (Moodly & Toni, 2019).

### **Policy Landscape**

Another bone of contention in the phenomenon under examination is the issue of the policy landscape. The policy landscape surrounding gender imbalance in African universities, with a focus on South Africa and Uganda, is characterised by a mix of national and institutional initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity and addressing disparities in higher education (Akala, 2020; Unterhalter, Robinson & Balsera, 2020; Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022). Both countries have made significant strides in developing policies and frameworks to advance gender equality within the education sector, yet challenges remain in translating policy intentions into tangible outcomes (Darvas, Gao, Shen & Bawany, 2017).

In South Africa, the post-apartheid era saw the implementation of progressive policies and legislation aimed at promoting gender equality in education, including the Higher Education Act and the National Gender Policy Framework (Mkhize, & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni,

2019; Gumede, 2020; Motala, 2020). These policies emphasize the importance of mainstreaming gender considerations into higher education planning, curriculum development, and institutional governance (Akala, 2019; Mkhize, & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020; Motala, 2020). Additionally, initiatives such as the Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) have been established to monitor and promote gender equity in South African universities, advocating for increased representation of women in leadership positions (Ginya, 2017; Gumede, 2020; Motala, 2020) and addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment. Similarly, in Uganda, efforts to promote gender equality in higher education are enshrined in national policies and frameworks, including the National Gender Policy and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (Odaga, 2019; Akala, 2020; Baine & Naiga, 2021; Maude, 2021). These policies emphasise the importance of addressing gender disparities in access to education, improving the quality of education for girls and women, and promoting gender-sensitive teaching and learning environments. Additionally, initiatives such as the Women Academics Forum (WAF) have been established to advocate for the advancement of women in academia and address gender-based challenges within higher education institutions (Odaga, 2019; Akala, 2020; Baine & Naiga, 2021; Maude, 2021). Despite these policy initiatives, however, challenges persist in translating policy intentions into meaningful outcomes. Implementation gaps, resource constraints, and cultural barriers continue to hinder progress towards gender equality in African universities (Liani, Nyamongo & Tolhurst, 2020; Igiebor, 2021).

We opine that the effectiveness of gender policies and initiatives may vary across institutions and regions, highlighting the need for greater coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of policy implementation efforts. There is also a need for continued investment in gender-responsive policies, institutional mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives to address gender imbalance in African universities. By strengthening policy frameworks, promoting institutional accountability, and fostering a culture of gender equality, African countries can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable higher education systems that empower women and advance social and economic development both in the short and long run.

Strategic Initiatives for Elevating Gender Equality

## **Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education Policies**

In both countries, gender mainstreaming policies have strategically initiated the promotion of gender equality and addressed gender imbalances within academic institutions. South Africa and Uganda have implemented various policies and frameworks for gender integration of gender perspectives as far as educational planning, curriculum development, institutional governance, and decision-making processes are concerned. In South Africa specifically, gender mainstreaming initiatives are guided by the National Gender Policy Framework, whose focal emphasis is the importance of mainstreaming gender into all aspects of governance and development (Chaney, 2016; Dua, 2019; Akala, 2019; Mkhize, & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020; Motala, 2020). Higher education institutions have developed gender-responsive policies and strategies to address gender disparities in access to education, promote gender equality in leadership positions, and create gender-sensitive teaching and learning environments. Initiatives such as the Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) have been established to monitor and promote gender equity in South African universities, advocating for increased representation of women in decision-making bodies and addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment (Akala, 2019; Mkhize, & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020; Motala, 2020).

In Uganda, efforts to mainstream gender in higher education policies are guided by the National Gender Policy and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (Lubaale, 2020; Gunawaedena, Kwesiga, Lihamba & Morley, 20024). These policies prioritise education-related equity and advocate for measures to address gender inequalities as far as not only enrolment but also retention which have direct and indirect implications on students' academic achievement. Uganda's institutions of higher learning have also implemented gender-sensitive curriculum development initiatives, established gender quotas for representation in decision-making bodies, and promoted gender-responsive teaching and learning practices (Kwesiga & Ssendiwala, 2006; Kasente, 2002 & Odaga, 2019). Initiatives such as the Women Academics Forum (WAF) have been established to advocate for the advancement of women in academia and address gender-based challenges within universities (Osongo, 2009; Kagoda, 2019; Baine & Naiga, 2021). It can therefore be concluded that initiatives to mainstream gender in universities' policies in both countries a representative of strategic initiatives aimed at elevating equality and advancing gender equity. By ensuring gender

perspectives are integrated into policy development, curriculum design, institutional governance, and capacity-building activities, universities in South Africa and Uganda may create learning environments that are empowering, equitable, and inclusive in nature to promote diversity, and ultimately, foster academic excellence.

