

# An Intersectional Approach: Unpacking Gender Inequality in Kenyan Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Much of the existing literature on gender in Africa has represented women as a homogeneous group, thereby neglecting the diverse identities among African women. This limitation constrains our understanding of the persistent gender inequality in academia. This conceptual paper investigates the intersection of gender and ethnicity among women, with a particular focus on issues of gender inequality within Kenyan higher education institutions. The study employs a qualitative intersectional framework to gather and interpret secondary data. The secondary data were identified through a scoping review and analysed using qualitative inductive thematic analysis. An intersectional methodological framework was utilised to examine the complex and multifaceted challenges that Kenyan women encounter, attributable to their ethnicity and gender, in accessing higher education. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the inequities present in Kenyan higher education. The findings indicate that the intersection of ethnicity and gender contributes to disparities in literacy and early education, student admissions, programme enrolment, and the recruitment and promotion of academic staff in Kenyan universities. The results

demonstrate that gender inequality in academia is intricately linked to ethnic hierarchies and other social divisions. By shifting from a solely gender-focused lens to an intersectional decolonial perspective, this study enriches the scholarship on gender in African academia. It underscores the necessity for contextually relevant reforms aimed at challenging patriarchal norms and ethnic biases, thereby fostering a more equitable and inclusive environment within Kenyan universities.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, diversity and equity, inclusion, gender studies, higher education, organisation sustainability, sustainable development goals.

## 1. Introduction

Women's representation in higher education in Kenya remains low, with evidence indicating significant under-representation, particularly in universities (Idahosa, 2021). This gender disparity reflects broader global inequalities and historical patterns of exclusion within academia (Bennett, 2002). Despite efforts by Kenyan universities to promote diversity in leadership, women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic positions (Barkan & Chege, 1989). In Kenya, male students outnumber female students, and senior academic roles are predominantly held by men, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms in professional settings (Bennett, 2002). Gender studies in Africa should consider the diversity of African women's experiences while recognising their shared struggles against patriarchal oppression. However, African women, particularly Kenyan women in this study, are frequently treated as a homogeneous group, despite their differing cultural, religious, and ethnic identities. An intersectional perspective highlights these differences and illustrates how multiple forms of discrimination, such as gender bias and ethnic prejudice, can concurrently limit Kenyan women's opportunities in academia (Afshar & Maynard, 1994).

Despite some progress, Kenyan women continue to encounter significant barriers to academic advancement, including restrictive cultural norms, discriminatory practices within institutions, and

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limited access to education and leadership opportunities (Odhiambo, 2011; Onsongo, 2006). The gender disparities in higher education are deeply rooted in historical and socio-political contexts, including the colonial legacy, nationalist movements, and government policies that shape resource distribution and institutional cultures (Bennett, 2002). Kenyan universities reflect the broader inequalities perpetuated by colonial-era structures and traditional hierarchies (Kamau et al., 2023). Although there are assertions of gender neutrality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, often encountering both subtle and overt discrimination that intersects with ethnic and patriarchal power dynamics (Odhiambo, 2011; Taaliu, 2017). While there have been incremental gains, setbacks and resistance continue to impede women's opportunities for leadership (Kamau et al., 2023).

The dynamics of ethnicity in Kenya significantly influence gendered outcomes. As discussed below, colonial policies fostered ethnic stratification, and post-colonial politics have, at times, intensified ethnic patronage within public institutions. African gender theorists contend that Eurocentric feminist frameworks may overlook local power relations. For example, colonial rule in Africa imposed Western concepts of gender hierarchy onto indigenous societies, reshaping social roles in manners that often subordinated women (Oyewumi, 1997). This imposition resulted in a gendered colonial legacy: early mission and government schools prioritised the education of boys, particularly from certain ethnic groups, leading to persistent disparities today (Bennett, 2021). The intersection of ethnicity and gender warrants further exploration to fully capture the extent of discrimination within Kenyan academia. Therefore, any meaningful investigation into gender inequality in Kenyan universities should adopt an intersectional lens that considers ethnic, regional, and class contexts. This study employs an intersectional feminist framework to critically analyse how gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers intersect in Kenyan higher education. By doing so, it aims to reveal the hidden dimensions of inequality and inform more effective, culturally grounded interventions. Based on this, the study answered the following question:

