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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Subversive Influence of Informal Institutions on Formal Equity Policies in Nigerian Universities: Gender Stakeholders' Perspectives

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| ABSTRACT
In an effort to address the systemic problem of gender imbalance in academic leadership, fifteen universities in Nigeria have established gender centres and adopted institutional gender policies. With these formal equity measures in place, it is assumed that women can easily progress to academic leadership; however, this has not been the case. Using interview data gathered from two purposively selected universities in Nigeria; this paper unveils the perspectives of policy stakeholders on the 'informal rules of the game'. The gender policy stakeholders constitute selected individuals responsible for providing the context and environment for formulating and implementing the gender policy; as such, it is imperative to consider the influence this structure exerts. Informed by *Feminist Institutionalism* (FI), the analysis was the extent to which gender norms and practices, embodied in informal rules and institutional legacies, challenge the intent of gender equity policies. Findings revealed two major discourses: the *nestedness of informal selection* in the gender policy formulation process and the *gendered logic of appropriateness* in gender policy implementation. This paper, therefore, contributes to the FI literature, providing a broader understanding of how the subversion of formalised policies limits the prospect for a positive institutional gender change and undermines women's academic leadership progression.

| KEYWORDS

Informal institutions, informal selection, gender equity policies, gender policy stakeholders, Nigerian universities.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Analyzing informal institutions and how they are gendered presents theoretical and methodological difficulties, as these can be challenging to uncover (Waylen, 2014). Informal institutions are the unwritten, historical, or contemporary understandings of how things are done or the existing networks that support non-formalized operating procedures. It includes informal rules, norms, and practices. Scholars have argued that gender norms and informal institutions are often naturalized as part of the status quo, thus, making them unperceived or unremarked (Fuentelsaz et al., 2019; Jenkins & Waylen, 2014). While the persistent underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions in Nigerian universities is investigated by examining university-based equity policy documents (Igiebor, 2020), this is not enough. Existing studies suggest that an exclusive focus on formal rules is insufficient, as informal institutions often have a profound and systematic effect on policy outcomes (Lowndes, 2020). Thus, neglecting the informal institution risks missing many of the *real* constraints that subvert gender policy's intent and potentially undermine women's advancement to academic leadership positions in Nigerian universities.

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Given that institutional effects are generated by "humans" (Crouch, 2005), the perspectives of gender stakeholders[1] are important because they provide the context and the environment within which gender policies are formulated and implemented. The gender stakeholders design institutions and interpret, apply, and adapt gender rules in academic environments. As such, it is imperative to study the gender stakeholders within the university to unearth the gendered aspect of the policy formulation and implementation process.

Existing explorations have been interested in questioning why institutions hinder greater women's representation (Kenny, 2013b); that is, why new institutions revert to older practices, which often signal regression on gendered norms— historical gender bias and gendered power imbalances found in most traditional institutions (Mackay, 2014). Studies have also focused on how informal institutions can inhibit progressive gendered change (Galea et al., 2020; Waylen, 2014). Against this background, Mackay and Waylen (2014) argued the need to investigate the role of gendered actors (used in this study as gender stakeholders) to explore the dynamics of gendered institutional change insofar as actors can either promote or resist institutional change. Erikson (2019) emphasized that a fruitful way to advance research in this area is to address actors' gendered perceptions of the institutional context, inasmuch "as their actions are shaped not only by the institutional context but also how they perceive and interpret that context" (p. 267).

In response to these calls, I posed a research question that guides this study: To what extent do informal institutions subvert formalized policies' intent, thereby potentially undermining women's advancement to academic leadership in Nigerian federal universities? I addressed the research question by identifying the gender norms and practices that came into play in the university gender policy process and examined their impact on women's progression to academic leadership positions. The primary goal is to analyze the perspectives of university gender stakeholders on the role of informal institutional arrangements in the progression of women to academic leadership positions. This study uncovers how gender norms and practices create resistance to institutionalizing gender equity. The unveiling of specific informal norms and practices adds to the scholarly field that informs institutional equity policy designers and feminists who wish to challenge the masculine stronghold prevalent in the Nigerian academe.