### **Promoting Gender-Responsive Research and Teaching Practices**

In Africa but with special reference to both South Africa and Uganda, promoting gender-responsive research and teaching practices is a strategic initiative aimed at advancing gender equality and addressing gender imbalances within academic institutions (Baine & Naiga, 2021; Diab & Bulani, 2023; Hailu, Lee, Halkiyo, Tsofniasvili & Tewari, 2023). These countries have implemented various initiatives to integrate gender perspectives into research activities, teaching methodologies, and curriculum development processes.

In South Africa, efforts to promote gender-responsive research and teaching practices are guided by the Higher Education Act and the National Gender Policy Framework (Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020). Higher education institutions have developed policies and guidelines to promote gender equality in research, teaching, and learning. Initiatives such as gender mainstreaming workshops, seminars, and capacity-building programs are organised to raise awareness and build the capacity of academic staff to integrate gender perspectives into their research and teaching practices (Mdleleni, Mandyoli & Frantz, 2021). Additionally, research funding agencies in South Africa may prioritise projects that address gender-related issues or incorporate gender analysis into research methodologies (Marongwe, et al., 2022).

Similarly, in Uganda, promoting gender-responsive research and teaching practices is supported by national policies such as the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001 and the National Gender Policy, and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (Baine & Naiga, 2021; Maude, 2021; Hailu, Lee, Halkiyo, Tsofniasvili & Tewari, 2023). Higher education institutions have established gender studies programs, centres, and research units to promote interdisciplinary research on gender-related topics. Efforts are made to incorporate gender-sensitive content and pedagogical approaches into academic curricula across disciplines (Baine & Naiga, 2021; Maude, 2021; Hailu, Lee, Halkiyo, Tsofniasvili & Tewari, 2023). Initiatives such as gender-sensitive training workshops for academic staff and gender-focused research

conferences are organised to promote gender equality and diversity in research and teaching.

So, promoting gender-responsive research and teaching practices in South Africa and Uganda represents a strategic initiative for elevating equality and advancing gender equity within academic institutions. By integrating gender perspectives into research agendas, teaching methodologies, and curriculum development processes, higher education institutions can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments that empower women, promote diversity, and foster academic excellence.

### **Enhancing Access to Professional Development and Leadership Training**

It should be noted that in both South Africa and Uganda, enhancing access to professional development and leadership training is a strategic initiative aimed at advancing gender equality and addressing gender imbalances within academic institutions (Ginya, 2017; Mkhize, 2019; Odaga, 2019; Akala, 2020). These countries have implemented various initiatives to provide women academicians with opportunities for skill development, career advancement, and leadership roles within higher education.

In South Africa specifically, efforts to enhance access to professional development and leadership training programmes for female academics are policy-guided, for example, the Employment Equity Act and the National Gender Policy Framework (Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020). Career development workshops, seminars, and training programs specifically target female staff, aimed at enhancing research, teaching, academic leadership, and management skills. Initiatives such as mentoring programs, networking events, and leadership academies are also established to support women's career advancement and leadership aspirations within academia (Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Gumede, 2020). In Uganda, initiatives to enhance access to professional development and leadership training for women academicians are supported by national policies. Higher education institutions work in collaboration with government parastatals, non-governmental organizations, and international partners to organize workshops, leadership training programs, and mentorship schemes for women staff for capacity building (Osongo, 2009; Gidudu, 2015; & Khaita & Lumutenga, 2017). These initiatives aim to equip women academicians with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to pursue leadership roles and contribute to processes in making decisions in

institutions of higher learning while advocating for gender equity within academia (Muhwezi, 2003; Mama, 2006; Chelimo, 2018 & Johnson, 2020).

Overall, enhancing access to professional development and leadership training in South Africa and Uganda represents a strategic initiative for elevating equality and advancing gender equity within academic institutions. By providing women academicians with opportunities for skill development, career advancement, and leadership training, higher education institutions can empower women, promote diversity, and foster inclusive and equitable academic environments that support the full participation and advancement of women in higher education.

