Assessing the Role of Gender-Inclusive Language in Promoting the Representation of Women in Leadership Roles within Higher Education Institutions in Kaduna State

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ABSTRACT

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within higher education institutions remains a significant gender equity concern, particularly in regions with entrenched sociocultural norms. This study examines the role of gender-inclusive language as a strategic tool for promoting the visibility and representation of women in leadership roles across higher education institutions in Kaduna State, Nigeria.This study examines the language and socio-cultural barriers that hinders women's leadership prospects, with a focus on the impact of gendered language in institutional communications, and leadership dynamics. A mixed-methods approach was employed, comprising content analysis of institutional documents (including job advertisements, and promotional materials), semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative staff, and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with religious and community leaders within the study area.Thirty participants were selected for the interview and thirty participants partake in the FGDs who were selected through judgmental sampling. The data was analyzed using NVivo software for content analysis. The analysis revealed that the language employed in these official documents is consistently gender-neutral. Notably, no significant instances of masculine-coded terms or explicitly gendered phrases were identified, revealing this neutrality. This result indicates that formal institutional language is not a barrier to gender-inclusive leadership representation. It concludes that promoting gender-inclusive language is not merely a semantic issue but a crucial step toward advancing gender equity and empowering more women to assume leadership positions in the higher education sector. However, to further promote gender inclusivity, the study

recommends ongoing monitoring of institutional communications and the implementation of measures to address subtler biases.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in leadership positions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains a global concern, particularly in developing regions like Nigeria. Despite an increase in female enrolment in higher education, leadership roles continue to be dominated by men. Scholars such as Dunn et al. (2014), Cheung (2017), Braide (2023), and Bothwell (2020) have identified gender discrimination and entrenched patriarchal norms as significant barriers to women's progression into leadership. The World Health Organization (2016) defines gender as socially constructed roles and behaviors, which shape leadership dynamics and often limit women's advancement, particularly in contexts with strong traditional gender norms.

Global statistics further reflect this disparity. UNESCO (2022) reports that women occupy only 15% of HEI leadership roles in 48 European countries, with 20 countries lacking female leaders. In Latin America, only 18% of university rectors are women, while globally, women constitute just 39.7% of researchers in higher education Northouse (2004).

Despite strides made in workforce participation, barriers like the "glass ceiling" persist, as noted by Kirton and Greene (2015) and Saeed et al. (2022). In Asia, gender disparities are similarly entrenched, with women holding only 2.3% of vice-chancellor roles in Japan and 15% in Malaysia (Dhir, 2015; Bothwell, 2017; Towni et al., 2021).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) often reflect entrenched gender disparities, particularly in leadership roles that are traditionally male-dominated. Verloo (2005) points out that the use of gendered language within academic settingssuch as "professor emeritus" or "headmaster"perpetuates male authority and discourages women from pursuing leadership. However, adopting gender-inclusive language in HEIs can significantly shift this narrative. Verloo (2005) observes that institutions embracing neutral terminology tend to see an increase in female leadership, as such language fosters an inclusive atmosphere where women feel empowered to aspire and contribute at the highest levels. Using terms

like "academic leader" or "administrator" signals institutional openness to diversity and dismantles long-standing exclusionary norms.

The African context, especially Nigeria, faces compounded challenges due to cultural and institutional limitations. Otieno et al. (2019) highlight how patriarchal norms and exclusionary policies limit women's leadership advancement in African HEIs. Akanle and Alonge (2022) report that women make up less than one-third of academic staff in Nigerian universities, while Tadesse and Tesfaye (2022) note their minimal presence in decision-making positions. Cultural resistance and institutional inertia hinder progress, especially in places like Kaduna State. According to Nyambi et al. (2020) and Akanle and Alonge (2022), the implementation of gender-inclusive language faces resistance from male staff and is often obstructed by a lack of awareness and training. This study therefore seeks to explore how inclusive language is adoptedor resistedin HEIs in Kaduna State and how such practices can be improved to support gender equity in academic leadership. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the influence of gender-inclusive language on the representation of women in leadership of higher education institutions in Kaduna State.

Literature Review

Gender

Gender operates throughout Nigerian and broader African societies through cultural and religious and socio-political systems which determine how people perform their roles and have responsibilities and get access to power (Nyambi et al., 2020). African societies maintain static gender patterns which stem mainly from traditional beliefs together with colonial heritage even though global gender definitions present the concept as a cultural product with flexible characteristics per Mazure (2021). Alongside patriarchal systems that maintain male economic power and leadership positions most communities enforce women to specialize in household work and caring responsibilities alongside subordinated societal roles (Akinbobola, 2023). These established gender roles receive support from languages, religion, customary institutions and institutional policy that entangles individuals mostly including women and gender-diverse persons from breaking through the strict gender norms (Okonkwo & Onwuegbuchulam, 2022). The public understanding of non-binary expression and transgender identities remains limited in Nigeria as society acknowledges only male and female genders (Okonkwo & Onwuegbuchulam, 2022).