- *To what extent does the intersection of gender and ethnicity contribute to gender inequality among female academics in higher education institutions in Kenya?*

### **1.1 Ethnicity in Kenyan universities**

Kenya's colonial history continues to exert a profound influence on its socio-political and institutional landscape in the post-independence era. Under British colonial rule until 1963, the administration implemented a deliberate strategy of ethnic division, creating eight provinces that largely mirrored ethnolinguistic boundaries. This "divide and rule" approach entrenched ethnic fragmentation, institutionalised the recognition of 42 distinct ethnic groups, and exacerbated interethnic competition for access to power and resources (Taaliu, 2017). Following independence, ethnic identity remained a dominant force in political life and public institutions. The emergence of the so-called "Big Six Syndrome" among ethnic groups – the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kamba, Kalenjin, and Kisii – symbolised ethnic dominance in key state sectors, including higher education (Taaliu, 2017). Historically, ethnic favouritism has shaped the geographical distribution of universities, the recruitment of academic staff, and student admissions (Barkan & Chege, 1989). Regions that benefitted from colonial infrastructure, such as the Central Province, had earlier access to educational institutions, while peripheral regions, such as the former North Eastern Province, remained marginalised. This historical unevenness established a foundation for enduring disparities in university representation along ethnic lines. In response to the ethnic violence that erupted during the 2007/2008 post-election crisis, the Kenyan government enacted the National Cohesion and Integration Act (NCICA) in 2008, which established the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). The NCIC was tasked with promoting national unity and mitigating ethnic discrimination. Similarly, the 2010 Constitution introduced reforms aimed at reducing ethnic exclusion through devolved governance, establishing 47 counties, and implementing regulations to limit the over-representation of any single ethnic group in public institutions, including universities, to no more than one-third of the personnel.

Despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks, ethnic considerations continue to significantly influence the composition and culture of public universities. Many institutions exhibit patterns in which senior administrative and academic positions are disproportionately held by individuals from the dominant local ethnic group or those aligned with the national political elite (Mwiria et al., 2007). This suggests that informal ethnic networks and patronage systems remain pervasive, often undermining formal merit-based procedures. Additionally, ethnic bias intersects with gender-based inequalities, creating heightened barriers for women from minority ethnic communities. For instance, female academics who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group within a particular institution may find themselves excluded from influential patronage networks. This exclusion curtails their opportunities for recruitment, promotion, and leadership roles. The combined effects of ethnic favouritism and patriarchy are central to this analysis. The study adopts an intersectionality framework to investigate these complex forms of exclusion. Intersectionality facilitates an examination of how ethnic identity, alongside regional, cultural, and institutional contexts, shapes women's lived experiences in academia. By emphasising ethnicity as a critical factor in differentiating among Kenyan women, this analysis moves beyond a solely "gender lens" and seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of structural inequities in Kenyan higher education.

## **1.2 Gender inequality in Kenyan universities**

Gender inequality in Kenyan higher education is deeply rooted in the country's colonial history and is perpetuated by intersecting structural, cultural, and institutional factors. British authorities and missionary institutions introduced colonial education policies in the 19th and early 20th centuries that primarily prioritised male education, often relegating women to domestic instruction when they were included at all. This created a gendered educational trajectory for early university graduates, who were almost exclusively male, thereby shaping the post-colonial academic landscape in Kenya (Kanake, 1997). Kenyan education is characterised by significant gender inequality, sustained by complex structural and historical factors that continue to impact women's access to and careers within higher education institutions (Amunga et al., 2010). These historical legacies continue to influence gender disparities in contemporary academia. Persistent practices rooted in the past hinder women's access to senior academic and leadership roles in Kenyan universities (Chacha, 2021). Women remain underrepresented at all levels of the university hierarchy, from student enrolment to senior academic and leadership positions (Onsongo, 2006; Odhiambo, 2011). Structural inequalities are exacerbated by established socio-cultural norms that often confine women to the domestic sphere, limiting their full participation in academic careers (Onsongo, 2002). Academic women frequently face disproportionate expectations regarding marriage, childcare, and family responsibilities, which can conflict with the demands of academic productivity and leadership.

