

Gender Inclusivity and Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the University of Port Harcourt

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Abstract

Bridging the gap between policy and practice is imperative for the creation of an inclusive and equitable university. The study examines how the integration of inclusive gender policies is essential for fostering fairness, diversity and equal access to opportunities and resources in the university. Using a case study approach, the research investigated how the gender policies of the University of Port Harcourt translate into practice and promote inclusivity at all levels, through the lens of gender mainstreaming theory. The research adopted a qualitative method with document analysis, and observational data to assess the university's policy design and practical outcomes. Attention was given to enrolment into programmes, staff recruitment, promotion, leadership representation, welfare, and responses to gender-based discrimination. It explores inclusive practices such as language, policies, infrastructure and representation. Findings show that while the University has established a gender policy, there are significant gaps between policy intent and actual practice. Challenges such as institutionalised cultural norms among others undermine effective implementation. The study revealed disparities in representation, leadership and decision-making structures. Applying gender mainstreaming theory, findings indicate the importance of building gender considerations into policy frameworks. It demonstrates the complementarity of capacity building, policy presence, and continuous evaluation in effective implementation. Achieving meaningful gender inclusivity demands sustained commitment to implementation, continuous evaluation and university culture change. The study recommends strengthening enforcement mechanisms, increasing gender awareness initiatives and ensuring inclusive participation in policy development and review processes.

Keywords: *Gender Mainstreaming; Inclusive Practices; Equality; Systemic Barriers; Institutional Frameworks*

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Background to the Study

In Nigeria, the evolution of gender policy mirrors global trends but faces unique contextual challenges. In line with the tertiary education policy statement of the National Policy on Gender in Education, it aims to achieve equitable, quality and easily accessible tertiary education that is gender-sensitive (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). Many Nigerian universities such as the University of Port Harcourt, Lagos, and others had expressed their commitment to gender sensitive and inclusive spaces. Their gender policies align with international treaties and national frameworks that promote gender equality particularly, the National Gender Policy. The National Gender Policy seeks to promote gender equality, women empowerment and social inclusion by addressing systemic barriers. However, translating these commitments into practice often encounters structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Gender inequality and exclusion manifests in unequal access to decision-making positions, staff leadership, sexual harassment enforcement, and explicit bias in tax policies. Others include the diverse forms of discrimination against women, absence of paternity leaves, limited participation of women in policy formulation, and inadequate resource allocation for gender-related initiatives.

Institutional cultures often reinforce patriarchal norms that marginalize women's voices and prioritize male perspectives in leadership and policy decisions. Even where gender mainstreaming frameworks exist, they are frequently treated as administrative formalities rather than transformative strategies. The Gender Mainstreaming office responsible for implementing gender equality policies acknowledges the existence of a disparity at the decision-making levels of some units, departments or faculties (<https://ui.edu.ng>). This results in token representation and superficial compliance without substantial impact on institutional structures or outcomes.

Additionally, weak accountability mechanisms, insufficient gender-disaggregated data, and limited capacity among implementers undermine inclusivity, effective monitoring and evaluation of gender policies. Consequently, policies designed to promote inclusivity often fail to address intersectional inequalities affecting women from the rank and file, minority groups, or persons with disabilities. A recent study observed the existence of a gap between formal policies and real practices, showing a bureaucratic culture that bounds inclusive transformation (Torrejon & Alvarez, 2026). The persistent gap between formal commitments to gender equality and the realities on ground depict the persistence of systemic barriers to gender inclusivity in university policy implementation. Gender policies in the university fail to achieve their intended outcome due to weak institutional structures, socio-cultural biases and lack of political will. As a result of this imbalance, institutional policies tend to reflect dominant male perspectives, with less attention given to specific needs and experiences of their female counterparts. In recent time, research has espoused the importance of gender policies in institutions. However, relatively little attempt has been made on the assessment of their implementation especially, the University of Port Harcourt. It is against this backdrop that the paper seeks to examine the success and policy gaps in implementing gender inclusivity in the University of Port Harcourt.

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender inclusivity refers to the practice of intentionally including and respecting people of all gender (male and female), and ensuring they have equal opportunities to participate fully in the university. There is emphasis here on the sex binary in accordance with the prevailing cultural norms that excludes gender diversity in the country. This is supported by Richardson (2008) definition of gender as the social meanings and value attached to being female or male in a given society.” Naseer & Choden, 2024 affirmed that gender inclusivity transcends diversity and embraces an atmosphere where all genders are valued, respected and empowered. It challenges systems and practices that privilege one gender often, men while marginalizing women and gender minorities. In contemporary societies, gender inclusivity has become an important principle for promoting fairness, participation, and sustainable development.