Leadership

leadership is the act of persuading people to comprehend and concur on what must be done and how to do it, while supporting both individual and group efforts to achieve common goals (Northouse, 2021). The ability to persuade and direct people or organizations toward the accomplishment of objectives is known as leadership. According to this concept, leaders have a crucial role in establishing a vision, motivating others, and fostering an atmosphere that encourages development and creativity(McKinsey, 2023). Leaders are viewed as people who work together with their teams in addition to providing direction, cultivating an environment of trust and respect.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

HEIs are institutions that foster advanced knowledge, skills, and competencies and to support research, innovation, and societal development, these institutions offer formal education beyond the secondary level. These programs include undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs (Altbach et al., 2019). In addition to specialized schools like polytechnics and colleges of education, modern higher education includes a wide range of programs and institutions, such as traditional universities with faculties in the arts, humanities, and sciences. According to Assie'-Lumumba (2005), the phrase also refers to "grandesecole" and other professional training facilities. The aims, objectives, teacher qualifications, admission requirements, program lengths, and certificates offered by universities and other higher education establishments can vary, these variations are a reflection of the various demands and priorities of various cultures (Assie'-Lumumba,2005).

Gender-inclusive language

Gender prejudices and inequities have historically been reflected in and reinforced by language. For instance, many languages have historically used masculine genetics, like "he" or "mankind," to refer to both males and women (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008). But in recent decades, there has been a growing movement to question these linguistic conventions. Establishing welcoming and supportive environments for individuals of all gender identities requires the use of gender-inclusive language. Even if there has been progress in encouraging inclusive language usage, obstacles still exist, and sustained work is required to bring about significant change. In every human society, language has a significant influence on social and cultural attitudes. Language itself is not gender biased as a social communication instrument (Language and Jingxia, 2019). The art of speaking and writing, whether professional or casual, in a way that does not

discriminate against any specific sex or gender is known as gender inclusive language, according to the United Nations (2023).

Language plays a critical role in shaping leadership perceptions and reinforcing or challenging gender norms. Scholars like Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) argue that gendered terms such as "chairman" or "spokesman" historically align leadership with masculinity, thereby marginalizing women and discouraging their participation in leadership roles. These terms reinforce stereotypes that equate effective leadership with male traits like assertiveness and authority. Consequently, women displaying these traits often face negative judgment, a phenomenon rooted in the linguistic association of leadership with men. Conversely, the adoption of gender-neutral terms such as "chairperson" and "spokesperson" can help dismantle these biases. Hellinger (2011), notes that inclusive language promotes a leadership culture that is accessible to all genders, sending a strong institutional signal of commitment to gender equality.

Moreover, inclusive language fosters organizational cultures that actively support diversity, which in turn enhances women's recruitment and advancement in leadership positions. When institutions adopt such language, they do more than promote equity symbolically—they cultivate environments that validate female leadership potential and challenge systemic exclusion. The broader societal impact is equally profound, as exposure to inclusive language in public and institutional discourse gradually shifts cultural perceptions and normalizes female leadership. Still, both Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) and Hellinger (2011) emphasize that language reform must be complemented by concrete actions such as training, policy adjustments, and accountability measures. Only through this multifaceted approach can inclusive language translate into sustained and meaningful gender equity in leadership.

Cultural and Structural Barriers in Higher Education
HEIs face persistent cultural and structural barriers that hinder gender equity in leadership roles. Patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in institutional practices, reinforced by gender-exclusive language such as "headmaster" and "professor emeritus," which uphold male dominance and marginalize women's visibility in leadership (Morley, 2018). These barriers extend beyond language to systemic issues like male-dominated networks and biased hiring and promotion processes that perpetuate male leadership as the default (Morley & Crossouard, 2016).

Organizational culture in HEIs often favors traditionally masculine traits like assertiveness and competitiveness, sidelining leadership styles typically associated

with women (Acker, 1990). The use of gender-neutral language, such as "leader" instead of "chairman," can challenge these biases and promote a more inclusive leadership model (Wang et al., 2010). Additionally, intersectional factors including race, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms compound the challenges women face (Crenshaw, 1991). Structural issues such as inflexible work policies and inadequate childcare support further restrict women's advancement. Addressing these multifaceted barriers requires comprehensive strategies, including flexible policies, mentorship, and transparent promotion criteria, to foster a supportive environment for women leaders in HEIs.