1.1 The Nigerian Context

In Nigeria, women's underrepresentation became a paramount concern and an important issue for democracy and justice during the 1980s and 1990s. Campaigns to increase women's presence in decision-making pressured governments to take positive gender actions. Consequently, the government considered mechanisms such as gender equity/equality policies that were prominent solutions to women's underrepresentation worldwide[2]. A significant leap was the adoption of the National Policy on Women in 2001, which was later changed to the National Gender Policy in 2006 to address gender disparities in all spheres of life and development (Aina, 2013). Since Nigeria's response to the global call for a gender-equal society through the adoption of the 2006 National Gender Policy, there has been a need for other institutions within and beyond government to close existing gender gaps (Aina et al., 2015). This development resulted in the creation of the "Ministries of Women's Affairs at the Federal and the State levels, and the establishment of gender desks/units in almost all the ministries—Federal/State/Local Government" (Aina, 2014, p. 17).

Efforts to transform gender cultures within Nigerian universities yielded the establishment of gender centers and the formulation of policy initiatives to implement gender equality principles, policy, and practice within the sector. All of these aim to root out gender discrimination in the university system. However, despite the Nigerian government's commitment to bridging gender gaps, only a few universities have a university-wide "Gender Policy" in place. Even in the universities that do, the numbers of women present in university academic hierarchies remain unequal and pervasive (Abiodun-Oyebanji & Olaleye, 2011; Akubue, 2016; Aluko et al., 2017). While institutional discourses in Nigeria have concentrated primarily on systemic structural and cultural inequalities that hold women back in their career advancement, there is scope for further investigation on whether institutional practices limit formal gender policies' capacity to achieve institutional gender change and advance women to academic leadership. This study is therefore driven by my concern for the gender policy's limited success in institutionalizing gender equity and delivering positive outcomes for women's academic leadership progression in Nigeria. A significant limitation of this study is its focus on federal

[1]The gender stakeholders are selected university staff assigned various roles and responsibilities ranging from the formulation of the gender policy to its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Generally, it is the responsibility of the gender stakeholders to ensure that the overall goal of the university gender policy is achieved and sustained.

[2] In September 1995, the 189 member states of the United Nations signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women. The Beijing Platform explicitly addresses the exclusion of women from decision-making and sets 'gender balance' as a key goal (Dahlerup, 2006).

universities. The study did not capture state-owned and private universities as I aimed to focus on highly-ranked federal universities.

2. Literature Review

The emergence of women's representation as an important feminist issue is matched by a rapidly growing body of work on women in leadership, education, and management. Studies on organizational practices demonstrate how women's positions and behavior are defined and shaped negatively in the workplace. Such disadvantages include underrepresentation, limited power, and resource access (Chacha, 2021; Madsen, 2012; Maurtin-Cairncross, 2014). Muoghalu and Eboiyehi (2018) undertook a study that compared the gender components of Obafemi Awolowo University between 2009 and 2017 and found no significant changes in women's participation in the university's decision-making positions except for the Bursar's office. The Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors (academic and administration), Provosts of colleges, Deans, and Registrars were positions occupied by men. These results are indications that the "gender policy has not brought about the significant transformation needed in the area of decision-making within the universities" (Muoghalu & Eboiyehi, 2018, p. 997).

The historical notion of leadership akin to masculinity is still common today. The current university system has been described as a highly masculine organization, privileging masculine-built allocated values such as aggressiveness and competitiveness over cooperation (Nielsen, 2014). While women continue to enter the academy, universities often remain a masculine bastion where men's access to power is maintained and legitimized through processes, rules, and discourses that continue to privilege specific ways of operating (Acker, 2006b; Blackmore, 2021). The conventional view is that the skills, competence, and temperament considered central to leadership, for example, independence, assertiveness, and authority, are rooted in a socially constructed masculinity concept (Aiston & Fo, 2021). The situation is much worse in developing countries with weak regimes and volatile governments (Udegbe, 2005). Leadership conceptions are profoundly problematic for women, as they are seen as gendered entities with characteristics considered inadequate for leadership.

Aina et al. (2015) problematized Africa's patriarchal structure and informal arrangements as having dangerous implications in higher education. The historical men supremacy had created an unfavorable work climate in the academic setting for women (Yusuff, 2014). Gender equality is seen as Eurocentric and strange for African essence, ethics, and cultural values in most African higher education institutions. As such, these are often regarded with "fear and trepidation" and have culminated in gender-insensitive policies, resulting in an increased gender imbalance in university leadership (Aina, 2014, p. 3).

