

Bridging Gender Gaps in Secondary School Leadership: A Social Demand Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzed the enduring gender inequalities in leadership positions within secondary education, utilizing the framework of social demand. Utilizing current research and international trends, it underscores the influence of societal expectations, cultural norms, and policy frameworks on the opportunities and obstacles encountered by women in their pursuit of leadership roles. The document delineates essential elements that contribute to the disparity between genders, encompassing stereotypes, recruitment methodologies, and challenges related to work-life equilibrium. It further posits that rectifying these disparities necessitates not merely institutional reforms but also a transformation in community perspectives and systemic backing for aspiring women leaders. The social demand perspective is articulated as a comprehensive framework that synthesizes stakeholder engagement, advocacy, and policy innovation to cultivate more inclusive and equitable leadership structures within secondary education. In conclusion, the paper advocates for policy intervention and the cultivation of a supportive school culture, while also suggesting that encouraging work-life balance policies and nurturing environments should be prioritized.

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Background to the Study

The persistent under-representation of women in secondary school leadership roles remains a pressing issue across many educational systems worldwide. Despite significant progress in gender equity policies and the growing number of qualified female educators, leadership positions in secondary schools continue to be disproportionately occupied by men. Bridging these gender gaps is not merely a matter of fairness or equal opportunity; it is a response to a growing social demand for diverse, inclusive, and representative leadership that reflects the broader community. Examining the barriers and opportunities for women in school leadership through a social demand perspective, it is critical importance of addressing structural, cultural, and societal factors that influence the appointment and advancement of women in educational leadership. Ultimately, fostering gender-balanced leadership in secondary schools is essential for cultivating equitable educational environments and preparing students for a more inclusive society. It is glaring to observe that there still exist indices of gaps in the attainment of educational leadership between male and female in educational institutions despite concerted efforts made by organized organizations both locally and internationally at various levels. This phenomenon has dragged the development of education in Nigeria backward and has negative implications to growth and development of education especially in developing nations like Nigeria.

This paper examines the societal, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to gender disparities in school leadership. It assesses the current state of gender representation in secondary school leadership roles and identifies the social and educational needs that drive the demand for more equitable gender representation. The paper proposes strategies and recommendations for bridging the gender gap and ensuring equal opportunities for all genders in leadership positions. Furthermore, it highlights the broader social benefits, including improved educational outcomes, increased diversity, and enhanced social justice, that result from gender equity in leadership.

Conceptual Framework

Gender

The term “gender” serves as a broad descriptor, typically employed to denote the differentiation among humans grounded in the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. It is frequently employed in conjunction with “sex” to signify or indicate the male-female dichotomy within society. It is also viewed as a socio-cultural construct that designates roles, attitudes, and values deemed suitable for each gender. This stereotyping has also led to the dogmatic propagation of gender bias as an accepted pattern of behaviour, which has crept into all aspects of our lives, including education (Obielumani, 2010)

UNICEF, (2017) defined gender as a social and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Roles associated with gender and various attributes, consequently, evolve and differ across diverse cultural contexts. The notion, as articulated by UNICEF, encompasses the anticipations regarding the traits, abilities, and

probable conduct associated with both women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender denotes the societal classification of humanity into two distinct categories, grounded in biological sex. Gender influences the self-perception of individuals, shapes their interactions with others, and determines their societal roles and status. Thus, gender also operates as a dimension of social inequality (Omoriege, *et al.*, 2009). Manlosa *et al.*, (2018), explain gender parity as a statistical means through which the numerical value and ratio of participation between the female to male are measured within a given indicator such as education. Gender is regarded as learned roles which are construed as not fixed but determined by social and cultural values which vary across countries and societal perspectives and is subject to possible changes through conscious government policies, societal awareness, media engagements and shift in traditions (Adeyeye *et al.*, 2019)

