Achieving Sustainable Development Goal Number Five: A Glance at Women Leadership at Mountains of the Moon University, Uganda

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Abstract: The study examines the progress and challenges encountered in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) particularly goal five - Gender Equality, focusing on women's representation in leadership in a university setting. The study centers on Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), investigating the current status, identifying barriers, and proposing recommendations for advancing women's participation in leadership roles. We applied interpretivism approach anchored on a case study design. We purposively chose middle and senior women holding or had held leadership positions at MMU. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 16 women in leadership positions at MMU. We thematically analyzed data guided by themes on representation, policy promotion and implementation and outstanding challenges faced. The study reveals a significant underrepresentation of women in top executive roles at MMU, with women holding only about 15% of the university's executive board positions despite constituting 25% of department heads. Women are more prevalent in humanities and social sciences faculties than in STEM disciplines, reflecting broader gender disparities across academic fields. Institutional policies promoting gender equality exist, but their inconsistent enforcement poses challenges, indicating a need for more robust implementation. Lack of mentorship programs and cultural barriers hinder women's progress, emphasizing the importance of tailored support mechanisms and inclusive policies for advancing women in leadership roles. The study recommended development and enforcement of robust gender mainstreaming policies across board, mentorship programs, active support for gender equality initiatives and leadership development programs tailored specifically for women.

Keywords: Women, University, Leadership, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Gender disparity in academic leadership roles has been undergoing scrutiny and transformation, with increasing numbers of women entering the field and concerted efforts to recruit and retain them in higher education and the workforce (George, 2024). These efforts vary by country, influenced by policies, governmental strategies, and institutional initiatives within specific contexts (Lopez & Duran, 2021; Towni et al., 2021). Despite progress, a global imbalance in gender parity persists. Regions like North America and Northern Europe are making strides in closing societal gender gaps but still face challenges in women's representation in STEM fields (Lopez & Duran, 2021; Marinelli et al., 2021; Silfver et al., 2022). Conversely, regions such as Southeastern Asia and the Middle East, while rapidly recruiting women in STEM, show the least improvement in closing overall gender gaps (Towni et al., 2021). Research indicates that women in leadership positions across various industries perform as well as, and sometimes better than, their male counterparts (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Goryunova & Madsen, 2024; Shepherd, 2017; Zhang & Basha, 2023). Despite this, female leaders continue to face obstacles in attaining leadership roles (Baker & Cangemi, 2016; Geiger & Kent, 2017; Paoloni et al., 2021).

Within universities, particularly in countries like Bangladesh and Malaysia, leadership roles are predominantly occupied by men. Bothwell (2017) reported that only 18% of the female working population held leadership roles in the top 200 universities in 2016–2017. As of 2020, only three women serve as vice-chancellors across twenty public universities in Malaysia. In Bangladesh, there is only one female vice-chancellor and one pro-vice-chancellor among 46 public universities (Sani, 2018). This gender disparity is evident globally, with low percentages of female vice-chancellors in Japan (2.3%), Kuwait (3%), India (3%), Turkey (7%), Malaysia (15%), and the UK (29%), while Hong Kong lacks any female vice-chancellors (Forestier, 2013; QS, 2015).

Similar gender disparities exist in other university leadership positions such as deputy vice-chancellor, registrar, dean, and deputy dean, with fewer women holding these roles compared to men. This shortage of female representation is also prevalent in many other Asian countries, including India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Morley & Crossouard, 2015, 2016). This calls for further research to address this issue (Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

Despite their academic achievements, women encounter barriers to success in various professional fields, including academia. These barriers are rooted in existing inequalities within patriarchal family structures and institutional cultures that marginalize women (Zvavahera & Chirima, 2023; Moyo, 2021). Calderon (2023) highlights that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 24.3% of university academics are women, hindering their advancement to leadership positions. The glaring topless aspects of women in academic roles across most African universities cannot be underestimated (Mabokela et al., 2017). Whereas some policies have been put in place in some universities in Uganda (e.g., Makerere, Kyambogo) to empower women withal, women in senior position are quit few Nakamanya et al. (2017) which require attention for enablers that position more women in leadership.