Scholars have explored the issue of micropolitics and theorized the informal and subtextual exercise of power in organizations, exposing how the informal relays of power alienate and exclude women (Morley, 2006; Pyke, 2013; Sümer et al., 2020). Micropolitical practices in the academy denote 'actions, relations, and perceptions which reflect the operation of informal power and impacts on academic recruitment/progression' (O'Connor et al. 2017, p. 4). The assumption that universities are impartial institutions where men and women are expected to succeed based on qualifications; makes *veiled* prejudice more invisible (Carvalho et al., 2012). The subtle nature of gender inequalities in universities has become more institutionalized and challenging for women. Van den Brink et al. (2010) argued that gender equality is often difficult to enhance due to multi-faceted gender inequality practices, especially in a traditional masculine academic setting with deeply entrenched masculinist or patriarchal standards. In Nigeria, scholars have argued for promulgating gender-friendly policies to advance women to leadership positions and approach gender discrimination with more institutional backing (Bakari & Leach, 2007; Muoghalu, 2010; Ogbogu, 2013b). While some universities in Nigeria have attempted to address gender disparities in academic leadership, Muoghalu and Eboiyehi (2018) argued that these interventions have been unsuccessful in enhancing gender equity at the universities where it was adopted.

From the literature reviewed, it is apparent that there are complex causes as to why women have not advanced at the same rates as their colleagues, who are men. However, what is missing from these studies is the gendered nature and institutional dynamics of women's underrepresentation in academic leadership positions. While research on informal institutions conducted by feminist scholars has involved the political arena (Bjarnegarg & Kenny, 2015; Brunner, 2013; Galea et al., 2014; Kenny, 2013a; Waylen, 2017), an in-depth study of informal institutions in Nigeria is almost non-existent. It is worth noting that this study does not focus on the political arena; instead, it aims to explore the Nigerian university setting where power dynamics and micropolitics operate.

3. Methodology

The shift from individual to institutional analysis has raised new questions and research directions, provoking a reconsideration of appropriate methods and frameworks (Kenny, 2013a) to capture the intricate and relational understandings of gender. The invisibility of informal institutions has raised the core methodological question of identifying informal institutions and recognizing their pervasive importance. As Waylen (2017) noted: "informal institutions can often be difficult to perceive… but

we know they are there because of the effects they have on other things (p. 4)." Identifying informal institutions and understanding how they shape formal institutions and outcomes requires techniques that provide an inside view of institutions' hidden lives (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2014).

The use of methods and approaches that facilitate in-depth case studies for gender research, such as interviews, participant observation, and process tracing, has been documented by feminist and institutionalist scholars (Bencivenga, 2019; Childs & Krook, 2006b; Curtin, 2019; Kenny, 2013b). The case for this study is to explore how Informal institutional arrangements subvert gender equity institutionalization and women's progression to academic leadership. Although there are many ways in which feminist and institutional research are conducted, I utilized an embedded single case study for this research, as it is most suited to understanding the research question at hand. This design strategy focuses on a single context (i.e., Nigeria), but data are collected and analyzed from multiple units (i.e., purposively selected universities) within the main context. The analysis does not aim to compare these individual sub-units but to investigate the perceived extent to which informal institutions subvert formal gender rules in the selected universities.

3.1 Participant recruitment

Seven gender stakeholders were purposively selected from the two top-ranking federal universities in Nigeria (used in this study as University A and University B). Purposively selected gender stakeholders whose names, positions, and e-mail addresses were publicly available on the university websites were sent an invitation to participate in the research (with an introductory letter, participant information sheet, consent form, and the interview schedule included). Participants who chose to participate contacted me, after which a follow-up e-mail was sent to the participants to schedule availability (time and date).

Interview participants were recruited from among the university gender stakeholders, comprising current and former directors of the gender center, members of the gender equity committees, and gender focal persons. These categories of participants provide a more rounded perspective on the gender policy process and how informal elements within the universities interact with formal rules. Table 1 shows the description of the participants.

The gender stakeholders were categorized based on their position and role. The Vice-Chancellor is the *core* gender stakeholder because of its dominant power and overall responsibility for implementing gender policy in both universities. Next in the classification are the higher-level gender stakeholders, such as the director of the university gender center, who is responsible for providing clear lines of communication, interactions, coordination, responsibility, consensus building, and collaboration toward implementing gender policy. Also included in this category are the chairpersons of the gender equity committees. The mid-level gender stakeholders, such as the centers' research fellows and members of the University Gender Equity Committees, are responsible for conducting gender-based research, training, and overseeing and enforcing the university gender policy. The low-level gender stakeholders are faculty/departmental-based gender representatives such as the selected peer mentors or gender focal persons. The perspectives of the gender stakeholders are important, as they provide the context and the environment within which gender policies are formulated and implemented.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

The research was granted ethics approval for data collection in Nigeria by the Human Participants Ethics Committee at the University of Auckland. The approval process included submitting the interview guides, the Consent Form, and the Participant Information Sheet and identifying how participants would be selected and the method of inviting them. The ethics approval process also required identifying and addressing all ethical issues that could arise. For example, in interviews with gender stakeholders, I acknowledged that complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed because of the small sample size. As a result of the small interview sample and ethical requirement, pseudonyms were used to represent the names of participants. The names of the selected universities and participants were not purposely mentioned due to the risk of compromising the interviewee's identity.