Challenges in Implementing Gender-Inclusive Language

The integration of gender-inclusive language within higher education institutions (HEIs) and other organizations is critical for fostering equitable and inclusive environments. However, this process is fraught with various challenges that can impede its effective implementation. These challenges stem from cultural resistance, institutional inertia, and a lack of necessary resources and frameworks to support change.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to adopting gender-inclusive language reform is one of the most persistent challenges faced by HEIs. This resistance often originates from traditional beliefs, deeply rooted societal norms, and a reluctance to deviate from established linguistic practices (Pauwels, 2003). Critics of gender-inclusive language argue that such reforms are unnecessary or overly politically correct, viewing them as disruptions to conventional norms rather than as steps toward equity. Additionally, many individuals, including educators and administrators, may find linguistic changes cumbersome, perceiving them as a challenge to their habitual modes of expression.

Lack of Awareness and Training

A significant barrier to implementing gender-inclusive language is the lack of awareness among institutional stakeholders regarding its importance and impact. Šidlauskienė and Butašova (2013) emphasize that without adequate education, many individuals fail to recognize the subtle ways in which gendered language reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates inequities. For instance, terms like "chairman" or "freshman" are often used uncritically, reflecting a lack of understanding about their exclusionary connotations. Moreover, Alemayehu (2020) highlights that many HEIs lack comprehensive training programs to equip faculty and staff with the knowledge and tools necessary to adopt gender-sensitive language.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

In multicultural and multilingual settings, the challenge of implementing gender-inclusive language is further complicated by the diversity of cultural and linguistic norms. Many languages, particularly those with deeply gendered grammatical structures, lack neutral terms for roles and identities, making it difficult to adopt gender-inclusive alternatives. For example, in languages such as French or Spanish, gender is embedded in almost all nouns and adjectives, complicating efforts to create neutral terminology (Cameron, 2010).

Policy and Resource Constraints

The absence of clear policies and adequate resources is another significant obstacle to the adoption of gender-inclusive language in HEIs. Many institutions lack formal guidelines that mandate or encourage the use of inclusive language in official documents, job descriptions, and everyday communications (Morley, 2018). In the absence of such frameworks, efforts to promote gender inclusivity often rely on individual initiative, leading to inconsistent application and limited impact. Furthermore, resource limitations, including the lack of funding for training programs, awareness campaigns, and the development of inclusive materials, hinder progress. For instance, creating gender-neutral job descriptions or revising institutional documents requires time, expertise, and financial investment. Without sufficient resources, even well-intentioned efforts may fall short of achieving meaningful change.

Pushback from Stakeholders

Another challenge arises from the pushback by stakeholders who view gender-inclusive language reforms as unnecessary or ideologically driven. This resistance is often rooted in misconceptions about the purpose of these reforms, with critics arguing that they prioritize political correctness over practicality. Faculty, staff, and students who are unfamiliar with the concept of gender-inclusive language may question its relevance or express concerns about its potential impact on academic rigor and tradition (Phipps, 2021).

Studies have examined how public perceptions of organizational outcomes are significantly influenced by the leader's gender. Cowen and Montgomery (2020) and Ebrahimi et al. (2017) emphasize that leadership gender plays a critical role in educational institutions. Research by Denise (2020), Rovira-Asenjo et al. (2017), and Zhihlejova et al. (2018) reveals distinct leadership traits between men and women, underscoring the importance of exceptional leadership from both genders in universities and other organizations.

In Nigeria, workplace representation clearly favors men over women across various sectors, including academia, as documented by Adisa et al. (2020). Academic institutions often rely on print media advertisements to recruit qualified personnel, according to Odor et al. (2019). However, there is a lack of sustained effort to increase female recruitment, with gender disparities and workplace environments playing a major role in perpetuating these inequalities (Ajayi et al., 2019). Additionally, the language used in appointment and promotion processes seldom achieves true gender neutrality, even when it appears neutral, ultimately limiting women's advancement opportunities.

Hernandez and Ibarra (2019) investigated how language sustains gender biases which occur in educational institutions. The researchers conducted research to analyze how gendered language practices in higher education impact assessments regarding women's potential for leadership roles. The study adopted a qualitative methodology by performing one-on-one interviews with female leaders who worked in academia. The research based its findings on social role theory to find that women commonly faced indirect discrimination through gendered communication approaches which undermined their authority. Research participants revealed that women experienced habitual interruption in meetings while their colleagues stole credit for their contributions.

Miranda et al. (2022) led research about the gender-inclusive language background knowledge and awareness of Bulacan State University Meneses Campus students in Matungao, Bulakan, Bulacan. This research project used survey questionnaires and guided written interviews which followed an explanatory sequential mixed-method research design. The study results showed that most students had a clear understanding of gender-inclusive language together with its purpose for advancing gender-related equality and sensitivity. The students showed their agreement to adopt gender-inclusive language both to learn with it and to serve as tools for gender equality advancement across classrooms and institutions within their communities.