Academic staff are expected to contribute to their disciplines' advancement through academic publications, innovation, securing research funding, effective instruction, service, leadership, and professional growth (van Dijik et al., 2020). This academic journey requires support and mentorship, typically provided by seasoned academics. However, female academics often lack these competencies due to insufficient support and mentorship, especially from male counterparts (Zvavahera, 2021). Odaga (2020) discovered that despite increased participation of women in higher education in Uganda, gender disparities persist. The study indicates that gender inequality in access to higher education has evolved into a more multifaceted and complex issue. Notably, half of the female population was concentrated in one of ten colleges, while in eight other colleges, men outnumbered women by a ratio of 8:2. This suggests that Uganda's higher education system perpetuates stereotypical gender roles, with women predominantly concentrated in certain fields and men in others.

While there has been progress in promoting women to leadership positions in various industries and sectors, including the public and private sectors of many countries, public universities continue to lag behind in gender parity, particularly in roles such as dean, deputy dean, vice-chancellor, and deputy vice-chancellor (Ahad & Gunter, 2017; Nakirigya, 2023). To address the wide spectrum regarding gap gender gap in leadership roles it is crucial to explore how women academics in leadership positions navigate their roles within their specific contexts. Therefore, in this study we beget a question- how universities in Uganda have contributed to the achievement of SGD goal 5 in line with women leadership? We explored

the experiences of women in leadership positions at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU). We also ascertained whether women served or are serving as token representatives in a masculinist institutional sphere. Through this exploration, insights have been drawn on the challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders in academia thence contributing to efforts aimed at fostering gender equality and inclusivity in higher education leadership.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In today's highly competitive learning environments where universities are accused of being very complacent expensive, universities cannot afford to outlook the value that come with creating learning spheres that are reliably conducive to diversity (Jackson, 2015). Gender diversity in top officials is not just a mere issue of social justice but also a smart strategy for sustainable institutional growth (Jackson, 2015) but does gender matter in leadership? The gender gap in leadership positions within higher education institutions, particularly in public universities in Uganda, continues to persist despite efforts to promote gender equality and inclusivity. This gap is evident in institutions like Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), where women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making organs and leadership roles. Nakirigya (2023) highlights this issue, noting that in six public universities, including Makerere (17% by 2023), Gulu, Kabale, Muni, Busitema, and Mbarara University of Science & Technology, the number of women in leadership positions and on decision-making organs falls short of desired levels. For instance, in Makerere University, the number of women in high positions increased by only seven percent over 16 years, indicating slow progress (Nakirigya, 2023). This persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles not only hampers the full utilization of women's skills and expertise but also limits the contribution of these institutions to national and international development agendas such as the third phase of Uganda National Development Plan (UNDPIII) and African Union Agenda 2063.

Furthermore, the existing literature unveils the importance of gender mainstreaming in achieving sustainable development goals and fostering inclusivity in higher education leadership (Ilagan, 2019). Despite the implementation of policies and initiatives to promote gender equality, including mentorship programs and leadership development opportunities, significant challenges hinder women's progress in attaining leadership roles. The slow progress in increasing women's representation in leadership roles reflects broader gender disparities in academia and underscores the need for targeted interventions to address salient systemic barriers. Thence, this study delved into the experiences, challenges,

and opportunities faced by women in leadership positions at Mountains of the Moon University, aiming to contribute actionable insights for advancing gender equality and inclusivity in higher education leadership within the Ugandan context.

1.3 Objectives of the study

1. To explore the current position of women in the leadership sphere in the MMU public dispensation.
2. To investigate the extent to which MMU policies and initiatives promote women in leadership
3. To identify challenges faced by women in leadership at MMU.
4. To identify strategies that can be advanced to enhance gender equality at MMU in alignment with sustainable development objectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women in the Sustainable Development Drive

Realizing SDG's is imperative for communities to meet their needs (Hubscher et al. 2022) if not challenges anyway! Achieving these goals, particularly goal five by 2030 requires sustainability change agents with an I can make it approach. This implies, change agents must be diverse not on single gender play basis. Leadership in various forms be it political, educational, organizational among others has continued to command public or community's high attention. In academia for instance, leadership research has also thrived, with a recent Web of Science search for "leadership" revealing more than 205,000 articles. Women in leadership positions have additionally been under study, with relatively about 10% of current Web of Science articles addressing both leadership and gender related matters. This shows that leadership and gender issues are a matter of concern.