3.3 Data collection

Interviews are an important tool within case study research, particularly to determine the informal aspects of institutions (Kenny, 2013b). Interviews help understand what leeway the formal framework leaves for informal practices to play a part in advancing or undermining women to academic leadership positions (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016). To unravel the actual rules and practices (informal) that influence gender equity in the universities, I conducted an in-depth interview with gender stakeholders in University A and University B about "how things are done" with regard to gender equity in the selected universities. Interviews conducted were audio recorded and lasted about 60-80 mins. Interviews were held at the participants' preferred location, mostly in their offices.

The choice of the two universities was based on the following criteria: Webometrics and National Universities Commission (NUC) ranking of institutions in the country, size, type of university, years of existence, highly-visible Equity Unit, or a university-based

Gender Policy. The selected universities are first-generation[3] federal universities that have existed for a long time. This feature provided a baseline to explore informal elements such as colonial or patriarchal influences on Nigerian universities and their implication for women's advancement to academic leadership. While scholars have argued that in-depth interviews are common data sources used in qualitative case studies, combining these with other data sources is often recommended to enhance validity (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2012). In addition to the in-depth interviews, field notes were used as data sources for this study. During each interview, I audio-recorded the participants' responses while observing and noting 'how it was said (actions and body language), when, and where. At the end of each interview, these field notes were converted to full notes that were used as an additional data source for the analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

According to Clavero and Galligan (2020), "identifying informal rules and evaluating their role in facilitating and constraining institutional change towards gender equality poses methodological challenges" because informal rules are (mostly) hidden (p.655). Carefully designed methodologies are required to overcome the challenge (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). In line with this, I employed an integrated approach—Feminist Institutionalism and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FI-FCDA), to examine the workings of gender, institutional resistance, and power relations in an informal institutional context within Nigerian universities. While feminist institutionalism enables the identification of informal norms and practices, feminist critical discourse analysis makes possible an understanding of the workings of these informal norms and practices, thereby creating discourses on the limits of institutional gender change. Using the integrated approach, I make a case for putting the *informal* into broader institutional and discourse frameworks for understanding the subversion of gender equity institutionalization and the continued underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions.

Drawing on Drucza and Rodriguez's (2018) model, I developed an analytical strategy for analyzing the interview data. Specifically, I combined the core FI perspective of *gendered actors*, *institutional resistance*, and *gendered power relations* with carefully crafted questions drawn from Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) principles. I worked with the FI concepts and constructed FCDA questions that reflect points of convergence across both frameworks, particularly identifying prevalent informal norms and practices subverting formal gender rules in the stakeholders' interviews. Table 2 shows how I utilized the FI-FCDA as an analytical strategy for this study.

Table 2: *FI-FCDA Analytical Strategy for Informal Institutional Dimension*

Institutional concepts	**Questions constructed from FCDA (analytical categories)**	FCDA principles used in constructing questions
Gendered actors	• Presence of a patriarchal social order? • How are oppressive social structures sustained?	*Feminist analytical activism*
Institutional Resistance/ stasis	• Presence of a hierarchical relation of domination or subordination? • Presence of hegemonic ideology • Are women subjected to forms of sexism?	*Gender as ideological structure and practice*
Gendered Power Relations	• How are the gendered relations of power and gender ideology contested, negotiated, and reproduced implicitly or explicitly? • How is masculinity that restricts potentialities for women entrenched or challenged?	*Role of discourse in the construction and deconstruction of gender*

Source: Model adapted from Drucza and Rodriguez (2018).

To analyze the interview data, I utilized thematic analysis, used with the NVivo software. The procedure used for coding was the utilization of NVivo, which involves extracting verbatim codes from the texts to capture the methodological needs of the

[3] First-generation universities are generally the oldest and largest, heavily research-focused and capture the majority of federal government funding.

study's inquiry. First, I familiarised myself with the interview data and listened to the audio recordings of the interviews several times for accurate transcription. I used an inductive approach which allowed themes to emerge from the content of the interview responses. Since I was concerned with addressing a specific research question, during transcribing, I noted points of interest that either was a possible theme or provided further insight into the subject matter and analyzed the data with this in mind.