Gender Gaps

Gender equality means that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefiting from) economic, social, cultural and political development (UNICEF, 2017). Gender equity involves ensuring fairness for individuals of all genders, encompassing men, women, boys, and girls, with a crucial emphasis on achieving equal outcomes and results. Gender equity may necessitate the implementation of short-term special initiatives to address historical or systemic biases or discrimination. It refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes (UNICEF, 2017). Gender equality is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is founded on the principle that women and men should engage as equal partners within the home, community, and society at large. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (UNICEF, 2017). Gender equality necessitates the consideration of the interests, needs, and priorities of all individuals, regardless of gender. It acknowledges the diversity among various groups and affirms that every person should have the freedom to cultivate their unique abilities and make choices unencumbered by the constraints imposed by stereotypes and biases related to gender roles. Gender equality represents a fundamental human right and is regarded as both a prerequisite for and a measure of sustainable, people-focused development (UNICEF, 2017). Equity guarantees that individuals of all genders, regardless of whether they are women, men, girls, or boys, possess an equal opportunity, not merely at the outset, but also upon achieving the ultimate goal. The discourse centers on equitable and just treatment of both genders, considering the distinct needs of men and women, as well as cultural impediments and historical discrimination faced by the particular group.

According to UNICEF (2018), gender equality is defined as the condition in which women, men, girls, and boys have equal access to rights, resources, opportunities, and protections. Ejumudo (2013) highlights the attainment of gender equality as fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development, identifying it as a catalyst and a sine-qua-non.

Equity in education Denotes the corresponding percentages of males and females within an educational framework, in relation to the demographic distribution by age group. While parity holds significant importance, it alone does not suffice in the pursuit of gender equality. Over the last few decades, the issue of gender disparity and education equality has been a major topic in development discourses concerning Africa (Agyepong, 2001; Bolaji, 2018; Okon, 2016 and UNICEF, 2017). The 2024 Global Gender Gap Index shows that while no country has achieved full gender parity, 97% of the economies included in this edition 2024 have closed more than 60% of their gap, compared to 85% in 2006. In 2024, data from LinkedIn indicates that the representation of women in the workforce continues to lag behind that of men across almost all industries and economies, with women comprising 42% of the global workforce and holding 31.7% of senior leadership positions. High-ranking positions continue to be limited for women on a global scale, as evidenced by the worldwide phenomenon of the "drop to the top" in 2024. Research conducted on LinkedIn reveals that deteriorating macroeconomic conditions correlate with a decline in the recruitment of women into senior leadership positions. However, the higher women's representation in the workforce is, the greater the resilience to retrenchment during economic downturns (Global Gender Gap Report, 2024).

Gender Gaps in Educational Leadership in Nigeria

Gender gap in educational leadership in Nigeria refers to the significant disparity between men and women in leadership and decision-making positions within the education sector, particularly in roles such as principals, headteachers, administrators, and policymakers. As of 2024, this gap remains a pressing social and institutional challenge. The majority of school heads and principals are male, even though teaching staff at the primary level are predominantly female. In many states, less than 30% of headteachers and principals are women. Decision-making positions in ministries of education and educational boards are overwhelmingly held by men.

Factors Contributing to Gender Gaps in School Leadership in Nigeria

Despite notable progress in educational access and professional advancement, significant gender gaps persist in school leadership positions across Nigeria. These disparities are shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that continue to limit opportunities for women to assume leadership roles within the educational sector. Understanding the underlying causes of these gender gaps is essential for developing effective policies and interventions that promote gender equity and harness the full potential of all educators. Currently, there are 258 male vice-chancellors in Nigeria and 12 female vice-chancellors which is about 95.3 percent to 4.7 percent (DATAPHYTE, 2025). Women are greatly underrepresented as principals in secondary schools. According to a 2021 study less than 30% of secondary school principals in Nigeria are female. In some states, the percentage of female principals is as low as 10-15%. Gender gaps are wider in Northern Nigeria due to sociocultural and religious factors. In some Northern states, female representation in school leadership is below 10%. Southern states tend to have higher female participation, but the gap persists (UNESCO, 2022). There has been a slow increase in female leadership over the past

decade, but the pace is not sufficient to close the gap soon. UNESCO (2022) reports that Nigeria lags behind the global average for women in school leadership positions, which stands at roughly 49% worldwide

The key factors that contribute to the under-representation of women in school leadership in Nigeria includes the following;

1. **Societal and Cultural Norms:** Deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs often limit women's advancement into leadership roles.
2. **Gender Stereotypes:** Leadership is frequently associated with males, reinforcing biases and reducing opportunities for women.
3. **Workplace Barriers:** Lack of mentorship, support, and networking opportunities for women, as well as gender-based discrimination and harassment.
4. **Family Responsibilities:** Women often carry a disproportionate share of family and care-giving duties, which can hinder their career progression
5. **Policy and Implementation Gaps:** While Nigeria has policies promoting gender equality, weak implementation and lack of enforcement contribute to persistent gaps.