Zvavahera et al. (2023) explored the relationship between gender and sustainable development skills in higher education, using a Zimbabwean university as a case study. Data from 43 female academics via interviews and questionnaires revealed significant challenges. The study found that the university's programs lacked gender mainstreaming, resulting in unequal participation and restricted access to opportunities for female academics. Many lacked essential skills in research, innovation, interdisciplinary thinking, and grant writing. This skill gap was attributed to male academics holding most leadership positions and controlling a large share of resources.

Nakamanya et al. (2017) explored the nature of capacity building given to female leaders in universities in Uganda.

Using interpretive methods, they found out that networking, ability development, and education contribute to better performance of female leaders. They concluded that despite aspects of network, development ability, education being parameters of capacity building, some loopholes that needed attention were identified (e.g., structured networking programmes). In contributing to narrowing such loopholes, we undertook a study in a newly established public university with emphasis on women leadership roles. More to it, we also included heads of academic departments (heads of departments) from different faculties. This widens the sample framework.

Galenda (2024) established experiences of female scientists in research network in STEM fields in public universities in Uganda. Using a sample of STEM female instructors selected in hard pure and hard-applied sciences, based on semi-structured interviews and document checks as data collection methods, Galenda used thematic analysis and found out that positive experiences with the research networks enabled women to win in areas of projects, postdoctoral fellowships among others with ease. Whereas the unit of analysis is the same as in our study, unit measures are different. Notably, Galenda, looked at academic women in STEM fields vs research networks while we are dealing with women leadership role at different levels in a university.

2.2 Policies and Initiatives in Support of Women in Academic Leadership Roles

Ramathuba and Davhana-Maselesele (2015) define support as total assistance provided to individuals in need, encompassing institutional policies, senior management help, networking, mentoring, role models, and family support. Crucial institutional policies for women's success in leadership include parental leave, maternity leave, and flexible work arrangements like job sharing and remote work (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Mwagiru, 2019; Watton, Stables & Kempster, 2019). These policies significantly enhance female leaders' productivity (Motaung, Bussin & Joseph, 2017; Saunders & Bassett, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). Conversely, countries such as Vietnam, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya lack family-friendly policies necessary for balancing work and family responsibilities (Hodgins, O'Connor & Buckley, 2022). Universities should create more suitable organizational structures, such as senior-level job-sharing roles (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Redmond, Gutke, Galligan, Howard & Newman, 2017) to enable more women to excel in senior leadership positions. Support from senior managers is vital for women's success in leadership roles, with collaboration and shared thinking being key (Elomaa, Eskela-Haapanen, Pakarinen, Halttunen & Lerkkanen, 2021).

In developed countries, universities have established supportive structures to promote women in leadership roles (Bertrand, 2019; Burkinshaw, Cahill & Ford, 2018; Coleman, 2019). Women's leadership development programs equip women, including Vice Chancellors, with skills and environments that foster personal and organizational growth (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci & Burke, 2017; Knipfer, Shaughnessy, Hentschel & Schmid, 2017). Similarly, South African and Zimbabwean universities have created short-term learning programs for women in leadership (Kele & Pietersen, 2015; Mwagiru, 2019). Ghanaian and Kenyan universities offer provisions like childcare, maternity leave, and annual leave to support female leaders, enhancing their performance (Muasya, 2016). Networking is essential for women's success in leadership positions within higher education.