Once the interview transcript was completed, it was uploaded into NVivo 12 for coding and analysis. In coding the data, text search queries and word frequency searches were used to identify keywords and phrases/sentences illuminating the particular concepts derived from the analytical framework. For example, I ran keyword searches for "gender equity" and "informal norms/informal practices." The question *how are oppressive social structures sustained? And; the presence of a patriarchal social order* guided me in coding for nodes on gendered actors and institutional resistance that the participants identified in the interview. Some of the codes produced under these are the *positional power of the Vice-Chancellor, academic heads, patriarchal idiosyncrasies, absence of checks and balances, and infiltration of personal ideology into policymaking*. Working through the data, more nodes and sub-nodes were developed that identified prevalent informal norms and practices in the universities. The different nodes and sub-nodes were reorganized into significant themes in the next phase.

4. Result/Findings

The two major themes (with various sub-themes) emerged from the data analyzed. The interviewees provided a deep insight into the nature of informal institutions playing out at the policy formulation stage. Attitudes towards gender policy implementation and viewpoints of gender as a matter of concern in the universities also emerged from the interview data.

4.1 Discourses on the subversive influence of informal norms and practices

The findings of this study revolved around discourses on informal norms and practices subverting formal gender policies in universities. The extent to which pre-existing informal rules and norms impact policy formulation and implementation is crucial. Questions such as "How do informal rules and norms play out alongside formal rules at the policy formation and implementation stage? Are there gender influences or biases in the way policies are formulated and implemented?" from the participants, I obtained a wide variety of views and perspectives that identify specific informal norms and practices and how these subvert formalized policies in the universities. The interviewees in both universities mentioned several issues which they perceived were informal norms and practices, such as informal selection through connections and gendered networks, the prevalence of patriarchal ideologies, non-engagement with gender issues, verbal reproval, and criticism. They also identified how these play out—at the policy formulation and implementation stage and its impacts on the institutionalization of gender equity in the universities.

4.2 Informalization of gender policy formulation process

The interviews highlighted trends of *informalization*, particularly regarding the selection criteria for higher-level gender stakeholders. Informality can be identified when there is an absence of explicit criteria relating to how a process is carried out or where guidelines are very brief or serve a purely symbolic function (Culhane, 2017). Findings showed a *highly exclusive* selection process for higher-level gender stakeholders. A highly exclusive selection process empowers just one person to decide; in this case, it is the VC. Therefore, the VC functions as the university's highest authority in gender equity and is specifically responsible for nominating higher-level gender stakeholders. They control the nomination procedures and decide whom to select, when, and how. According to one interviewee:

> It is a sought-after position with less rigor because you are either nominated or appointed to the position rather than the usual rigor of interviewing and proving your competence. (Dr. Cynthia, University B)
> It is not like the normal promotion process where you apply. It is appointment-based. The choice of a suitable candidate is the prerogative of the VC or whosesoever it has been delegated to. (Tobi, University B)

From the interviewees' quotes, the higher-level gender stakeholders' position is attractive and provides significant payoffs to career advancement. These payoffs include having an edge in promotion decisions (especially where the individual is not in the professorial cadre yet), financial rewards and perks, leadership experience, opportunities, and professional networks. The participants highlighted that the position of the higher-level gender stakeholders is a highly regarded position that requires nomination or appointment by the VC to be filled rather than promotion through the ranks. Given this, the VC has the ultimate power to select whomsoever they deem fit to fill the role.

The participants emphasized how the Vice-Chancellor's positional power enables *informalized selection* through connections and gendered networks. Since the VC holds the overall power to nominate the higher-level gender stakeholders, there is a probability of choosing well-connected individuals. One of the respondents has this to say:

> There is the existence of informal norms and practices in the university [smiling]… but this is not visible. The prevalent informal practice I have observed and personally experienced is the "use of connection." Most people will not say that openly, but we all know what happens "at the top." Informal rules overshadow what is written down, especially in appointments. (Dr. Tolu, University A)

Indirect discrimination, use of connection/informal networks, and caucuses were identified as the prevalent informal practices at play within the universities. While these universities may have formal rules in place, it is not a guarantee that these rules are strictly enforced.

The VC's positional power and authority in the selection process may leverage them to employ *informal* selection practices.