These gender norms are neither static nor exclusively indigenous; they have been reinforced by the interaction of local patriarchal traditions and imported Western ideologies. Scott (2007) asserts that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships and a primary way of signifying power relations," which aptly describes the situation in Kenyan universities, where institutional power is predominantly held by men. Men occupy senior academic and administrative positions, including vice-chancellors, deans, and full professors, while women are primarily found in junior and support roles. This reinforces the gendered hierarchies of authority and status.

The institutional gendering in Kenyan universities can be partly traced back to the colonial legacy that imposed Victorian gender ideologies on existing indigenous systems. Although Oyewumi (1997) critiques the universalisation of Western gender constructs, arguing that many precolonial African societies were organised by lineage or age rather than gender, the colonial encounter in Kenya imposed British patriarchal structures on local institutions. The result is a hybridised patriarchy that merges local and colonial concepts of male dominance within academia. Post-independence developments have done little to disrupt these entrenched structures. Nation-building discourses

have favoured male leadership, and until the late twentieth century, few policies actively promoted women's inclusion in higher education. Even with the introduction of affirmative action and gender mainstreaming policies in the early 2000s, progress has remained uneven (Onsongo, 2009). Institutional cultures continue to resist change, with subtle forms of sexism, such as scepticism towards women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and disproportionate scrutiny of women's qualifications, still prevalent (Morley, 2005).

Qualitative research has elucidated the performative nature of gender within academia. For instance, Odhiambo (2011) documents the experiences of Kenyan female academics who encounter marginalisation, including exclusion from leadership discussions and being undermined by male colleagues. These experiences resonate with Butler's (1990) concept of gender as performative, suggesting that gender is reiterated through societal norms and behaviours rather than being biologically fixed. Research indicates that Kenyan female academics earn less than their male counterparts (Limo, 2012), highlighting significant gender inequality and discrimination within Kenyan universities (Mulongo, 2013). In the academic sphere, expectations of authoritative masculinity, characterised by assertiveness, self-promotion, and institutional visibility, are often rewarded. In contrast, women are typically expected to assume caregiving roles, such as mentoring or providing administrative support, which are undervalued in promotion metrics. Women who adhere to traditional notions of femininity may be perceived as lacking authority, while those who assert themselves may face backlash for deviating from normative gender expectations. The gender inequality observed in Kenyan universities cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it results from a complex and intersecting set of influences. Factors such as colonial legacy, patriarchal cultural norms, and resistant institutional structures all contribute to the perpetuation of male-dominated academic environments. Addressing these disparities necessitates an intersectional approach that considers how gender intersects with other social categories, such as ethnicity, class, and geographic location. For example, a woman from a pastoralist ethnic minority may encounter compounded disadvantages distinct from those of her urban middle-class counterparts. The following sections will present a theoretical framework to unpack these complexities and analyse how intersectional inequalities manifest in key areas of Kenyan academic life.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality, a concept first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, emerged from critiques concerning the marginalisation of Black women's experiences within feminist and antiracist discourses (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (2021) argued that Black women in the United States became invisible when feminist movements focused solely on gender, and antiracist movements concentrated only on race. The primary issue is that the experiences of African American women cannot be fully understood through a single-axis lens, whether that focus is on race or gender. This narrow perspective obscures the complex nature of their marginalisation. As noted, these frameworks "conceal the other dimensions" of the oppression individuals face at the intersections of multiple identities. Intersectionality has since evolved into a crucial analytical tool for examining the convergence of various social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and region, and how they influence individuals' access to resources and power (Cole, 2020). Intersectionality functions as a matrix of domination that is particularly relevant, as it illustrates how race, class, gender, and other hierarchies shape social relations and institutional practices (Collins, 2000). An intersectional framework aligns with the principles outlined by Dill and Zambrana (2009), emphasising the importance of centring lived experiences, questioning fixed identity categories, and connecting individual experiences to broader power structures. This approach transcends individualistic explanations, such as the assertion that "she did not work hard enough," and critiques institutional cultures that systematically disadvantage certain groups. It also avoids prioritising one dimension of inequality over others, instead highlighting how gender-based disadvantages are influenced by, and can sometimes be overshadowed by, ethnic or class-based exclusions.