UNESCO found a consistent increase in female representation in tertiary education from 33.6% in 1990 to 43.2% in 2020, with significant gains in South and West Asia. However, sub-Saharan Africa saw the smallest increase, with women remaining underrepresented in senior faculty, university leadership, and education policymaking positions. Networking supports female senior leaders in higher education. Networks can be formal or informal, women-only or mixed-gender, and provide access to valuable contacts, social capital, professional development, and support (Coleman, 2019; Inez & Scott, 2018; Mwagiru, 2019). However, women often struggle to enter male-dominated networks influenced by old-boy connections, family ties, school affiliations, and business relationships. Such networks are crucial for obtaining and succeeding in leadership roles, including senior positions in higher education (Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Smith, 2023).

Mentoring significantly enables women to succeed in higher education leadership. Mentoring involves guidance and support from a more experienced person and can be formal or informal (Coleman, 2019; Mullen, 2016). It provides psycho-social support through role modeling, counseling, encouragement, friendship, and empowerment. It also improves time management, productivity, networking skills, administrative aspirations, and satisfaction with work-life balance (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Redmond et al., 2017).

2.3 Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership Positions

Muweesi et al. (2024) noted with concern that, promotion of women in academia has remained low despite the various advances in the recent past. They also pointed out that, whereas women make up a significant potion of the academic skilled pool, underrepresentation in leadership

capacities is still at a big stance. Despite supportive government policies to address gender inequalities in enrollment, progress in increasing female representation in academic and decision-making positions within higher education remains slow. Jawhar (2022) found that although female graduates slightly outnumber males in Saudi Arabia, this has not translated into labor market participation, particularly in Knowledge Economy (KE)-related jobs. The study also highlighted Saudi Arabia's low international ranking in innovation and ICT, with insufficient public information on the gender dimension, indicating a lack of recognition of gender as a factor in improving these rankings.

Family support is key to the success of women in leadership positions. In Vietnam, women leaders have overcome various challenges due to family support (Maheshwari, 2023). Essential support from family members motivates women in leadership roles (Motaung et al., 2017; Phaswana-Mafuya, 2023; Sabour, 2024). In Africa, additional support comes from extended family and the church community, providing moral and financial assistance (Asiamah, 2024; Amutabi, 2024). Despite this, Redmond et al. (2017) note that more men need to engage in household responsibilities, especially childcare, to allow women to produce work of comparable quality to men (Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016).

Role models are vital for women's success in leadership positions. They boost confidence, enhance understanding of leadership capacities, and develop trusted relationships through personal support (Redmond et al., 2017). However, the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions in Africa results in a lack of female role models in higher education (Bowen, 2024; Owolabi et al., 2023). This scarcity creates confusion about leadership behavior, forcing women to seek support from available senior leaders, regardless of gender, to progress in leadership roles (Coleman, 2019). Evidence shows that male researchers often receive a larger share of research funding, affecting their long-term academic success. Male academics typically produce more publications than females, with a wider gap in top journals, as highlighted in Elsevier's 2020 gender report.

The literature on gender inequality in higher education leadership highlights significant skill gaps and limited resource access for female academics due to inadequate gender mainstreaming (Zvavahera et al., 2023). Institutional support, including effective policies, management backing, networking, mentoring, role models, and family support, is crucial for fostering women's leadership capacities and balancing work-family responsibilities (Ramathuba & Davhana-Maselesele, 2015). Developed countries have supportive structures like leadership development programs and family-friendly policies, while developing countries, particularly in Africa,

lag, hindering women's success (Bertrand, 2019; Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Hodgins, O'Connor & Buckley, 2022). Networking and mentoring are vital for professional development, yet women often face barriers in male-dominated networks (Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Smith, 2023). The scarcity of female role models in senior positions further challenges women's advancement (Owolabi et al., 2023). Family support is crucial for balancing responsibilities (Sabour, 2024). Gender mainstreaming policies significantly promote equal access to leadership roles, but global disparities in senior academic positions and research funding persist (Maude, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The disconnect between women's educational attainment and labor market participation, as seen in Saudi Arabia, underscores the need for incorporating gender dimensions in policy and planning (Jawhar et al., 2022).

Despite existing policies and support mechanisms, inconsistent implementation and enforcement, especially in developing countries, remain a significant research gap. This underscores the need for robust strategies to ensure gender equality initiatives translate into tangible outcomes, effectively promoting women's representation in higher education leadership roles.