Furthermore, I asked the interviewees how informal selection, facilitated by the VC's positional power and the use of connections, subverts the intent of formalized policies and potentially undermines women's advance to academic leadership positions. The interviews revealed that a significant implication of "informal selection" is the possibility of the VC prescribing to the selected stakeholders what they must do in their capacity and what they are prohibited from doing. According to one of the interviewees:

> What do you expect? [smiling]. Of course, they would want someone who would not challenge their directives, even if it is detrimental to the policy's overall goal. They carefully select those that would be loyal to them. (Tope, University B)

The participant's quote emphasized how the Vice Chancellor's positional power allows for malleable[4] people (mainly women) who would not question or challenge the status quo but show allegiance to the VC to be handpicked. The fact that equally qualified candidates cannot apply for positions as gender stakeholders unless the VC nominates them was mentioned as a possible informal practice that can withdraw interest in gender. The opportunity for the best and most competent candidate to be appointed is limited as no formal processes or committees are set up to evaluate the candidates' capability and choose the best. A level playground and opportunity are not presented to eligible women to apply. It is believed that since the selected stakeholders are responsible for influencing gender representation within the university, the selection process should be formal and visible.

4.2.1 Downplaying of merit in the selection process

According to the interviewees, although merit may not usually be downplayed, the use of informal selection is often questioned. One of the interviewees stated:

> Well, there is no specific stipulations or criteria for determining the best. For example, the grade level of who should apply, experience as a gender expert, training, etc. It is not enough to have two publications on gender and call yourself a gender expert. No! It is more than that. Competence/capability, passion, and experience are core must-haves! I believe they are people who are more qualified than those informally selected. (Dr. Cynthia, University B)

This participant's quote highlights the absence of established formal selection criteria to evaluate and assess the suitability of a higher-level gender stakeholder. Determinants of suitability or definitions of merit, such as educational or gender experience/training, are wholly absent from the universities' policy documents. It is certainly not my aim to argue that the individuals selected do not merit it. Indeed, it is generally tricky to overlook merit due to the nature of the position (academic position). Beyond qualification and experience, the participant emphasized the need to select women who are passionate about gender issues and have the competence for such tasks.

The case studies draw attention to the dynamic processes through which informal norms and practices play out (Annesley, 2015; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2017). Applying an FI lens to this study unveiled the nestedness of informal institutional arrangements (Mackay, 2009; Raney & Collier, 2021). The case study reveals informal selection as an important feature across University A and University B within the gender policy formulation stage. The Vice-Chancellor (VC) has the overall responsibility for the gender policy and the positional power to appoint the director of the gender center or chairpersons of the equity committees in both universities (A and B). For example, in University B, while the university senate is responsible for selecting suitable candidates for appointment, the VC has the ultimate power to decide who the suitable candidate would be. The VC's positional power and the lack of selection criteria arguably facilitate the use of connections for informally selecting individuals to positions of authority. The selection process sits within pre-existing informal practices, such as the use of connections, and

[4] People who are easy to persuade.

is exacerbated by the VC's dominant power, thus, showing how gendered power relations are reproduced implicitly. The positional power to appoint stakeholders creates a power advantage pattern that allows for the reproduction of masculine hegemony and women's profound disadvantage (Chappell & Mackay, 2017). The use of connection allows influential individuals connected with the overall power opportunities to be nominated or selected into attractive policy positions even if they do not possess the competence or capability.

Network roles are key to ensuring selection in many contexts (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013; Morrison & Gibbs, 2021). Existing research on the gendered impact of informal selection suggests that it fosters selection based on personal loyalties and patronage. Thus, it favors the nomination of well-networked and existing individuals or their family members (Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013b). Individuals with "extensive connections" and "name recognition" are perceived as being able to further their interests and that of family members or friends. The study's findings showed an institutionalized informal perception of selection. These findings align with Holgerrson (2013), who argued that where few formal regulations exist regarding criteria, there is a high tendency for selection to be based on subjective criteria and personal preferences or loyalties, which are often gendered. I argue that the exclusion of a fair level playing field for qualified women to vie for the position has detrimental effects on the gender equity outputs produced. It bears explaining here that this restricts potentialities for some women, breeds systematic exclusion, and constrains their participation. The interviewees brought to light the fact that the absence of a formal selection process or criteria, coupled with the VC's positional power, can facilitate informality. An implication is that it can potentially subvert the intent of the gender policy and undermine women's advancement to academic leadership positions in the long run.