Efforts to Bridge Gender Gaps in Educational Leadership

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in women's participation in educational leadership roles, especially in urban centers and within private educational institutions. This trend reflects broader societal shifts toward gender equity and the growing recognition of women's capabilities and contributions in the field of education. Urban areas and private institutions often have more progressive policies and greater resources, which can translate into more opportunities for women to enter and advance in leadership positions such as principals, department heads, or administrators. Several advocacy groups and government initiatives have emerged to further promote women's leadership in education. These organizations work to raise awareness, provide training and mentorship, and advocate for policy changes that support the advancement of women. For instance, some government programs offer scholarships or leadership development workshops specifically for women, aiming to equip them with the skills and confidence needed to assume leadership roles. Advocacy groups often spotlight successful female leaders as role models and push for institutional reforms, such as gender-sensitive hiring practices and family-friendly workplace policies.

Despite these encouraging efforts, the overall impact on women's representation in educational leadership remains limited. While more women are enrolling in and completing higher degrees—an important qualification for leadership positions—the transition from academic achievement to leadership attainment is hindered by persistent barriers. These include deep-seated gender stereotypes, lack of access to influential professional networks, work-life balance challenges, and sometimes subtle forms of discrimination within educational settings. As a result, the leadership pipeline is described as “leaky”: although more women are equipped with the necessary credentials, many do not ultimately secure or retain leadership roles. Addressing the root causes of this leakage requires a multifaceted

approach. This includes strengthening mentor-ship and sponsorship programs, implementing transparent and equitable promotion practices, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and ensuring that support systems are in place for women balancing leadership with personal responsibilities. Only through sustained and comprehensive strategies can the gains in women's educational attainment be translated into meaningful, long-term representation in leadership roles across all sectors of education.

Implications of Social Demand and Gender Gaps in School Leadership

The lack of female perspectives in leadership affects policy, school environments, and student outcomes. Fewer women in leadership reduces the availability of female role models for young girls. The implications of social demand and gender gaps in school leadership are significant and multifaceted. Social demand refers to the expectations and needs of communities for effective, representative, and responsive school leadership. As societies evolve, there is increasing pressure for school leaders to reflect the diversity of the populations they serve, including gender representation. However, persistent gender gaps in school leadership positions—where men are often over-represented in principal and administrative roles—can lead to several challenges. These gaps may perpetuate stereotypes, limit role models for students, and reinforce unequal power structures within educational institutions. When women are underrepresented in leadership, schools may miss out on diverse perspectives, innovative leadership styles, and inclusive decision-making. Addressing these gaps is crucial for fostering equitable school environments. Promoting gender equity in leadership can improve organizational culture, enhance school performance, and inspire all students to aspire to leadership roles, regardless of gender. Therefore, bridging gender gaps in school leadership is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for meeting the social demand for inclusive and effective education systems.

Conclusion

Addressing gender gaps in secondary school leadership through a social demand perspective highlights the importance of community expectations, policy interventions, and supportive school cultures. By recognizing and responding to the societal need for more equitable representation, stakeholders can implement strategies that empower women, foster inclusive environments, and ultimately improve educational outcomes for all. Bridging these gaps is not only a matter of fairness but also a critical step toward achieving broader educational and social goals. Although specific percentages differ by source and state, official statistics and academic research consistently indicate that women remain underrepresented in educational leadership positions in Nigeria. Women frequently constitute less than 30% of headteachers and principals, despite comprising the majority of the teaching workforce at lower levels.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen enforcement of gender-equality policies in education.
2. Provide mentorship and leadership training programs for female educators.
3. Promote work-life balance policies and supportive environments.
4. Address cultural and institutional barriers through awareness campaigns.

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