3. Methodology

Our study applied interpretivism approach relying on a case study design to comprehensively explore the challenges faced by female academics in attaining sustainable development competencies within higher education institutions, with Mountains of the Moon University (MMU) serving as the primary case study. We purposively chose middle and senior women holding or had held leadership positions at MMU basing on their leadership experiences. Data collection involved the utilization of semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussions. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select 16 women respondents, encompassing current and former leaders at MMU holding senior management positions, such as members of the University Council, Top University Management, Deans, and Heads of departments. These interviews delved deeply into the participants' experiences, encountered challenges, and the existence and efficacy of institutional support mechanisms aimed at promoting women in leadership roles within MMU.

Furthermore, the qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group discussions underwent meticulous analysis using Nvivo, version 14. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, emerging themes, and meaningful relationships within the data. This analytical approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives and questions,

facilitating the extraction of valuable insights regarding the representation, experiences, and barriers faced by women in leadership positions within the academic setting. The qualitative analysis also enabled the generation of in-depth narratives and contextual understandings of the complex dynamics surrounding gender equality and women's leadership within Mountains of the Moon University.

In addition to primary data collection and analysis, the study incorporated a documentary analysis component. This involved scrutinizing existing data sources related to women in leadership positions at Institutions of Higher Learning, including historical records, previous research studies, official reports, and relevant policy documents. Complementary documents linked to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and policy frameworks were also reviewed for corroborative purposes. This comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis ensured the triangulation of findings, enhancing the credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions and recommendations regarding the challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equality and women's leadership in higher education institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, which explored the challenges faced by female academics in achieving sustainable development competencies in higher education institutions, using Mountains of the Moon University as a case study. The section includes a detailed analysis of the data collected from face-to-face interviews with 16 women. The discussion is supported by verbatim responses from the participants, cross-referenced with relevant literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

4.1 Gender representation in leadership roles

Proportion of Women in Leadership Positions. The study found that women hold a significant portion of mid-level management positions but are underrepresented in top executive roles. Specifically, while women constitute 25% of department heads, they only represent about 15% of the university's executive board.

> *"I feel like we are given responsibilities that are important, but not the ones that come with real power. It's frustrating to see qualified women sidelined for top positions (K7,2024)"*

Similarly, other respondents had this to say:

> *"It seems women are well-represented in mid-level management but less so in top university management positions."*

The findings resonate with the observation by Okwakol cited in Nakirigya (2023), acknowledging that

> *"Women are underrepresented in leadership and decision-making organs of universities in Uganda"*

Further, this finding is consistent with global trends observed in other studies, which highlight the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership roles (Forestier, 2013; QS, 2015). This presents a need to explore possible strategies to narrow the gender parity gap.

Women are more likely to be found in leadership roles within faculties related to humanities and social sciences, compared to STEM faculties where leadership positions are predominantly held by men.

> *"Based on my observations, it appears that women encounter fewer obstacles in progressing within the fields of arts and social sciences compared to STEM disciplines. In STEM, however, the atmosphere tends to be overwhelmingly dominated by males, which can present additional challenges for female advancement (K13, 2024)."*

This reflects a broader pattern of gender disparity across different academic disciplines, where women are less represented in STEM fields (Silfver et al., 2022). Due to reasons that require more research, one wonders where the STEM capacity is because of choice, competence or both!

Women are better represented in administrative and support roles, such as registrar offices and student services, but these positions often lack decision-making power compared to academic leadership roles.

> *"Many of us are in supportive roles, which are essential but do not influence policy or significant university decisions. This limits our impact on the institution's direction (K4, 2024)."*

The lack of female representation in decision-making positions has been widely documented, indicating a need for structural changes within universities to promote gender equality (Hodgins, O'Connor & Buckley, 2022).

