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Gender Equality in Higher Education: Access, Participation, and Academic Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality in higher education is increasingly recognized as a strategic component of sustainable development, encompassing dimensions of access, participation, and academic leadership. This article examines the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for advancing gender equality in universities. Drawing on more than 50 scholarly articles and policy reports from the past decade, retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, the literature spans both Global North and South contexts, with diverse methodologies quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method. The systematic selection process applied inclusion criteria such as peer-reviewed status and topical relevance. A narrative synthesis approach was used to extract key themes, including access, participation, structural barriers, and policy measures. While women's access to higher education has improved, significant disparities persist, especially in STEM disciplines and academic leadership. Barriers such as gender bias, unequal domestic responsibilities, and limited institutional support remain pervasive. Various interventions including gender training, mentoring, and policy reforms have shown mixed effectiveness across contexts. The findings underscore the importance of multidimensional strategies involving stakeholders, embedding gender equity into institutional culture, and enhancing policy monitoring systems. This review provides evidence-based insights and practical recommendations to foster more inclusive and equitable higher education environments globally.

1. Introduction

Gender equality in higher education has emerged as a global concern that has garnered increasing attention over the past few decades, with numerous studies emphasizing the importance of equitable access, equal participation, and female representation in academic leadership (Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024). Although notable progress has been made, structural, cultural, and

institutional barriers continue to restrict women's full participation in higher education and limit their advancement into leadership positions (Grzelec, 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Saenz et al., 2025).

In terms of access, factors such as socio-economic status, prevailing social norms, and public policy significantly influence women's opportunities to enter higher education (Alam et al., 2024; Mia et al., 2024; Ombolo Messo et al., 2024). Efforts to improve access have included affirmative policies and scholarship programs; however, gender gaps persist, especially in STEM fields (Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Sharif et al., 2024; Singh Bahi & Paavola, 2024).

Women's participation in higher education is frequently shaped by embedded gender biases within curricula, pedagogical approaches, and societal expectations (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Moreover, challenges such as the dual burden of academic responsibilities and domestic duties often hinder women's full engagement (Broström et al., 2024; Canestrini et al., 2025; Grzelec, 2024). Research indicates that integrating gender equality into teaching and learning processes can foster critical awareness and empower women (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; de Villarreal & Scotton, 2024; Kumlu, 2024).

In the realm of academic leadership, women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in senior roles such as professors, deans, and rectors (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024). Key obstacles include the "glass ceiling," gender stereotypes, and insufficient institutional support, which impede women's advancement to top leadership positions (Grant & Willetts, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Cross-national studies further highlight the influence of cultural contexts and social norms on the extent to which gender equality is realized in higher education institutions (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Saenz et al., 2025).

Various strategies have been adopted to promote gender equality, including gender equality certification schemes, gender mainstreaming in university policies, and gender sensitivity training for academic staff (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Nevertheless, both organizational and individual resistance to gender-related reforms remains a persistent challenge (Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

At the global level, there is significant variation in the attainment of gender equality in higher education. In some developed countries such as Sweden and Spain, gender equality policies are more advanced and supported by robust legal frameworks (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024). Conversely, in developing countries, gender equality issues are often intertwined with structural challenges such as poverty, conflict, and limited access to educational resources (Alam et al., 2024; Ombolo Messo et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2024).

This literature review aims to analyze existing research findings on women's access, participation, and academic leadership in higher education. By reviewing

more than 50 academic articles and policy reports from diverse national contexts, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, intervention strategies, and policy recommendations relevant to advancing gender equality in higher education institutions. It is expected that the review will contribute to the development of more inclusive and gender-equitable practices and policies in the future.

2. Methodology

This study employs a literature review methodology to examine gender equality in higher education, focusing specifically on issues of access, participation, and academic leadership. The literature search was conducted systematically by accessing major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, which are widely recognized in prior research on gender and higher education (Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024; Saenz et al., 2025).

Keywords used in the search included “*gender equality*,” “*higher education*,” “*academic leadership*,” “*access*,” and “*participation*” (Alam et al., 2024; Mia et al., 2024; Ombolo Messo et al., 2024). The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles published within the past ten years, written in English or other internationally recognized languages, and directly relevant to the core themes of the review (Broström et al., 2024; Canestrini et al., 2025; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Rguibi et al., 2025). Articles consisting solely of opinion pieces or lacking formal academic review processes were excluded from the analysis (Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024).