Gender equality and inclusivity have been identified as crucial for academic excellence, social responsibility and the indices for measuring institutional excellence and reputation (Baltaru, 2022; Bojnec & Blatnik, 2025). Basically, gender inclusivity is rooted in the idea of equality and social justice. Historically, many societies operated within patriarchal structures that limited women's access to education, leadership, employment, and decision-making processes. Gender inclusivity seeks to correct these imbalances by promoting policies and practices that ensure equal participation of all genders. This includes eliminating discrimination, addressing gender stereotypes, and creating environments where everyone can thrive regardless of gender.

In institutions such as universities, workplaces, and government agencies, gender inclusivity can be promoted through policies that guarantee equal opportunities in recruitment, promotion, leadership, and access to resources. Inclusive policies may also address issues such as gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and unequal pay. Bojnec & Blatnik (2025) examined the place of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in ensuring inclusivity and justice in the University of Primorska. The five core pillars of the UP's Gender Equality project was built on the European Union Horizon policy expectation for gender inclusivity. These include: work-life-balance, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression. Others are the integration of the gender dimension into research and curricula, and actions against gender-based violence and harassment.

Universities can foster inclusivity by ensuring balanced representation in leadership roles, supporting gender-sensitive curricula, and creating safe reporting systems for discrimination or harassment. Another key aspect of gender inclusivity is the recognition of diversity within gender groups. Women and men experience social realities differently depending on factors such as class, ethnicity, religion, and age. Therefore, inclusive policies must consider these intersections to effectively address inequalities. By acknowledging diverse experiences, universities can design programmes that better support marginalized groups. Furthermore, gender inclusivity contributes to broader societal development. Research consistently shows that societies that promote gender equality experience improved economic growth, stronger governance, and better social outcomes. When women and other marginalized groups

participate fully in decision-making processes, policies tend to be more responsive to community needs.

Engeli & Mazur (2018) described the process of gender policy implementation as complex. Its complexity stems from the conflict and negotiation between various stakeholders that either encumber or support implementation. Gender policy implementation is the process of activating and enforcing all legal and institutional frameworks that promote gender equality, women empowerment, mainstream gender and fight discriminatory practices through deliberate institutional change and legal compliance. Gender policy implementation refers to the process through which established gender equality policies are translated into practical actions, programmes, and institutional practices. While gender policies are designed to promote fairness, equal opportunity, and the empowerment of all genders, their true impact depends on how effectively they are implemented within universities. Implementation therefore represents the stage where policy commitments are transformed into tangible outcomes that address gender inequality in society. Gender policies emerged from growing global recognition of the structural inequalities that affect women and other marginalized gender groups. Historically, social, economic, and political systems have often privileged men, limiting women's access to education, employment, leadership, and decision-making processes.

As a response, governments and international organizations began developing gender policies aimed at correcting these imbalances. Such policies are often influenced by global frameworks such as the goals of the United Nations and international commitments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which encourage countries to adopt strategies that promote gender equality (African Union, 2009). However, adopting gender policies alone does not automatically guarantee change. The effectiveness of these policies largely depends on the mechanisms put in place for implementation. The observation about the lack of significant progress in implementation of the gender policies on education in Tanzania more than a decade after the Nairobi Conference on Women (Stromquist, 1997), is noteworthy. Gender policy implementation involves integrating gender perspectives into planning, budgeting, staffing, monitoring, and evaluation processes in the university. This often includes establishing gender units or committees, allocating adequate financial resources, training personnel on gender-sensitive practices, and ensuring accountability mechanisms that track progress toward equality goals.

The implementation of gender policies in Nigeria faces several challenges. These include limited institutional capacity, inadequate funding, cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality, and weak monitoring systems. As a result, there is often a gap between policy formulation and actual practice. Addressing these challenges requires strong political will, institutional commitment, and continuous advocacy to ensure that gender equality remains a priority within the academia and organizational structures. Ultimately, gender policy implementation is crucial for translating policy intentions into meaningful social transformation. Effective implementation ensures that gender equality is not merely a theoretical principle but a practical reality that shapes institutional culture, improves access to

opportunities, and promotes inclusive development. When gender policies are properly implemented, they contribute significantly to building more equitable societies where all individuals, regardless of gender, can participate fully and benefit from social progress.

Theoretical Framework

The study is predicated on the gender mainstreaming approach as a means of ensuring that policies, programmes, and institutional practices reflect the needs, experiences, and interests of males and females. It is a globally recognised policy-making approach (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021), introduced at the 1985 Nairobi World Conference on Women and endorsed by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action as a strategy for promoting gender equality (UN, 2002). However, inclusivity is only meaningful when it is actively entrenched in policy implementation, not just stated in policy documents. Gender mainstreaming lens views gender inclusivity and policy implementation not as a separate goal, but a continuous and integrated process. This conceptual framework emphasizes that inclusivity is not achieved by mere creation of gender-focused policies but through integration of gender considerations into policy processes at all levels.