Crenshaw (1992, 2023) later elucidated that structural, political, and representational intersectionality enhances the analytical approach. Structural intersectionality examines how institutional systems, such as labour markets, laws, and academic policies, compound challenges for individuals with multiple marginalised identities. For instance, a female academic from a marginalised ethnic group may encounter additional hurdles in hiring or promotion due to entrenched patronage systems, inadequate institutional support, or biased assumptions. Political intersectionality emphasises how individuals at the intersection of multiple disadvantaged identities often fall through the cracks of policymaking. In Kenyan academia, for example, initiatives aimed at gender equity may inadvertently marginalise women from ethnic minority backgrounds, while programmes designed for ethnic inclusion might not adequately address the unique challenges faced by these women. Representational intersectionality examines cultural imagery and stereotypes, such as the belief that minority women are less competent in STEM disciplines. These perceptions reinforce both structural and political exclusions.

An intersectionality framework emphasises that systemic inequalities are not merely additive but interrelated, creating distinct forms of disadvantage. In the Kenyan context, intersectionality is particularly significant for comprehending the lived experiences of women whose social positions are influenced by intersecting identities. Understanding intersectionality is inherently tied to the specific social, historical, and cultural contexts within which Kenyan women navigate their daily lives. By focusing on these experiences, this study elucidates how power operates through complex hierarchies within groups traditionally regarded as homogeneous. Kenyan women who belong to multiple marginalised groups, such as minority ethnic communities, rural populations, or individuals with disabilities, frequently encounter exclusion from both formal and informal opportunities. The objective of adopting an intersectional framework is not solely to diagnose issues but also to instigate transformation. By uncovering the multidimensional nature of inequality in Kenyan academia, intersectionality facilitates the development of more comprehensive, context-sensitive interventions. It challenges simplistic policy responses and advocates for justice-oriented frameworks that account for the full complexity of women's experiences in higher education institutions. This study also examines the representations of these issues in the media, institutional discourse, and policy rhetoric. Importantly, intersectionality extends beyond individual identity markers; it necessitates a deeper understanding of the broader systems of power that shape the identities of Kenyan women.

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, an intersectionality theory informed both the methodology (the processes by which evidence was gathered and interpreted) and the analysis (the explanations of observed patterns). Intersectionality serves as the conceptual and methodological foundation for examining the complex, layered disadvantages present in academia. By applying this qualitative intersectionality framework, we conceptualise Kenyan higher education as a matrix in which patriarchy, ethnic hegemony, class stratification, and regional inequalities intersect, resulting in systemic exclusions. Employing an intersectional lens necessitates a critical examination of institutional policies, organisational practices, and statistical data while remaining attuned to the interlocking systems of oppression and privilege. For example, when analysing academic recruitment, it is imperative to investigate whether women from specific ethnic groups are disproportionately confined to junior positions. Similarly, when reviewing enrolment patterns, it is crucial to ascertain whether gender gaps are exacerbated among students from historically marginalised regions. This qualitative intersectionality approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration and enriched our understanding of gender inequality within Kenyan higher education institutions.

Qualitative methods are utilised because they align with conceptual research, which aims to establish an initial understanding using secondary data. Secondary data refers to information collected by

individuals other than the investigator and encompasses sources such as official documents, scholarly articles, and government statistics (Genga, 2025). The utilisation of existing secondary data offers advantages over the collection of new information, which can often be resource-intensive (Babalola & Genga, 2024). Given the extensive scope of this investigation, it was deemed appropriate to utilise secondary data from reliable sources to provide the necessary context for addressing the research objective and answering the research question. A qualitative intersectional approach was selected to complement this conceptual research, which focuses on developing theoretical insights through the analysis of secondary data (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Genga, 2025). This study employed a conceptual qualitative research framework to synthesise existing literature, policy reports, and statistical data through an intersectionality lens. This approach generated a deeper understanding of gender inequity in Kenyan higher education by providing valuable insights into the underlying layers of oppression that shape women's experiences in Kenyan universities. Such a thorough exploration is essential for comprehending the gender inequality faced by women at the intersection of ethnicity and gender within Kenyan higher education institutions.