Materials and Methods

The Study Area
Kaduna State between Latitudes 10° 25'N and 10°32'N of the Equator and between Longitudes 7°25'E and 7°25'E of the prime meridian. The state has a total of 23 Local Government Areas and covers a land area of 46,053 km², making it the fourth largest in the country. In terms of population, it is the 3rd largest with a projected population 10,400,000(KADSEEDS, 2024). Because of the number of educational institutions in the state, it has been nicknamed the Centre of Learning.

Higher education in Kaduna began with the establishment of Kaduna Technical Institute in 1956. The Northern Nigeria Executive Council at its meeting of 17th August 1962, Conclusion No.1, re-designated the Technical Institute, Kaduna as the Polytechnic, Kaduna. It became Kaduna Polytechnic in 1968 by the Federal Government Decree No. 20 of 1968, which was revised in 1979 by Decree No. 79. Similarly, Ahmadu Bello University on the 4th of October, 1962 as the University of Northern Nigeria. The Federal College of Education, Zaria now Federal University of Education, Zaria, was also established by the then Northern Region Government of Nigeria in November 1962. In 1976, the Federal Government established the Federal Cooperative College, but it took off in 1979 to provide the much-needed manpower in the cooperative sub-sector of the economy. The Kaduna State College of Education, which began as Advanced Teachers' College, Kafanchan, was established and started formal classes on the 30th of March, 1977 on its first campus at Manchok.

Purposive sampling was used to select one (1) institution from the three senatorial zones in Kaduna State. The institutions were selected based on the large number of staff members. The institutions selected are Ahmadu Bello University in Zone 1, Kaduna Polytechnic in Zone 2, and Kaduna State College of Education Gidan Waya in Zone 3, as shown in Fig 1.
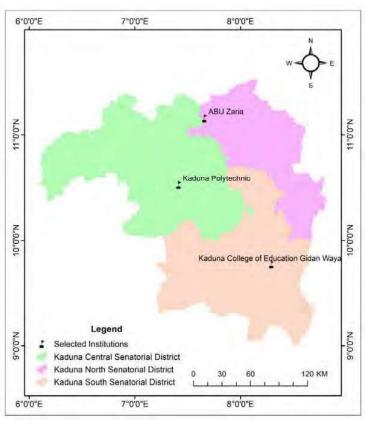
Figure 1: Map of Kaduna State Showing the three Senatorial Zones and Selected Institutions
(Source: Adopted and modified from GRID3 - Nigeria, 2024)

Data Collection Methods
The study adopted multiple qualitative data collection methods using purposive sampling technique to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. These included Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and a detailed document review. The KIIs were conducted with principal officers including Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, Deans, and Provosts across the selected institutions.Principal officers were targeted because of their involvement in institutional policy formation and administrative leadership, making them appropriate informants for evaluating gender inclusivity practices. The FGDs were held with community and religious leaders from each senatorial zone to capture socio-cultural and religious perspectives on female leadership in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the study involved reviewing institutional documents, including job descriptions,

appointment records, and promotion guidelines. This allowed for an examination of how language embedded within institutional policies might reinforce or challenge gender biases

A total of 60 participants were engaged in the study. This included 30 principal officers drawn from the three selected institutions, with each institution contributing 10 participants. These officers, both male and female, represented a mix of academic and non-academic leadership roles. In addition, 30 religious and community leaders were selected across the three senatorial zones to participate in FGDs, with each zone contributing 10 participants. The total sample size ensured a balanced representation of institutional and community perspectives, thereby enriching the study with diverse insights into the barriers and enablers of gender-inclusive leadership in higher education.

Method of Data Analysis
Data analysis was conducted using both content analysis and thematic analysis approaches. NVivo software was employed to organize and code the qualitative data, facilitating a systematic identification of emerging themes. Content analysis was applied to institutional documents to scrutinize the use of gendered or gender-neutral language. This was employed to identify linguistic patterns that may influence leadership opportunities for women. Thematic analysis, on the other hand, was used to interpret data from the KIIs and FGDs, highlighting stakeholder perceptions, institutional practices, and socio-cultural beliefs.

Results and Discussion
Gender Representation in Leadership Positions across the Selected Higher Education Institutions in Kaduna State
A comparative analysis of gender representation in leadership positions across the three higher education institutions in Kaduna State: ABU Zaria, Kaduna College of Education (Gidan Waya), and Kaduna Polytechnic was analysed and presented in Table 1. The data reveals notable gender disparities in leadership roles within these institutions. At ABU Zaria, male leadership predominates, with 65 male Heads of Departments (HODs) compared to only 5 females. This trend is similarly reflected in other positions, such as the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC), where no women held these positions. Female representation is very limited, especially in key leadership roles like university librarian, bursar, and registrar.