The selection process began with the identification of titles and abstracts, followed by a full-text review of articles meeting the initial criteria (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; de Villarreal & Scotton, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024). To ensure diversity of perspectives, articles were selected from a range of countries and academic disciplines, encompassing both Global North and Global South contexts (Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Sharif et al., 2024; Singh Bahi & Paavola, 2024). A narrative synthesis approach was adopted, which allowed for the integration of findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025).

During the analysis phase, the literature was coded according to key thematic categories such as access, participation, structural barriers, affirmative policies, and women's academic leadership (Rahmania et al., 2025; Sarkki et al., 2024; Widyawati et al., 2024). The validity of the synthesis was maintained through comparative analysis across relevant studies, identifying both commonalities and divergences in the findings (Fisher et al., 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025).

In total, 50 articles that met the inclusion criteria were selected for in-depth analysis. These studies addressed topics such as intervention strategies, organizational

resistance, and policy evaluation (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Broström et al., 2024; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Rahmania et al., 2025; Tzanakou et al., 2025). This methodological approach facilitated the identification of existing research gaps and the formulation of evidence-based recommendations to support gender equality policy reforms in higher education (Alam et al., 2024; Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024).

3. Result and Discussion

The results of the research are based on 50 academic articles, the results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, intervention strategies, and relevant policy recommendations to advance gender equality in higher education institutions, more details can be seen in table 1 and Figure 1 below:

Tabel 1. Literature Review Results

Aspects	Key Findings	Reference
Access to Higher Education	Access for women in higher education has significantly improved over the past decades. However, gender disparities remain particularly pronounced in STEM fields and in developing countries. Socio-economic barriers, cultural norms, and uneven educational policies continue to shape the opportunities available to women, often limiting their access to specific disciplines and institutions.	(Alam et al., 2024; Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Mia et al., 2024; Ombolo Messono et al., 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024; Rguibi et al., 2025; Saenz et al., 2025)
Academic Participation	While female participation in higher education is relatively high, it remains uneven across disciplines. Gender bias embedded in curricula and pedagogy, coupled with domestic responsibilities and a lack of academic support structures, constitute primary barriers to full and equitable participation for women students and scholars.	(Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Broström et al., 2024; Canestrini et al., 2025; de Villarreal & Scotton, 2024; Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Singh Bahi & Paavola, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025)
Academic Leadership	Women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles, such as deans, rectors, and full professors. Persistent barriers include gender stereotypes, the "glass ceiling" phenomenon, the scarcity of female mentors, and entrenched masculine organizational cultures, all of which hinder career advancement for women in academia.	(Fisher et al., 2024; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Rahmania et al., 2025; Sarkki et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025; Widyawati et al., 2024)
Interventions and Programs	Various institutional efforts including affirmative action policies, gender equality certifications, gender sensitivity training, and mentoring programs for women have shown	(Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Han, 2025; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Kumlu, 2024; Otieno &

Global Comparisons	<p>positive impacts. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions varies significantly across institutions and national contexts, suggesting the need for context-specific adaptations and sustained implementation.</p> <p>A marked contrast exists between gender equality achievements in developed and developing countries. Nations such as Sweden and Spain demonstrate advanced progress due to strong legal and policy frameworks supporting gender equity. In contrast, developing countries face compounded challenges including patriarchal norms, socio-political conflicts, and poverty, which hinder systematic improvements.</p>	<p>(Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024; Saenz et al., 2025; Tzanakou et al., 2025)</p> <p>(Alam et al., 2024; Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Mia et al., 2024; Nasrin & Bunker, 2024; Ombolo Messono et al., 2024; Rguibi et al., 2025; Sharif et al., 2024; Singh Bahi & Paavola, 2024)</p>
Challenges and Opportunities	<p>Organizational and cultural resistance remains a significant challenge to achieving gender equality in higher education. However, emerging opportunities such as strengthened regulatory frameworks, increased engagement of male allies, and the adoption of evidence-based approaches offer transformative potential for sustainable progress.</p>	<p>(Grant & Willetts, 2024; Han, 2025; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Kumlu, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024; Saenz et al., 2025; Tzanakou et al., 2025)</p>