4.3 Gender policy implementation clogged by gender norms and practices

This theme shows how formal policy implementation is hindered by masculinist norms and in a contradictory way. The ideology of some academic heads was identified as a norm that subverts the intent of formalized policies. In both Universities A and B, the gender equity policy documents stipulate that all provosts, deans, directors and heads of departments are members of the Gender Equity Implementation Committee and are expected to monitor and facilitate the implementation of the Gender Equity Policy. However, findings have shown that gender appears to be a non-issue for some academic heads, thus impacting the implementation of gender policy within the faculties/departments. According to one of the interviewees:

> The personal ideologies of the academic heads often reflect in their style of administration. When gender is a non-issue for the VC or members of the governing council, then gender equity success cannot be guaranteed. For example, the former VC was very supportive of gender equity, and we could see a visible difference and changes in structures. However, the present VC has been quite relaxed, and we feel he is not supportive as his predecessor. (Dr. Cynthia, University B)

Another interviewee added that:

> At the various sub-levels [department/faculties], there are some non-compliance because of the belief of the person occupying the headship position. Surprisingly, despite the awareness and sensitization programs, some men still have that parochial and stereotypical belief about women leading and do not comply with implementing policy actions. This is why we encourage staff to be aware of their rights and the policy content so they can report when taken undue advantage of. (Prof. Grace, University A)

Participants noted how gender could become a 'non-issue' when VCs are not supportive and how informal rules around masculinity and patriarchy continue to shape the behavior of some academic heads. They also noted how parochial ideological perceptions about gender allow women to be stereotyped. These belief systems are also a significant factor impacting gender equity implementation.

Furthermore, the interviewees stressed the non-engagement of some departmental/faculty heads with gender issues and how low-level gender stakeholders responsible for fostering gender equity are often marginalized. On the surface, these academic heads actively create a seemingly institutional image of fully supporting gender equity. At the coalface, where it matters, implementation remains elusive because, for them, gender is a non-issue.

> Several efforts to ensure things are done with gender considerations in the department and the faculty have been met with gridlock. At a time, I insisted that some women be included in the one committee set up by the dean and was very assertive at the meeting. Some people saw me as being disrespectful because of my insistence. (Tobi, University B)

The interviewee's quote showed that attempts to assert gender equity at the faculty and departmental levels had been repelled or constrained by some academic heads that pay lip service to gender equity. Not much attention was directed toward gender equity, even though they had the authority to do so.

One of the interviewees also identified verbal gender reproval or criticisms as a reoccurring issue targeted at female gender stakeholders or scholars within the university. Gender equity stakeholders expressed how they often contend with powerful and deeply embedded norms and rules which subvert formal gender policies (Mackay, 2014). Two interviewees had this to say:

> In the committee meetings, I make contributions, but I cannot do anything because of my position as a junior academic staff within the department. I remember that during one of our faculty staff meetings, I had raised an observation on an issue I felt was a case of gender discrimination. After presenting my case, a colleague said, "Madam Gender, please take your [seat]… We have other important issues to be discussed". They all laughed about it and shelved the case. To date, the issue has not been addressed. (Muna, University A)

> A senior colleague told me after our meeting to tread with caution, especially with making a case during the faculty staff meeting, as I do not want to be seen as one who thinks or knows too much. Apparently, junior staff are expected to keep quiet or support what their older colleagues say. (Dr. Tolu, University A)

From the quote above, although there are gender-focal persons within the faculty responsible for fostering gender equity, unfortunately, they are often younger staff members, some of whose roles are not empowered. Stereotypical remarks from senior colleagues have shut down attempts by these junior staff to encourage gender equity. This shows an apparent power asymmetry to the disadvantage of junior stakeholders working on gender equality.

Evidence from this study reveals how gender actors resist institutional gender change via the non-engagement of faculty/departmental-based management with gender issues, patriarchal ideologies, verbal gender criticisms, and marginalization of lower-level stakeholders. It unpacks the dominant gender ideologies at play within the universities and shows how gender ideologies intersect with the notion of an institution's culture. The case study stands illustrative of Chappel's (2006, p. 225) "gendered logic of appropriateness." According to FI, the gendered logic of appropriateness prescribes and proscribes what is acceptable for gendered actors, which affects policy outcomes (Chappell, 2006; Minto & Mergaert, 2018).