Table1: A Comparative Analysis ofGender Representation in Leadership Positions at ABU Zaria, Kaduna College of Education, and Kaduna Polytechnic

Position	ABU Zaria Female	ABU Zaria Male	Kaduna College of Education, Gidan Waya Female	Kaduna College of Education, Gidan Waya Male	Kaduna Polytechnic Female	Kaduna Polytechnic Male
HODs	5	65	-	-	-	-
Faculties	1	7	-	-	-	-
College Provosts	1	3	-	-	-	-
Directors	1	4	1	0	0	12
University Librarian	0	1	1	0	1	0
Bursar	0	1	1	0	1	0
Registrar	0	1	1	0	1	0
DVC	0	1	-	-	-	-
VC	0	1	-	-	-	-
Deans	-	-	2	5	1	2
Deputy Provosts	-	-	1	1	-	-
Deputy Registrar	-	-	-	-	1	0
Deputy Rectors	-	-	-	-	1	1
Rector	-	-	-	-	0	1

Source: Authors Analysis, 2024

Table1 reveals that at the Kaduna State College of Education, female representation in leadership is modestly higher in mid-level positions such as Deans and Directors, where women occupy two and one positions respectively. However, senior leadership roles such as the Provost and Deputy Provost remain entirely male-dominated, reflecting a persistent gender imbalance at the top. A similar pattern is observed at Kaduna Polytechnic, where women are notably absent from critical positions like Rector and Deputy Rectors. Although women serve in important roles such as Librarian and Bursar, they are significantly outnumbered by men in more influential administrative posts like Directors. These findings emphasize a continuing gender disparity in leadership within the three institutions, with women consistently underrepresented in senior decision-making roles.

Gendered Language in Job Descriptions, Appointments, and Promotions in Higher Education in Kaduna State

Following a review of the job description, and appointment and promotion documents of all three HEIs, a content analysis was conducted, with recurring themes extracted and coded. The results shows that there is no discriminatory languages portrayed in these documents. The study found that higher education institutions in Kaduna State, including Kaduna College of Education (Gidan Waya), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, and Kaduna Polytechnic, have made notable efforts to promote gender inclusivity through the use of neutral language in these sensitive documents. These institutions emphasize merit-based criteria such as qualifications and experience, avoid gender-specific terms, and openly encourage applications from all genders. The documentation reflects a strong institutional commitment to fairness, equity, and diversity in leadership and academic advancement.

However, the findings also recognize that inclusive language alone may not sufficiently address gender imbalances in leadership.Sloan, (2023) found that changing gendered language in job postings had limited effect on attracting diverse candidates. Likewise, the effectiveness of technologies used to detect gendered language has been questioned, pointing to the need for more comprehensive reforms.

Perceptions of Stakeholders, Regarding the Importance of Gender-Inclusive Language in Promoting Gender Equity in Leadership Roles

Results obtained from the KII presents the stakeholders' perception regarding the importance of gender-inclusive language in promoting gender equity in leadership roles. Sub-Themes generated from the data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceptions of Gender-Inclusive Language in Higher Education Institutions

Participant ID	Institution	Position	Sub themes
P9	KAD POLY	Chief Lecturer	Inclusivity
P10	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer	Motivation
P4	KAD POLY	Dean Student Affairs	Motivation
P1	KAD POLY	Principal Assistant Registrar	Institutional Practice

P10	KAD POLY	HoD/ Chief Lecturer	Respect for women
P7	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer	Inclusivity
P27	ABU Zaria	Deputy VC	Inclusivity
P21	ABU Zaria	HoD	Awareness and Policies
P30	ABU Zaria	HoD	Visibility and Recognition
P24	ABU Zaria	Dean	Inclusivity
P22	ABU Zaria	HoD	Respect for Women

Source: Author's Analysis (2024)

Findings revealed that gender-inclusive language plays a pivotal role in promoting women's participation in leadership roles withinHEIs in Kaduna State. Many of the respondents acknowledged that using such language fosters a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of exclusion among women and individuals who do not identify strictly within the male-female binary. According P10;

"Gender-inclusive language is something we advocate for, so everyone feels included regardless of gender," while P22 added that;
"Inclusive language can inspire more women to pursue leadership roles."

These perspectives suggest that the use of inclusive terms not only broadens participation but also helps dismantle subtle biases in institutional communication. The findings further revealed that inclusive language serves as a motivating factor for women to aspire to leadership by reinforcing the belief that leadership is not restricted to a particular gender. As expressed by P10 and P12,

"By encouraging gender-inclusive language, we promote the idea that leadership isn't just for one gender."

This sense of encouragement is crucial in institutions where cultural or historical biases may have previously limited female representation. Respondents also pointed out that when women see themselves reflected in the language used in job advertisements or institutional documents, it boosts their confidence and aspirations.