To address the research objective and answer the research question, a scoping review was conducted, which is an effective method for achieving specific research goals (Pollock et al., 2023; Genga & Babalola, 2026). This review incorporated a variety of evidence sources, including official reports from Kenyan universities, peer-reviewed research, and relevant policies. A snowball sampling technique was employed to explore the literature on the intersection of ethnicity and gender in Kenyan higher education institutions. To enhance reliability and minimise bias, official reports from Kenyan universities were combined with peer-reviewed articles. The study adhered to the JBI Scoping Review Methodology Group framework and followed best research practices for a careful data extraction process, as illustrated in Figure 1. Using the Google Scholar database for the scoping review, the findings are summarised in Table 1. The focus was on sources such as books, peer-reviewed journals, and grey literature, specifically targeting English-language materials published between 2000 and 2025 that discuss gender inequality in Kenyan higher education institutions. The selected keyword strategy included terms such as “gender inequality,” “gender,” “ethnicity,” “Kenya,” “Kenyan woman,” and “Kenyan higher education institutions” to refine search results.

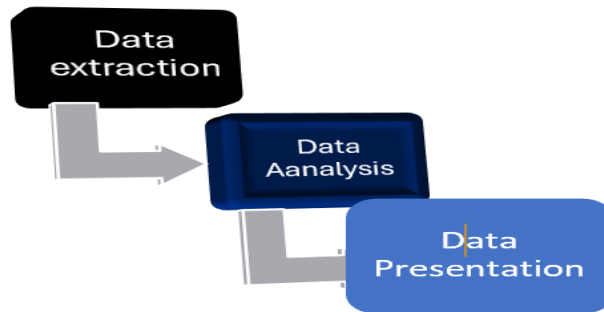


Figure 1: JBI scoping review methodology group framework

Table 1: Scoping review steps, activities and outcomes

Step/Activities	Outcome
1. Identify research question	To what extent does the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender contribute to gender inequality among women academics in higher education institutions in Kenya?
2. Identify key terms and use them to find pertinent studies	The following are the strings of key terms used for the primary search materials. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gender inequality in Kenyan Higher education institutions</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>2. Gender in Kenyan higher education institutions</li><li>3. Ethnicity in Kenyan higher education institutions</li><li>4. Kenyan women in higher education institutions.</li></ol>
3. Select the related studies	<p>The comprehensive literature review was conducted from a total of documents. The following is the breakdown</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. 3 Official reports</li><li>2. 18 Journal articles</li></ol>
4. Extract the major themes and constructs	<p>The major themes that were running throughout the available literature include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Literacy and early education: Assessing the difference of ethnicity and gender of literacy and early education by ethnicity and gender in Kenyan higher education institutions</li><li>2. Student admission: Exploring gender and ethnic imbalance of student admission in Kenyan higher education institutions</li><li>3. Academic programme enrolment: Investigating the ethnicity and gender segregation in academic programme enrolment in Kenyan higher education institutions</li><li>4. Staff recruitment and promotion: Addressing the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in staff recruitment and promotion in Kenyan higher education institutions.</li><li>5. Leadership: Examining the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender of academic leadership in Kenyan higher education institutions</li></ol>
5. Integrate, summarise and report the findings	<p>The study integrated and summarised the findings from step 4 and presented them in this research.</p>

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Given the nature and objectives of the study, a qualitative inductive thematic analysis was employed to examine the data, ensuring confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. This analysis utilised secondary data to address the research objectives and effectively answer the research question. Selected sources from the scoping review were examined to support this purpose. The qualitative inductive thematic analysis of pre-existing data provided insights into gender inequality, with a focus on the intersection of ethnicity and gender as experienced by Kenyan women in higher education institutions. The framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised to ensure dependability, transparency, confirmability, and credibility, as illustrated in Figure 2. The research objective guided the analysis of the intersectional dynamics of ethnicity and gender, concentrating on the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that arise at this intersection, while considering region and class as additional correlating variables. The data analysis situated gender within Kenya's historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, recognising that gender bias is not isolated but is rather influenced by ethnic hierarchies, regional disparities, and class dynamics. The identified themes, which specifically relate to Kenyan women in higher education institutions, are displayed in Figure 3. This qualitative intersectionality approach effectively explored the relationships between ethnicity, gender, and higher education institutions from a Kenyan perspective.