4.2 Institutional Policies and Support Mechanisms

The university is in the process of implementing policies aimed at promoting gender equality, including affirmative action measures to ensure a minimum percentage of women in leadership roles. However, the current situation presents uncertainty about the implementation and enforcement of these policies. "Policies exist on paper, but their enforcement is inconsistent. We need more commitment from the top management to see real changes" (K8, 2024). This finding is consistent with research suggesting that effective gender mainstreaming and supportive institutional policies are crucial for enhancing women's representation in leadership roles (Maude, 2021).

Despite the introduction of these policies, there are significant challenges related to their practical application. Many female academics feel that the policies are more symbolic than effective. As one respondent noted,

> "The policies are well-written, but they lack teeth. There's no real accountability for ensuring they are followed" (K3, 2024).

This sentiment reflects the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and accountability structures within the institution to ensure that gender equality initiatives lead to tangible outcomes.

Furthermore, the university has initiated several support mechanisms, such as professional development workshops and gender sensitivity training. However, these initiatives are often perceived as insufficient or poorly targeted. One participant expressed,

> "We have these workshops, but they don't address the specific challenges women face. It's like a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine effort to help us advance" (K9, 2024).

This highlights the necessity for more tailored support programs that directly address the unique obstacles faced by female academics.

Mentorship and networking opportunities are also crucial for career advancement, yet they are significantly lacking at the university.

> "There's no formal mentorship program here, especially for women. We need more opportunities to learn from those who have navigated these challenges successfully" (K12, 2024).

This gap underscores the importance of establishing structured mentorship programs to provide guidance and support for women aspiring to leadership roles.

The lack of flexible working arrangements further exacerbates the difficulties faced by female academics. Many respondents emphasized the need for policies that accommodate the dual responsibilities of work and family. One stated,

> "Flexible work hours or remote working options would make a huge difference. It's hard to juggle everything without that support" (K5, 2024).

Flexible working policies have been shown to improve work-life balance and overall job satisfaction, which are critical for retaining talented female staff (Muasya, 2016; Motaung et al., 2017).

The university's efforts to promote gender equality are further hampered by a lack of comprehensive data and metrics to monitor progress. One respondent commented,

> "We need better data to track how these policies are working. Without that, it's hard to see what's really changing" (K6, 2024).

Effective policy implementation requires robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of gender equality initiatives and identify areas for improvement.

4.3 Challenges and Barriers

There are no mentorship programs and professional development workshops specifically designed for women to prepare them for leadership roles. The absence of such programs limits women's opportunities for career advancement and professional growth.

> "For all the time I have worked here, there have not been any mentorship or professional development programs aimed at preparing women for leadership roles at this institution. We really need these opportunities, especially for women trying to break through the glass ceiling K12, 2024."

The importance of mentoring and networking for female leaders has been emphasized in various studies (Coleman, 2019; Redmond et al., 2017).

The study further found out that cultural norms and societal expectations still play a significant role in hindering women's progress to higher leadership positions. Many women face additional scrutiny and higher expectations compared to their male counterparts.

> "Society expects us to juggle home and work seamlessly. This double burden is rarely acknowledged by our male colleagues, who often have more support systems (K11, 2024)."

These findings are supported by literature highlighting the impact of societal and cultural barriers on women's career progression (Gasparini, & DeWitt, 2024; Smith, 2023; Coleman, 2019) who posit that some working environments are dominated by male connections.

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family obligations remains a significant barrier for many women. The lack of flexible working arrangements and adequate support systems exacerbates this challenge.

> *"Balancing family and work is a daily struggle. Without flexible working hours or adequate leave policies, it becomes almost impossible to perform at your best (K5, 2024)."*

Studies have shown that supportive work-family policies are essential for improving women's productivity and career satisfaction (Muasya, 2016; Motaung et al., 2017).

Implicit bias and perceptions about women's leadership abilities persist within the university, influencing hiring and promotion decisions. Women often need to demonstrate higher levels of competence to be considered for leadership roles.

> *"There's an unspoken bias. We have to work hard to prove our worth, and even then, it's not always enough (K10,2024)."*

This aligns with findings from other research that highlight the pervasive nature of gender bias in academic institutions (Johnson, 2016; Sikanyiti, 2024).