### **Creating Supportive Work Environments and Flexible Policies**

In both South Africa and Uganda, creating supportive work environments and flexible policies is a strategic initiative aimed at advancing gender equality and addressing gender imbalances within academic institutions. These countries have implemented various initiatives to promote work-life balance, support the needs of women academicians, and create inclusive and equitable workplaces.

In South Africa, efforts to create supportive work environments and flexible policies are guided by national legislation such as the Employment Equity Act and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. Higher education institutions have developed policies and practices to support work-life balance for women staff, including flexible working arrangements, maternal and paternal leave, lactation facilities, counselling, and workplaces that enhance work-family balance to support female academics' career and professional growth (Mukong, 2024; Mkhonza, 2004 & Awung, 2019). The same applies to Uganda through initiatives that create supportive work environments and flexible policies such as the National Gender Policy and the Labor Act. Uganda's higher education institutions work in conjunction with government agencies, workers' unions, and civil society organisations to establish and grow gender-sensitive workplace policies and practices. Flexible working hours, telecommuting options, and maternity leave provisions are implemented to accommodate the needs of women staff and promote work-life balance (Mulyampiti, 2016; Nabawanika, 2023 & Esplen, 2006). Additionally, initiatives such as on-site childcare facilities, wellness programs, and gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms are established to support the holistic well-being of women academicians.

Creating supportive work environments and flexible policies in South Africa and Uganda represents a strategic initiative for elevating equality and advancing gender equity within academic institutions. By promoting work-life balance, supporting the needs of women staff, and creating inclusive and equitable workplaces, higher education institutions can empower women, promote diversity, and foster a culture of respect, inclusion, and equality for all staff members.

#### Fostering Mentorship and Networking Opportunities for Women Academicians

In both Uganda and South Africa, fostering mentorship and networking opportunities for women academicians is a strategic initiative aimed at advancing gender equality and supporting the career development of women in academia (Marongwe, Meki-Kombe, Kobusingye & Machingura, 2022). These countries have implemented various initiatives to provide women with access to mentorship, networking, and support systems that facilitate their professional growth and advancement within higher education.

In South Africa, workshops, and conferences allow women to build professional relationships, exchange ideas, and collaborate on research projects (Khosa, 2023; Cross, Lee, Bridgman, Thapa & Cleary, 2019; Hull & Toni, 2017; Lunsford, Crisp & Dolan, 2017). In Uganda, initiatives to foster mentorship and networking opportunities for women academicians are supported by programs such as the Women Academics Forum (WAF) and the Mentoring and Networking for Women in Higher Education (MENTAWHE) initiative. These programmes aim to connect women academics with mentors, sponsors, and support networks that can help them navigate the challenges of academia and advance their careers (Ntshongwana, 2024; Wandera, 2019; Nakankako, Katamba, Kaye & Okello, 2014). Mentorship circles, peer support groups, and online forums provide spaces for women to share experiences, seek advice, and build professional relationships with colleagues across disciplines and institutions (Nakayiwa, Eihangi & Santos, 2020 & Diab & Bulani, 2023).

Fostering mentorship and networking opportunities for women academicians in South Africa and Uganda represents a strategic initiative for elevating equality and advancing gender equity within academic institutions. By providing women with access to mentorship, networking, and support systems, higher education institutions can empower women, enhance their professional development, and contribute to the creation of inclusive and

supportive academic environments where women can thrive and succeed.

## **Conclusion**

Gender imbalance among academicians in African universities is a multifaceted issue that requires strategic and coordinated efforts to address. By implementing targeted initiatives, fostering supportive environments, and promoting gender-responsive policies, African universities can advance gender equity and create more inclusive academic spaces. Through collaboration, advocacy, and commitment to change, universities can elevate equality and empower women academicians to thrive in their academic careers, contributing to the advancement of knowledge, innovation, and social progress in Africa and beyond.

## **Recommendations**

### **Implementing Gender-Responsive Policies and Legislation**

Policy recommendations for implementing gender-responsive policies and legislation aimed at supporting female academicians in Africa, with specific reference to South Africa and Uganda, are crucial for advancing gender equality in higher education. It is imperative to strengthen existing gender equality frameworks and enact legislation that mandates the implementation of gender-responsive policies in academic institutions. These policies should include measures to address gender disparities in recruitment, promotion, and leadership positions, as well as provisions for addressing gender-based discrimination and harassment. Also, institutions should prioritise the allocation of resources towards initiatives that support female academicians, such as mentorship programs, leadership training, and childcare support services. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to track progress toward gender equality goals and hold institutions accountable for implementing gender-responsive policies effectively. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, academic institutions, and civil society organisations are essential for ensuring the successful implementation of these policy recommendations and fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for female academicians in Africa.