Figure 2: Braun & Clarke's inductive thematic analysis framework

In Step 1, we began by familiarising ourselves with the data from the scoping review, which included official reports and journal articles. Step 2 involved generalising the codes identified from the books and journals, followed by the identification of themes relevant to the research objective. This process required a thorough review of the official and journal articles to identify the main themes through the intersectionality lenses of gender and ethnicity. In Step 3, we reviewed these themes to ensure they addressed the research objective and subsequently defined them based on their relevance. After assessing and refining the themes, in step 4, we completed a write-up in step 5, as illustrated in Figure 3.

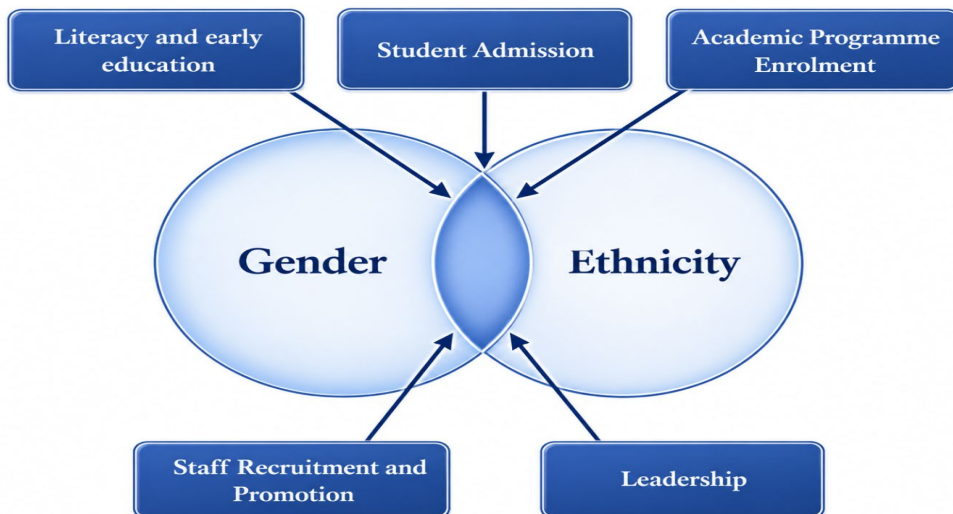


Figure 3: Themes of the Intersectionality of ethnicity and gender of Kenyan women in HEIs

In addressing the research objective, the inductive thematic analysis identified five main themes. The first theme is literacy and early education, highlighting the intersection of gender and ethnicity for Kenyan girls seeking to start off in education. The second and third themes focus on student admissions and academic program enrolment, illustrating how gender and ethnicity affect the admissions process and the programmes female students choose in Kenyan higher education institutions. The fourth theme, staff recruitment and promotion, examines the intersection of gender and ethnicity among female academics in these institutions. Finally, the fifth theme addresses leadership, shedding light on the intersection of gender and ethnicity regarding Kenyan female academics' access to leadership positions in Kenyan higher education.

## 4. Presentation of Results

A qualitative inductive thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data and address the research objectives, thereby effectively answering the research question, in accordance with the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis concentrated on the intersectional dynamics of ethnicity and gender, elucidating the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that emerge at this intersection, while also considering region as an additional correlating variable. The study contextualised gender within the historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks of Kenya, recognising that gender bias is not an isolated phenomenon but is influenced by ethnic hierarchies, regional disparities, and class dynamics. The data analysis identified five themes specifically related to Kenyan women in higher education institutions, which are discussed in the subsequent section.