Network Diagram of Articles and Aspects in the Literature Review

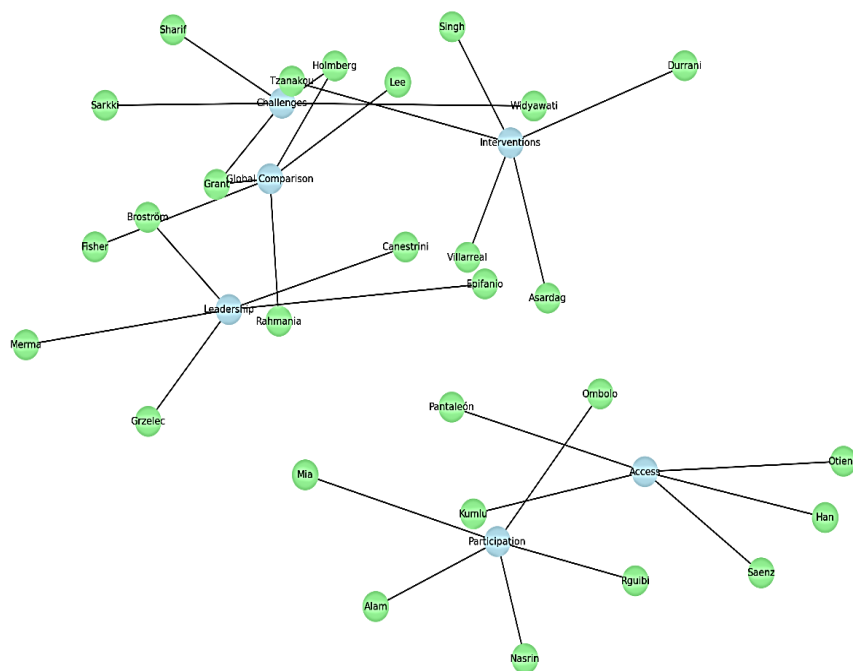


Figure 1. Network Diagram of Articles and Aspects in the Literature Review

Access to Higher Education

Multiple studies highlight persistent gender disparities in access to higher education, particularly in STEM disciplines (Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Mia et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2024). Socio-economic status, cultural norms, and national education policies play pivotal roles in either facilitating or restricting women's access to tertiary education (Alam et al., 2024; Nasrin & Bunker, 2024; Ombolo Messono et al., 2024). Interventions such as affirmative scholarships, mentoring programs, and awareness campaigns have proven effective in expanding access, yet significant challenges remain, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024; Saenz et al., 2025).

Academic Participation

Despite achieving parity or even surpassing men in overall student enrollment in some regions, women's participation remains unevenly distributed across academic disciplines (Broström et al., 2024; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024). Women are predominantly concentrated in humanities and social sciences, whereas men dominate STEM fields (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Broström et al., 2024; de Villarreal & Scotton, 2024). Structural barriers such as gender bias, inflexible academic structures, and the dual burden of household responsibilities continue to limit women's full academic engagement (Grant & Willetts, 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

Academic Leadership

Female representation in academic leadership roles such as full professors, deans, and university rectors remains critically low (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Key constraints include entrenched gender stereotypes, lack of female mentors, and deeply rooted masculine organizational cultures (Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024). Some institutions have introduced gender-focused leadership training, gender equality certifications, and gender mainstreaming policies, though outcomes vary significantly depending on institutional and cultural context (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

Global Comparison

Cross-national comparisons reveal substantial variation in gender equality outcomes within higher education. Countries such as Sweden and Spain have made notable progress, largely due to progressive gender policies supported by robust legal and institutional frameworks (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024). In contrast, countries across Asia and Africa continue to face compounded challenges, including patriarchal norms, economic hardship, and political instability, which hinder the advancement of women in academia (Alam et al., 2024; Ombolo Messono et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2024).