4.4 Success Stories and Progress

There are several notable success stories of women who have ascended to high leadership positions within the university. These women often serve as role models and mentors for other aspiring female leaders.

> *"Having a female registrar has been incredibly inspiring. She shows us that it's possible to reach these heights, despite the challenges (K3, 2024)."*

The presence of role models is critical for encouraging and supporting women's leadership aspirations (Redmond et al., 2017).

While the pace of change has been slow, there has been incremental progress over the years. The proportion of women in leadership roles has been gradually increasing, reflecting a positive trend towards achieving gender parity.

> *"We're seeing more women in leadership roles now than a decade ago. It is slow progress, but it is progress nonetheless and gives us hope (K2, 2024."*

This trend is consistent with global observations of gradual improvements in women's representation in higher education leadership (UNESCO, 2022).

A number of respondents revealed that their spouses were supportive and encouraged them to attend to university assignments.

> *"My husband has been incredibly supportive, always encouraging me to focus on my university work and handle home responsibilities together"* (K2, 2024). Another shared, *"Without the support and understanding from my spouse, balancing my academic duties and home life would have been extremely difficult"* (K14, 2024).

In terms of appointments, the appointments board has been just and transparent in considering women both for first-time appointments and promotions.

> *"The appointments board has been fair in promoting women based on their qualifications and contributions. It feels good to be acknowledged purely on merit"* (K1, 2024). Another respondent shared, *"I've seen the board give equal opportunities to women, which has been very encouraging for many of us striving for leadership roles"* (K15, 2024).

The findings from Mountains of the Moon University illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of gender inequality in academic leadership. While there has been some progress, significant challenges remain. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive institutional policies, effective support structures, and a cultural shift towards greater gender inclusivity. The experiences at Mountains of the Moon University resonate with global trends, emphasizing the need for concerted efforts to achieve gender parity in leadership roles in higher education.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings from Mountains of the Moon University align with global trends of underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership. Women constituted only 15% of the university's executive board, reflecting broader trends where women, despite their qualifications, face barriers to top leadership roles (QS, 2015; Silfver et al., 2022). This limited representation underscores the broader challenges highlighted by Hodgins, O'Connor & Buckley (2022) regarding gender biases in career advancement.

Women at the university were predominantly found in leadership roles within humanities and social sciences, while STEM faculties remained male-dominated. This pattern aligns with studies indicating that women are more likely to advance in non-STEM fields due to persistent

gender biases and structural barriers in STEM disciplines (Silfver et al., 2022). Women were better represented in administrative roles like registrar offices and student services, but these positions often lacked significant decision-making power (Hodgins, O'Connor & Buckley, 2022).

Despite policies aimed at promoting gender equality, their implementation was inconsistent at Mountains of the Moon University. Participants expressed the need for more commitment from top management to enforce these policies effectively, highlighting the importance of institutional support (Maude, 2021). The absence of mentorship programs and professional development workshops specifically designed for women was identified as a significant barrier. Mentorship is crucial for career advancement and professional growth, a point supported by Coleman (2019) and Redmond et al. (2017).

Cultural norms and societal expectations continue to impede women's progress in higher leadership positions. The heightened scrutiny and higher performance expectations placed on women compared to men reflect deeply ingrained biases (Johnson, 2016; Sikanyiti, 2024). The struggle to balance professional responsibilities with personal and family obligations remains a significant challenge, underscoring the need for more supportive work-family policies (Begum et al., 2024; Motaung et al., 2017).

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family obligations emerged as a significant challenge. The lack of flexible working arrangements and adequate support systems exacerbated this issue (Begum et al., 2024; Motaung et al., 2017). Implicit bias and perceptions about women's leadership abilities influenced hiring and promotion decisions, requiring women to demonstrate higher levels of competence for leadership roles (Johnson, 2016; Sikanyiti, 2024; O'Connor, 2023).