### 4.1 Literacy and early education

The journey towards higher education in Kenya begins with access to basic education, where significant disparities by gender and ethnicity become evident early on and influence long-term patterns of under-representation. The data reveal that national illiteracy rates demonstrate a persistent gender gap, with Kenyan females being almost twice as likely to be illiterate as males; approximately 22% of women are illiterate, compared to 14% of men. Furthermore, 70% of illiterate people in Kenya are female, which results in women constituting 75% of the agricultural and unskilled labour workforce, effectively excluding them from higher education. However, these statistics mask deeper inequalities along gender, ethnic, and regional lines. The intersection of gender and ethnicity is depicted in Table 2, which shows that individuals from more advantaged ethnic groups (such as the Kikuyu or Luo, particularly in agriculturally rich or urbanised areas) have greater access to opportunities.

*Table 2: Literacy by ethnicity*

<b>Ethnic group</b>		<b>% Literacy Levels</b>
<b>Big Six Syndrome</b>	Kisii	83.4%
	Kikuyu	83.0%
	Luo	80.8%
	Kambaa	79.4%
	Luhya	71.9%
	Kalenjin	71.6%
<b>Other Ethnic groups</b>	Embu	82.4%
	Meru	68.2%
	Mijikenda	55.0%
	Maasai	31.8%
	Somali	20.9%
<b>Gender</b>	<b>% Illiteracy rates in Kenya</b>	
<b>Men</b>	14%	
<b>Women</b>	22%	

The analysis significantly reveals that Kenyan women are nearly twice as illiterate as Kenyan men. This study elucidates a complex relationship between gender, ethnicity, and geography in relation to literacy and early education for Kenyan women. Furthermore, it emphasises the critical importance of literacy and early education, demonstrating that disparities in higher education are rooted in early exclusions experienced by Kenyan women. Moreover, gender and ethnicity intersect: females from the BSS ethnic group have a higher chance of attaining higher education compared to those from minority groups. Women from historically marginalised ethnic groups and geographically isolated areas, such as Somalia, Borana, and Turkana, experience systemic barriers to accessing basic education, which in turn limits their opportunities for higher education. Conversely, women from more advantaged BSS ethnic groups, such as Kikuyu or Luo, enjoy greater educational opportunities. In contrast, women from ethnic minority groups in rural Kenya, located in

disadvantaged regions, often face oppression and exclusion due to the interplay of gender and ethnicity, which significantly affects their status in Kenyan society.

#### 4.2 Student admissions

The Kenyan Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS), previously known as the Joint Admissions Board, has established mechanisms to promote gender and regional equity. However, these efforts have not fully addressed the systemic imbalances that persist. According to the 2023/2024 report from the Commission for University Education, 327,492 male students (57%) were enrolled in Kenyan universities, while 246,247 female students (43%) were enrolled. This 16-percentage-point gender gap highlights patterns of exclusion that originate earlier in the educational pipeline.

*Table 3: Admission to the university by gender*

Gender	Student admission	% Student admissions
Male	327,492	57%
Female	246,247	43%
<b>Total of student admissions</b>	<b>573,739</b>	<b>100%</b>

An analysis that focuses solely on gender overlooks the important intersectional dynamics at play. Therefore, understanding intersectionality is essential for explaining access to higher education, as gender and ethnicity together influence who gains admission. Taaliu (2017) found that the majority of students in Kenyan higher education institutions belong to four main ethnic groups: Kalenjin, Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, and Luo, which collectively account for 72% of the student population. In contrast, the remaining ethnic groups make up only 28%. Table 4 indicates that approximately 94.8% of students in public universities come from just eight ethnic communities, known as the "Big Eight": Kikuyu (37.8%), Kamba (13%), Luo (12%), Luhya (10%), Kalenjin (8%), Meru (7%), Kisii (4%), and Embu (3%). These groups have historically benefited from political inclusion and infrastructure investment. Conversely, the remaining 5.2% of university students are drawn from more than 30 other ethnic groups, many of which have been historically marginalised. For example, while Kikuyu students represent about 37.8% of the university population, groups such as Turkana, Samburu, Pokot, and Somali are significantly underrepresented. Additionally, Table 4 shows that female students account for less than 40% of those admitted to Kenyan public universities.