Moreover, the study revealed that respectful and inclusive language contributes significantly to the recognition and respect of women in leadership roles. P4 emphasized;

"Using inclusive terms gives women confidence, making them feel acknowledged and equal,"

highlighting how language can shape perceptions and reinforce institutional values of equality.

Factors Affecting Gender Equity in Leadership Roles
The factors affecting gender equity in leadership roles were also one of the recurring themes from the data analyzed. The results is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Factors Affecting Gender Equity in Leadership Roles

Participant ID	Institution	Position	Sub-themes
P6	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer	Lack of Confidence
P9	KAD POLY	Chief Lecturer	Religious, Societal and Cultural Norms
P1	KAD POLY	Principal Assistant Registrar	Stereotypes
P4	KAD POLY	Dean Student Affairs	Lack of Confidence
P4	KAD POLY	Dean Student Affairs	Religious Factors
P1	KAD POLY	Principal Assistant Registrar	Male Dominance
P6	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer	Lack of Confidence
P19	KSCOE	Dean	Institutional Policies
P29	ABU ZARIA	Dean	Marital Issues
P25	ABU ZARIA	HoD	Religious, Societal and Cultural Norms

Source: Author's Analysis (2024)

Findings indicate that several societal, cultural, and institutional factors hinder gender equity in leadership within HEIs in Kaduna State. A major issue is persistent stereotypes that downplay women's leadership potential, regardless of their qualifications. P6 noted;

"Men often believe women cannot be on the same level as them, which creates resistance in leadership roles."

These views are rooted in longstanding patriarchal beliefs that position men as natural leaders.

Male dominance in leadership roles reinforces gender imbalance, as men tend to support and mentor other men. P1 shared;

"Men have higher qualifications in many departments, which becomes a barrier for women..."

This creates pressure on women to prove themselves more. Marital responsibilities further restrict women's progression, with society expecting them to prioritize home over career. As one participant stated, *"Society often expects women to take on more domestic roles than leadership roles."*
Lastly, the absence of strong institutional policies limits progress. While some institutions support women's leadership, others rely on informal peer support. As one participant explained;

"For now, the only support is the support that we get from colleagues.
(P19)*"* Without formal systems in place, achieving gender equity remains a challenge.

Factors Promoting Inclusivity, Advocacy, and Policy Support in HEIs
The factors promoting inclusivity, advocacy and policy support for women in HEIs were analyzed and presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Factors Promoting Inclusivity, Advocacy, and Policy Support in HEIs

Participant ID	Institution	Position	Sub-themes
P9	KAD POLY	Chief Lecturer	Support for Women in Higher Education
P10	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer	Support for Women in Higher Education
P1	KAD POLY	Principal Assistant Registrar	Sensitization and Encouragement
P6	KAD POLY	HoD / Chief Lecturer	Policy and Institutional Efforts
P4	KAD POLY	Dean Student Affairs	Flexible Recruitment and Promotion Policies

P11	KSCOE	PRO	Mentorship
P11	KSCOE	PRO	Policy and Institutional Efforts
P23	ABU ZARIA	Professor	Support for Women in Higher Education
P24	ABU ZARIA	Dean	
			Reserving some positions for women

Source: Author's Analysis (2024)

Findings revealed that providing strong support for women in HEIs significantly promotes inclusivity and encourages women to pursue leadership roles with confidence.

P9 noted that: *"There is encouragement for women to seek advanced training, attend conferences, and even be sponsored for further studies."*

Continuous, well-structured training involving all staff is also essential, with P11 emphasizing that ongoing programs reinforce the priority of inclusivity.

The study further revealed that sensitization on gender-inclusive language opens opportunities for women, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields.

P1 explained, *"By sensitizing people on gender-inclusive language, we can open doors for women to feel more welcome in all fields."*

Such inclusive language helps break down barriers, making women feel valued and empowered to seek leadership positions.

Findings also highlighted that institutional policies designed to promote gender equality and inclusive language are crucial for long-term change. As P6 stated;

"We try to create balanced committees and ensure women are represented, especially in decision-making bodies," while P11 added;

"Everybody would be treated equally irrespective of their gender."

Policies that simplify recruitment and promotion processes for women encourage greater participation, as noted by P4:

"Creating policies that make it easier for women to apply for leadership positions could encourage more participation."

Mentorship emerged as a vital tool to boost women's confidence and guide their leadership development. P11 remarked,

"When you talk to women, and give them audience, their sense of confidence is boosted."

Formal mentorship programs help build supportive networks that nurture women's leadership potential.

The representation of female in leadership roles was analysed and presented in Table 5. The stakeholders shared their views concerning the recognition of women in leadership positions of HEIs in kaduna state and the results presented in Table 45.