Inclusivity in policy design must begin at the formulation stage of policies. This should be informed by gender analysis to reflect the different needs, roles and experiences of men and women. What appears neutral can still exclude certain gender if differences are ignored. Gender mainstreaming requires that those responsible for implementing policies in the university, such as vice-chancellor, registrar, senate, deans, provosts, directors and heads of departments apply gender-sensitive approaches in practice. This includes equitable resource allocation, inclusive participation, and fair access to opportunities. The theory highlights that inequality is rooted in institutional structures and social norms. It means that effective implementation should challenge these barriers (e.g., discrimination, stereotypes, unequal power relations) rather than reinforce them. Gender inclusivity is achieved when implementation is monitored using gender-responsive indicators to ensure that outcomes are equitable for all groups.

Gender Policy Frameworks

The evolution of gender policy reflects the global struggle for equality, social justice, and the recognition of women's rights as human rights. Over time, gender policy has transformed from welfare-oriented interventions focused on women's domestic roles to comprehensive frameworks aimed at achieving gender equity and inclusivity in all spheres of life. In the early to mid-20th century, gender-related policies were largely shaped by welfare perspectives that viewed women primarily as dependents and caregivers. These policies focused on maternal health, child welfare, and social support, with little attention to structural inequalities or women's empowerment. Gender issues were considered private or social matters rather than central to governance and development. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948) views gender equality as a fundamental human right; a necessary condition for sustainable peace and development in societies, and a catalyst for women empowerment and economic growth.

The 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point, as feminist movements across the world began to challenge patriarchal systems and demand equality in education, employment, and political representation. This period saw the emergence of the concept of “women in development” (WID), which emphasized integrating women into economic activities and development planning. However, WID approaches were later criticized for focusing on women in isolation rather than transforming gender relations. The declaration of 1975 as United Nations International Women's Year, the first world conference on Women in Mexico, and the subsequent UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) provided a global platform for advancing women's rights. Landmark conferences such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1985 Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies expanded the policy agenda to include legal equality, political participation, and gender-based violence (African Union, 2009). These developments laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of gender policy within governments and international organizations.

By the 1990s, the shift from “women in development” to “gender and development” (GAD) reframed policy focus from women alone to the broader social structures that produce gender inequality. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action was a watershed moment, calling for gender mainstreaming as a strategy to ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into all stages of policymaking. Governments and institutions worldwide began adopting gender policies, establishing gender ministries, and creating national gender machineries to monitor implementation. In the 21st century, gender policy has evolved to embrace intersectionality recognizing that gender inequality intersects with class, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexuality. Policies increasingly address issues such as gender-based violence, digital inclusion, climate change, and economic empowerment. The Millennium Development Goals, Maputo Protocol of 2003 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality, reinforce the global commitment to gender-responsive governance and inclusive development

The National Gender Policy formulated in 2006 and revised in 2021 was developed to promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and social justice (Federal Ministry of Women and Gender Affairs, 2021). However, implementation has been uneven due to sociocultural barriers, weak institutional frameworks, and limited political commitment. Despite these challenges, advocacy by civil society, women's movements, and international partners continues to push for more inclusive and accountable gender policy implementation.

Methods

This is a qualitative case study. It makes for an in-depth examination of gender inclusivity and policy implementation in the University of Port Harcourt. The approach is suitable as it enables the investigation of such complex social phenomena like gender, inclusivity, equality, policy implementation. The research purposively selected the University of Port Harcourt based on the following strengths: the existence or availability of a gender policy; the university has made some attempts at implementation; and has a diverse staff composition of academic, administrative and technical cadres. The study employed document analysis in addition to participant observation. It examined how gender was framed and integrated into university

policy frameworks for inclusive practices. The assessment was based on the implementation of the four gender-inclusive practices. These include; language, policies, infrastructure and representation. As a participant observer, institutional practices, meetings and gender-related programmes of the university especially, at the Center for Gender, Conflict and Development Studies were noted. The observations reflect the everyday practices and informal norms that influence policy implementation. Data were analysed deductively based on the framework employed.

Gender Policy Implementation in the University of Port Harcourt

Universities, as centers of learning and social transformation, play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and inclusivity. The National Universities Commission have ensured the adoption of gender policies by universities aimed at promoting equal opportunities, preventing discrimination, and ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all members of the academic community. However, the extent of implementation varies widely, revealing both notable achievements and persistent gaps.