Despite these challenges, success stories of women in high leadership positions within the university serve as beacons of hope and inspiration. The presence of female role models and mentors significantly influences women's leadership development, emphasizing the need for more structured mentorship programs. Incremental progress in women's representation in leadership roles reflects a positive global trajectory, although more efforts are needed to achieve true gender parity (Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

The challenges faced by women at Mountains of the Moon University resonate with global trends. Studies have shown that women in leadership positions perform as well as or better than their male counterparts but face similar barriers (Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Institutional support structures, such as mentoring, networking, and family-friendly policies, were identified as critical for promoting women's success in leadership roles (Elomaa et al., 2021; Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

The presence of female role models and mentors significantly impacted women's leadership development. Mentorship and role modeling are powerful tools for overcoming barriers to women's leadership (Coleman, 2019; Pandit & Paul, 2023). The study highlighted the importance of institutional policies that support gender equality, such as flexible working arrangements and parental leave. However, participants noted that the implementation of these policies was often lacking, emphasizing the need for effective policy implementation (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Mwagiru, 2019).

Networking was identified as a key factor in supporting women's career advancement. However, women often found it challenging to gain entry into male-dominated networks (Coleman, 2019). Family support played a significant role in the success of women in leadership positions, with support from spouses, parents, and extended family members being essential for enabling women to succeed (Asiamah, 2024; Sabour, 2024). The study found a positive relationship between gender mainstreaming policies and women's participation in leadership roles, though more needs to be done to ensure equity in leadership opportunities (Maude, 2021).

A multifaceted approach is necessary to address gender disparity in academic leadership. "Any program to support women should be backed by institutional-level policies, including short courses, workshops, and training, coupled with monitoring women's progress from the department level" (Okwakol, in Nakirigya, 2023). Institutions must formulate and review equal opportunity policies that address specific barriers and are gender-responsive, including recruitment, development, and promotion.

While there have been significant strides in promoting gender equality in higher education, substantial work remains. Institutional policies, support structures, networking, mentoring, and family support are crucial for enhancing women's leadership capabilities. Addressing structural barriers, fostering inclusive cultures, and leveraging women's potential in the knowledge economy are essential steps toward achieving gender parity in higher education leadership.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings from Mountains of the Moon University highlight the global challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal Number Five—gender equality in academic leadership. Despite some progress, women face entrenched barriers like cultural norms, biases, and insufficient institutional support, echoing concerns raised by Nabawanda (2024), Khan et al. (2024), and UNESCO (2022). Universities must enforce gender mainstreaming policies, offer robust mentorship and networking opportunities, and establish family-friendly work environments to empower women. The inconsistent implementation of these policies at Mountains of the Moon University reveals the need for stronger commitment from top management. Mentorship and role modeling are pivotal in overcoming challenges, providing necessary guidance and support. Success stories of women in high leadership positions demonstrate the potential achievements with adequate support and opportunities.

Achieving gender parity in higher education leadership requires a multifaceted approach addressing both structural and cultural barriers. Universities must enforce comprehensive gender mainstreaming policies, foster inclusive work environments, and provide flexible working arrangements and family-friendly policies. The transformative impact of role models and mentorship on women's career trajectories cannot be overstated. By valuing and leveraging women's contributions, institutions can foster innovation and contribute to broader societal progress, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal Number Five.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Develop and enforce robust gender mainstreaming policies across all academic and administrative areas, ensuring equal opportunities for women and involvement in decision-making processes.
2. Establish formal mentorship programs that pair junior female academics with experienced mentors, focusing on providing guidance, support, and opportunities for professional development.
3. Encourage male colleagues and leaders to actively support gender equality initiatives by participating in mentorship programs, promoting inclusive policies, and challenging discriminatory practices.
4. Invest in leadership development programs tailored specifically for women, providing practical skills and creating supportive

environments for individual growth and organizational advancement. This includes addressing competencies such as research, grant writing, interdisciplinary collaboration to increase female representation in senior academic and administrative positions.

Based on the findings, it can be elucidated that Mountains of the Moon University has taken initial steps towards promoting gender equality nevertheless significant gaps remain in the enforcement and effectiveness of these policies. Stronger accountability measures, tailored support programs, flexible working arrangements, and comprehensive data collection are essential for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for female academia. Addressing these issues will require a sustained and committed effort from all levels of the university.

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