Nigerian higher education embodies a patriarchal-like institution where its norms and practices sustain a masculine dominance of the profession with the presence of patriarchal social order. In the cases studied, attempts to assert gender equity at the faculty and departmental levels have been repelled or constrained by some academic heads for whom gender is a non-issue. The presence of hegemonic ideologies and hierarchical relations of domination and subordination has subverted gender policy implementation and clogged the wheels of institutionalizing equity in universities. The few women in senior management often find it difficult to challenge such a culture (Erikson, 2019). The failure of some men who are academic leaders to support gender equity is evidenced in their inability to shed their entrenched masculinist norms and values regarding women and gender in the organizations they manage (Doorgapersad, 2016). The general lack of interest or commitment of some academic heads is attributed to the institutions' informal "logic of appropriateness" embedded in the everyday practice of institutions (Mackay et al., 2009, pp. 256–258). These are not only disguised as standard and taken-for-granted but are also "particularly sticky and resistant to change" (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 605; Lowndes, 2020).

In the case studied, *gender as a non-issue* is exacerbated through the lack of monitoring and evaluation of gender equity. As Beveridge et al. (2000) argued, "a fundamental weakness of implementing the gender policy is the lack of monitoring" of gender initiatives or action plans (p. 391). The lack of official monitoring of gender equity meant that challenges could not be clearly identified, and impacts remained unknown. Norms privileging masculinized forms of representation and patriarchal ideological beliefs shut out efforts toward institutionalizing gender equity. Given that mid-level and lower-level gender actors frequently have limited powers, gender change is likely to face opposition and may "subvert, distort or stymie formal rule change" (Waylen, 2014, p. 221). Moreso, it is difficult to call out academic leaders such as Heads of Departments or Deans for whom gender is a non-issue so as not to be in the wrong book. This shows that even if gender equity is on the universities' official agenda, the importance of gender equity has not been unanimously accepted throughout the university, as witnessed by those working as gender stakeholders. This study demonstrates that gender norms and gender relations are particularly "sticky" institutional legacies with which to contend (Baker, 2021; Mackay, 2010, p. 188).

This study has shown that informal norms and practices play out in policy formulation and implementation, subverting gender policy intent and women's representation. Based on the findings, this study recommends decoupling the overall responsibility for

the gender policy from the office of the Vice-Chancellor to allow for checks and balances in policy formulation and implementation responsibilities. Formal selection criteria that would enable qualified women to compete for key positions should be adopted to broaden women's participation. Most importantly, gender equity should be tied to the accreditation requirement of universities to ensure policy implementation and compliance. Lastly, a future cross-national study, which connects the knowledge of gender equity and the role of informal institutions in Nigerian universities to those in the international arena, is an area for possible exploration. This would be a way to further explore limits to institutional gender change in various contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study provided an analysis of informal institutions subverting the intent of the university gender policy—the institutionalization of gender equity. It examined norms and practices potentially undermining women's representation in academic leadership. The case study emphasizes how informal norms and practices subvert the intent of formalized policies drawing attention to the dynamic processes through which they play out. The study showed pre-existing informal norms playing out in the university's formulation and implementation of gender policies. It showed how the use of connections and the VC's positional power are enabled due to the absence of selection criteria for gender policy positions. As an implication, the findings revealed how the exclusion of a fair level playing field for qualified women to vie for positions constrains participation, thereby enabling masculine dominance. Evidence also showed how informally selected stakeholders are unlikely to push for radical gender change to be in the good books of the person who has appointed them. Regarding gender implementation, findings revealed how masculinist culture and patriarchal ideology, coupled with the absence of monitoring and evaluation, have resulted in gender as a non-issue for some academic heads. Evidence demonstrated how some academic heads create and sustain the dominance of men by challenging gender equity through their masculinist ideology, gender criticism, and non-engagement with gender issues.

Overall, this study demonstrated that the hegemonic masculinities that place women as secondary actors create a power differential that privileges masculinized forms of leadership, subverts the institutionalization of gender equity and undermines women's academic progression to leadership positions. The findings showed that formal institutional policies have been largely ineffectual because of the powerful and problematic forces of informal norms and practices. Evidence demonstrated that informal elements were far more influential, and the formal policies acted only as a signaling strategy with little practical meaning and real-life application. The informal norms that are culturally ingrained in the mindsets and practices of some male stakeholders within the universities undermine women's progression. This has implications for the way Nigerian universities and other male-dominated institutions go forward, as it is unlikely that formal gender equity policies are enough to alter the existing male-dominated logic of the institution in a significant way. This means that when an institution is looking to make formal policy changes favoring women, it must address cultural concerns. Regarding gender policy implementation and institutionalization of gender equity, gender-competent Vice-Chancellors to tackle the universities' historically male-dominated, masculinist structure and culture should be a paramount consideration.

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