The University of Port Harcourt had established a gender policy framework to guide their operations and promote inclusivity. This policy was recently reviewed through the Gender Equality Policy Project (GEPP) of the university in partnership with Bournemouth University. This policy is said to be applicable to all aspects of university life and to members of the university community. It articulates commitment to equality in recruitment, promotion, student admissions, and representation in leadership. The university seeks to promote diversity, equity and inclusivity in all its engagements but not limited to recruitment, admission, promotion, and retention (uniport.edu.ng). The establishment of the Center for Gender, Conflict and Development Studies had also provided institutional platform for advocacy, research, and training on gender issues. The policy document delegates the responsibility of administering policy initiatives, by providing support the marginalised groups, holding seminars and workshops, and handling complaints arising from the policy issues.

There has been significant progress in female enrolment and participation in higher education. In this university, women's enrolment and excellence rates are approaching parity with men's, particularly at the undergraduate level with the harvest of female best graduating students at the last combined 35th convocation. The unique University of Port Harcourt has also recorded notable increases in women occupying administrative and academic leadership roles, such as deans, heads of departments, directors, provost, bursar, librarian, registrar, council membership and deputy vice-chancellor, though disparities remain. The university's sexual harassment policy (2019) an established mechanism to address GBV aims to prevent, report and respond to sexual assault and sexual harassments in the entire university. These measures have increased awareness and provided formal channels for reporting misconduct, contributing to safer and more accountable campus environments. There is a growing integration of gender considerations into teaching, research, curriculum development and across all university functions. Gender-related courses and researches have contributed in deepening the understanding of inequality with the Center for Gender, Conflict and

Development Studies at the front burner of training students and staff in gender-sensitive analysis and advocacy.

While the university has well-drafted gender policy, implementation remains inconsistent. Policies often exist on paper without effective monitoring, evaluation, or enforcement mechanisms. The Center for Gender lacks funding and institutional authority, making it unable to influence any decision. The Center for Gender is under-resourced, limiting its ability to conduct training, advocacy, or policy monitoring without external assistance. The absence of a distinct human relations department in the University of Port Harcourt is a major challenge in the quest for inclusive practices. This is responsible for the near neglect of the principles of equal opportunities in human resources issues. These lacunas reflect the lack of national legal frameworks on gender inclusivity hence; international treaties lack domestic relevance. Gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, and informal networks often hinder women's career progression within academic hierarchies.

Deep-seated cultural attitudes and patriarchal institutional cultures continue to pose barriers to gender equality. Some academic staff and administrators view gender policies as external impositions rather than integral to institutional growth, leading to passive resistance or superficial compliance. In practice, opportunities are not equal particularly, for people from states of origin other than Rivers, as the vice-chancellor of this federal university must be an indigene of the state. The use of words that identify individuals either as male or female is in place based on the prevailing social norms that exclude other gender in the country. Generally, gender-neutral terms are not enforced as phrases reinforce binary roles. The use of own pronouns is not commonplace. There are no clear anti discriminatory policies rather, discriminatory tax regimes against women with no pay equity audits. On the other hand, men are denied paternity leave; though, a nation-wide problem. In the area of infrastructure, very few lactation rooms exist in the university.

The absence of gender-disaggregated data also hampers effective planning and assessment of progress. Despite anti-harassment policies, cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence remain prevalent, often exacerbated by fear of stigma, victim-blaming, and weak disciplinary systems. The gap between policy existence and implementation highlights institutional inertia and lack of accountability. Although, the University of Port Harcourt have made appreciable progress in gender inclusivity, women remain underrepresented in leadership and strategic roles (Vice-chancellor, pro chancellor), where policy decisions are made and executed in the university. An expectation of the Gender Equality Policy Project (GEPP) of the university in partnership with Bournemouth University looks forward to a “more balanced representation of all genders in leadership positions” within the university.

Conclusion

Despite global and national commitments to gender equality and inclusivity, the implementation of gender policies within the universities continue to reveal inherent inequalities. In order to strengthen gender policy implementation, the university must commit to stronger accountability and monitoring systems in the Gender Equality Policy.

Management should allocate adequate resources for gender studies, training and provision of gender-disaggregated data. It is expedient that inclusive leadership development and representation for women be promoted. Also, ensure that gender policies address intersectional inequalities related to sex, ethnic diversity, religious affiliation, class, disability, and parenthood while integrating gender responsiveness into institutional planning, tax, budgeting, and evaluation processes. Although the University of had aligned with the national frameworks that promote equality yet, the implementation of gender policy represents both progress and paradox. While institutional frameworks and awareness have expanded, persistent structural and cultural barriers continue to limit the realization of full gender inclusivity. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires deliberate institutional commitment, cultural transformation, and sustained advocacy to make universities truly equitable. Addressing these gaps requires a shift from rhetorical commitment to action-oriented approach ensuring that gender policies are inclusive, backed by adequate resources, leadership commitment, and institutional reforms that challenge discriminatory norms and practices. The study recommends strengthening enforcement mechanisms, increasing gender awareness initiatives and ensuring inclusive participation in policy development and review processes.

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