Table 4.5 Recognition of Female Representation in Leadership of Higher Education Institutions

Participant ID	Institution	Position		Sub-themes
P3	KAD POLY	Director (Entrepreneurship)		Progress
P8	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer		Progress
P5	KAD POLY	Deputy (Academics)	Registrar	Institutional Support
P2	KAD POLY	Deputy (Establishment)	Registrar	Mentorship and Role Models

P8	KAD POLY	HoD/Chief Lecturer		Progress
P14	KSCoE	HoD (PHE)		Fair representation
P15	KSCoE	HoD	(Educational Foundation)	Fair representation
P26	ABU ZARIA	Professor		Progress

Source: Author's Analysis (2024)

Findings revealed that progress has been made in increasing female representation in leadership roles within HEIs, though challenges remain. Some stakeholders acknowledged improvements, with P3 noting,

"Over the years, we've seen an increase in women taking up roles, especially in departments where there weren't many women before." P8 also emphasized this positive trend:

"Women now head departments that were previously led only by men. As long as you're qualified, our institution doesn't hold you back based on gender."

However, there is a contrasting view highlighting the persistent gender gap in leadership positions. P26 stated that;

"How many female staff do we have? They are very few compared to the men in leadership roles, now, we can say that they are highly underrepresented." This points to an ongoing issue where, despite fair representation in general roles, leadership remains predominantly male.

Institutional support for women in leadership was seen as adequate by some, with P5 noting that *"Women in leadership roles are supported through initiatives like committee assignments, which builds their experience and visibility."* Additionally, mentorship and visible role models were identified as vital in encouraging aspiring female leaders. P2 highlighted this impact:

"Seeing other women lead motivates younger women in our institution, showing them that leadership is possible for them too." This creates a positive environment that fosters ambition and confidence among women pursuing leadership paths.

Relationship between the Use of Gender-Inclusive Language and The Recruitment, Retention, and Career Advancement Opportunities for Women in Leadership

The relationship between gender-inclusive language, recruitment, retention, and career advancement opportunities for women in leadership was analyzed and the results presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Fostering Gender Inclusivity

Participant ID	Positions	Issues Discussed (Sub-Themes)
P26	HoD	Influence on Hiring Decisions
P17	HoD	Creating a Supportive Environment
P20	Sub Dean	Developing Inclusive Policies

Source: Author Analysis, 2024

Findings from the table revealed that gender-inclusive language plays a crucial role in shaping hiring decisions and institutional policies within higher education institutions. Many stakeholders emphasized that revising job descriptions and interview processes to use gender-neutral language helps eliminate biases, as P26 noted;

"We have restructured our job descriptions and interview processes to ensure that gender-neutral language is used throughout, thus removing any potential biases."

Additionally, creating a supportive and inclusive environment was linked to the adoption of such language, with P17 stating;

"Gender-inclusive policies create an atmosphere where women feel supported, reducing turnover and promoting long-term retention in leadership roles."

Furthermore, the use of gender-inclusive language has influenced the development of broader institutional policies promoting equality and non-discrimination, as P20 explained;

"Our advocacy for gender-inclusive language is reflected in our policies, which now emphasize equality and non-discrimination in all leadership appointments."

This highlights the importance of language as a foundational step toward fostering gender equity in leadership within HEIs.

Leadership and Advancement

To ascertain if language plays a role in leadership advancement was analysed and results presented in Table 7.

Table 4.7: Leadership and Advancement

Participant ID	Positions	Issues Discussed (Sub-Themes)
P19	Sub – Dean	Equal Promotion Opportunities
P5	Deputy Registrar	Aspiration for Leadership
P13	Dean	Empowerment Through Mentorship

Source: Author Analysis, 2024

Findings revealed that gender-inclusive language and supportive institutional practices have significantly influenced women's leadership and advancement in HEIs. Many stakeholders highlighted that using gender-neutral criteria for promotions has created equal opportunities, with P19 noting;

"By using gender-neutral criteria for promotions, we have been able to promote more women into leadership roles, ensuring that everyone has equal access to advancement."

This inclusive language has also inspired women to aspire to leadership positions, as P5 expressed,

"The inclusive language used in leadership opportunities makes me feel valued and inspires me to aim higher."

Additionally, mentorship and leadership development programs were seen as vital in empowering women to overcome challenges and progress professionally. P13 emphasized this by stating;

"Leadership training and mentorship programs are designed to help women overcome challenges and advance in their careers." These findings underscore the role of inclusive language and mentorship in fostering women's leadership growth.