### **Strengthening Institutional Support Mechanisms**

Policy recommendations for strengthening institutional support mechanisms for female academicians in Africa, with specific

reference to South Africa and Uganda, are pivotal in enhancing gender equality in institutions of higher learning. Institutions should establish comprehensive support structures tailored to the needs of female academicians, including mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and professional development initiatives. These mechanisms can help women navigate the academic landscape, access resources, and advance their careers. Furthermore, policies should be implemented to address systemic barriers to gender equality within institutions, such as unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion processes, unequal access to research funding, and limited opportunities for career advancement. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and providing targeted support to female academicians, higher education institutions can create enabling working environments that motivate women to not only thrive but also make meaningful contributions to academia. Collaboration between stakeholders, including universities, government bodies, and civil society organisations, is essential for implementing these policy recommendations effectively and creating lasting change.

### **Enhancing Data Collection and Monitoring Systems**

Enhancing data collection and monitoring systems focusing on female academicians in Africa, with special reference to South Africa and Uganda, are critical for promoting gender equality in higher education. Institutions should prioritise the collection of gender-disaggregated data on various aspects of academic life, including recruitment, retention, promotion, and research funding. This data will provide valuable insights into the status of female academicians within institutions and identify areas where gender disparities exist. Also, robust monitoring and evaluation systems should be established to track progress toward gender equality goals and assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting female academicians. Regular reporting on key gender indicators will facilitate evidence-based decision-making and accountability at all levels. Collaboration between universities, government agencies, and research organisations is essential for standardising data collection methodologies, sharing best practices, and promoting transparency and accountability in efforts to advance gender equality in higher education.

### **Implications**

The implications of elevating equality through strategic initiatives for addressing gender imbalance among academicians in African

universities are profound and far-reaching. By implementing targeted policies and support mechanisms, these initiatives have the potential to transform academic landscapes, empower female academicians, and create more inclusive and equitable environments. In South Africa, where initiatives like the Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) have been successful in advocating for gender-responsive policies and fostering institutional change, the implications include increased representation of women in leadership positions, improved support structures for female academicians, and greater awareness of gender issues within the sector. Similarly, in Uganda, initiatives such as the Women Academics Forum (WAF) have played a pivotal role in providing mentorship, networking, and capacity-building opportunities for women in academia, leading to enhanced career prospects and greater gender equality within higher education institutions. The implications of these strategic initiatives extend beyond individual institutions to impact broader societal attitudes toward gender equality, thereby contributing to social transformation and sustainable development in Africa.

### **Future studies**

Conduct qualitative research to capture the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of female academicians navigating academic environments in Uganda and South Africa. Qualitative studies can provide insights into the challenges, barriers, and facilitators of gender equality in academia, as well as the strategies women employ to navigate and overcome these obstacles. Policy Analysis, that is, analyse the impact of existing gender equity policies and legislation on promoting gender equality in African universities. Evaluate the implementation, enforcement, and effectiveness of policy interventions, and identify gaps or areas for policy reform to strengthen institutional support for female academicians.

### **Lessons learnt**

Successful initiatives for gender equality in academia require collaboration among universities, government agencies, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders. By working together, institutions can share resources, share best practices, and advocate for changes in policies, aimed at supporting gender equity.

Addressing gender imbalance in academia requires an intersectional approach that considers the complex interplay of gender with other social identities such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Recognising and addressing intersecting forms of discrimination is essential for promoting inclusivity and equity.

Transforming institutional cultures and practices to promote gender equality is a long-term process that requires sustained commitment and effort. While progress may be gradual, strategic initiatives can create momentum for change and lay the groundwork for lasting impact.

Providing support structures such as mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and professional development initiatives is critical for empowering female academicians and addressing barriers to their advancement. These support mechanisms help women navigate academic environments, build confidence, and access opportunities for career growth.

Collecting gender-disaggregated data and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems are essential for tracking progress toward gender equality goals, identifying areas for improvement, and holding institutions accountable. Data-driven approaches provide evidence to inform decision-making and prioritise interventions that significantly promote gender equity in academia.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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