Impact of Intervention Programs

Various gender equality interventions including gender sensitivity training, women's leadership networks, and institutional recognition policies have shown positive outcomes (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Nevertheless, their effectiveness remains inconsistent, often hampered by institutional inertia and resistance to change. Several studies emphasize that organizational resistance remains a significant impediment to implementing gender-transformative policies (Grant & Willetts, 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite progress in access and participation, significant challenges persist, particularly those rooted in structural and cultural resistance (Han, 2025; Lee & Jung, 2024; Saenz et al., 2025). However, rising awareness of gender disparities and stronger international policy frameworks present new opportunities for transformative change in higher education institutions (Kumlu, 2024; Otieno & Makabira, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024). The path forward will require coordinated efforts across institutional, national, and international levels to build more inclusive and gender-equitable academic environments.

Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that, despite significant progress in expanding women's access to higher education, persistent disparities remain particularly in STEM disciplines and academic leadership roles (Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024). Socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and public policy significantly influence patterns of access and participation among women (Mia et al., 2024; Ombolo Messo et al., 2024). Research has shown that affirmative programs such as scholarships, mentoring, and gender awareness training have improved women's participation; however, the sustainability of these efforts is often undermined by cultural and institutional resistance (Durrani & Kataeva, 2025; Sharif et al., 2024; Singh Bahi & Paavola, 2024).

In terms of academic participation, structural barriers such as gender stereotypes, domestic responsibilities, and a lack of social support continue to constrain women's contributions (Broström et al., 2024; Canestrini et al., 2025; Grzelec, 2024). Several studies underscore the importance of gender-sensitive curriculum reform and capacity-building among academic staff to create inclusive learning environments (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025).

In academic leadership, women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in senior roles such as dean, rector, and full professor (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Merma-Molina et al., 2024). Persistent barriers include the "glass ceiling," masculine leadership stereotypes, and limited access to professional networks (Grant & Willetts, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Tzanakou et al.,

2025). Cross-national studies show that gender equality achievements vary widely, with developed countries generally being more progressive due to supportive legal frameworks, while developing countries face more complex structural challenges (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Saenz et al., 2025).

A range of initiatives such as gender equality certification, awareness training, and gender mainstreaming in institutional policies have been implemented with varied results (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025). Nonetheless, both organizational and individual resistance to change continues to pose a major obstacle (Grant & Willetts, 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024). Some studies also emphasize the critical role of engaging men as strategic allies in gender equality initiatives to promote sustainable institutional transformation (Han, 2025; Kumlu, 2024; Pantaleón et al., 2024).

The discussion further reveals regional disparities in gender equality achievements. Northern European countries such as Sweden and Finland demonstrate success through progressive family policies and state support (Epifanio & Calvo-Iglesias, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024). In contrast, countries in Asia and Africa face entrenched challenges, including patriarchal norms, conflict, and poverty, which further exacerbate gender inequality (Alam et al., 2024; Ombolo Messo et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2024). Context-sensitive interventions have been identified as more effective in advancing gender equality in these regions (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025).

The policy implications emerging from this review highlight the need to strengthen affirmative action, promote institutional reforms, and implement more rigorous monitoring of gender equality policy execution (Rahmania et al., 2025; Sarkki et al., 2024; Widyawati et al., 2024). Moreover, there is a need to develop evidence-based strategies aimed at addressing gender resistance at both individual and organizational levels (Fisher et al., 2024; Grzelec, 2024; Holmberg & Alvinus, 2024).

Overall, this discussion emphasizes that gender equality in higher education is not solely an issue of access but also concerns meaningful participation and representation in leadership. A comprehensive approach is required one that integrates cultural change, institutional reform, and individual capacity-building to achieve sustainable transformation (Asardag & Komorowski, 2025; Grant & Willetts, 2024; Lee & Jung, 2024; Tzanakou et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion

Gender equality in higher education remains a critical issue encompassing the dimensions of access, participation, and academic leadership. While substantial progress has been made in expanding women's access to higher education, significant challenges persist particularly concerning uneven participation across disciplines and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Social, economic, cultural, and structural barriers continue to hinder progress, despite

various intervention efforts such as affirmative policies, gender awareness training, and institutional reforms, which have yielded mixed results across different contexts.

Achieving sustainable transformation requires a comprehensive approach that engages all stakeholders, promotes cultural change, and strengthens monitoring and evaluation systems for gender equality policies within academic environments. A coordinated and evidence-based strategy is essential to foster a more inclusive and equitable higher education system for current and future generations.

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