Best Practices and Recommendations for Implementing Gender-Inclusive Language Policies and Initiatives within Higher Education Institutions

The participants gave an insignt into effective strategies and recommendations that can facilitate the integration of gender-inclusive language across various institutional practices. The results is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Enhancing Gender Inclusivity through Leadership and Policy Initiatives

Participant ID	Positions	Issues Discussed (Sub-Themes)
P20	Sub – Dean	Leadership involvement in policy endorsement
P13	HoD	
P13	HoD	Continuous education on gender inclusivity
P17	HoD	
P27	Deputy Vice-Chancellor	
P15	HoD	Policy Review/Implementation
P1	Principal Assistant	
P10	Registrar	
	Chief Lecturer and HoD	
P7	Chief Lecturer and HoD	Support forum
P16	HoD	
P20	Sub – Dean	

Source: Author Analysis, 2024

The findings from the table revealed that strong leadership involvement is crucial for the successful endorsement and implementation of gender-inclusive policies in HEIs. Stakeholders emphasized that when leadership actively supports gender inclusivity,

"it sends a powerful message throughout the institution" (P20), whereas lack of such backing can cause initiatives to "fall flat" (P13). Continuous education through trainings and sensitization is also vital to shift socio-cultural norms and reinforce that inclusivity remains a priority. As P13 noted, *"Ongoing training programs are vital,"* and P17 stressed that training should *"address biases, language impact, and practical applications of gender-neutral terms."* Engaging external experts in gender studies was suggested to enhance these programs, with P27 stating, *"Inviting gender studies experts can enhance training programs."*

Furthermore, stakeholders called for clear, dynamic guidelines on gender-inclusive language that are accessible to all and aligned with global best practices while reflecting societal changes. P15 remarked, *"Clear guidelines on the use of gender-inclusive language should be available to everyone,"* and P10 added that guidelines must be *"dynamic and adaptable to reflect societal changes."*The establishment of support forums was viewed as necessary to engage students, faculty, and underrepresented groups, providing spaces to share experiences and promote accountability. P7 advocated for forums where *"students, faculty, and*

administrators can discuss their thoughts on gender inclusivity," and P20 highlighted the importance of accountability through stakeholder engagement.

These findings align with research by Tate and Page (2018) and Pronin and Roberts (2021), who emphasize that consistent policies, training, and inclusive stakeholder involvement foster a culture of equality and reduce gender bias in academic settings.

Discussion
This study set out to assess the role of gender inclusive language in promoting the representation of women in leadership positions across HEIs in Kaduna State. The findings reveal a crucial interplay between institutional language practices, cultural perceptions of leadership, and gender representation. While the job description, appointment and promotion documents remains neutral of gendered language, there is paucity in general awareness of gender inclusive language among staff and administrators, the actual implementation of such language remains inconsistent and largely superficial.

One of the key findings from the interviews with female staff revealed that many perceive institutional language as a barrier to career progression. While some institutions have begun integrating more inclusive language (e.g., "chairperson" to refer to every candidates), these changes are often not accompanied by broader gender sensitive policies or leadership development initiatives targeting women. This disconnect highlights a critical gap between linguistic inclusivity and structural reform.

Additionally, cultural and religious values prevalent in Kaduna State play a significant role in shaping both language use and leadership dynamics (Tate and Page, 2018). In many cases, participants reported resistance to gender inclusive reforms on the grounds of cultural appropriateness or religious doctrine (Pronin and Roberts, 2021). This finding points to the need for context specific strategies that engage with local norms while promoting equity and inclusivity.

Importantly, the study also reveals a positive correlation between institutions that actively adopt gender inclusive language and those with higher levels of female leadership representation. This suggests that inclusive language can function as both a symbolic and practical mechanism for change, creating a discursive space where women's leadership is normalized and encouraged (Safeer et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings indicate that while gender inclusive language alone cannot dismantle structural gender inequality, it is a vital component of broader

institutional efforts toward gender equity (*Correa et al., 2025*). As such, higher education institutions in Kaduna State must actively promote strategies to encourage the representation of women into leadership positions irrespective of the language used, these could be in the form of staff trainings, mentoring, policy revision, and public accountability mechanisms that ensure representation and voice for women at all levels of leadership.

Conclusion
The study concludes that language holds a pivotal influence in shaping gender equity within HEIs in Kaduna State. Notably, the research found that institutional language is largely neutral, with no significant use of masculine-coded or explicitly gendered terms, indicating that language itself does not obstruct gender-inclusive leadership. Furthermore, the study reveals strong stakeholder support for adopting gender-inclusive language, emphasizing its potential to cultivate a transparent, equitable, and welcoming institutional culture. This environment not only encourages diverse leadership applications but also significantly enhances the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women. Moreover, the findings highlight that inclusive language actively challenges entrenched gender norms and signals a genuine commitment to diversity, which in turn fosters a deeper sense of belonging and empowerment among female leaders. In addition, the study concludes that the successful implementation of gender-inclusive language policies depends on practical actions such as continuous training, clear and adaptable guidelines, collaboration with key stakeholders, and regular policy evaluations each serving as essential pillars for building a more inclusive academic atmosphere.

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