*Table 4: Admission of students by ethnicity and gender*

Ethnic Group	% Representative in Universities
Kikuyu	37.8%
Kambaa	13%
Luo	12%
Luhya	10%
Kalenjin	8%
Kisii	4%
Meru	7%
Embu	3%
Total % of the eight ethnic groups	94.8%
The other 34 Ethnic groups	5.2%
Total % of students	100%
Female student admission	40%

The findings indicate that admissions disparities reflect the gendered nature of academic disciplines. Fields such as the arts, education, and the humanities tend to attract more women, while men are more prevalent in STEM and other high-demand areas. Historical data support this observation. For instance, in the 1998/1999 academic year, women represented only 9.1% of engineering students and

24.5% of medical students, compared to 37.7% in the arts and 38.3% in commerce, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: Female student enrolment**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>% Female enrolment</b>
Arts	34.9%
Commerce	38.3%
Agriculture	24.8%
Engineering	9.1%
Medicine	24.5% %
Sciences	21.4%

The analysis reveals that gender and ethnic imbalances in university admissions in Kenya reflect deeply entrenched patterns of intersectional exclusion. Consequently, Kenyan women from dominant BSS ethnic groups continue to enjoy the greatest access to educational opportunities. The findings strongly indicate that gender disparities in student admissions persist, adversely affecting overall admission numbers and access to prestigious, high-reward careers. Although women now represent nearly 50% of total university admissions in certain regions, their participation in technical fields remains below 30%. Furthermore, the data reveal further stratification: female student admissions from larger BSS ethnic groups tend to be over-represented in professional and technical disciplines, while women from smaller or marginalised groups often cluster in less resource-intensive, lower-prestige fields.

### 4.3 Academic programme enrolment

While the increase in female enrolment at Kenyan universities is a significant achievement, a closer look at the distribution reveals ongoing gender and ethnic stratification. Women are predominantly found in the humanities, education, and social sciences, whereas men are more likely to enrol in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), computing, and other technical fields. This pattern of gender segregation has been consistently documented over the years and remains deeply entrenched (Onsongo, 2006; CUE, 2024). For instance, in the late 1990s, women accounted for only 12% of science students and 2% of engineering students at the University of Nairobi. Recent statistics indicate that, nationwide, women make up only one-third of students in STEM programmes. In contrast, they dominate areas such as education, languages, nursing, teaching, and the arts, as illustrated in Tables 6 and 7. Several interrelated factors contribute to this programme-level gender stratification.

**Table 6: Student enrolment in language programmes in universities**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>% Female student enrolment</b>
Public Universities	37	63	67
Private Universities	38	62	33
<b>Total</b>			<b>100</b>

**Table 7: Student enrolment in education programmes in universities**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>% Female student enrolment</b>
Public Universities	48	52	69
Private Universities	48	52	31
<b>Total</b>			<b>100</b>

The analysis of Tables 7 and 8 reveals that Kenyan women are predominantly concentrated in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in languages and education. There has been an increase in the number of female students enrolling in private universities that primarily offer programmes in these fields. Notably, only one-third (33%) of female students are enrolled in STEM programmes

in Kenyan universities. This suggests that the increase in female enrolment has largely occurred through greater access to arts and social sciences programmes, particularly in private institutions, rather than through meaningful integration into STEM disciplines. This situation highlights the gender inequality that women encounter when accessing higher education in Kenya (Onsongo, 2006).

#### 4.4 Staff recruitment and promotion

Although the number of Kenyan women entering academia is increasing, their advancement remains significantly limited, resulting in a pronounced drop-off at senior levels. This issue is often referred to as a "leaky pipeline." According to CUE (2024) data, men make up approximately 65% of academic staff at both public and private universities, while women account for only 35%, as shown in Table 8. However, this overall figure conceals a more severe imbalance at higher ranks: 83% of full professors and 76% of associate professors are male, as indicated in Table 9. The gender gap narrows at entry-level positions, where lecturers comprise 65% male and 35% female, and tutorial fellows consist of 60% male and 40% female. This suggests that while women are entering the profession, a limited number are advancing to positions of influence.

*Table 8: Academic staffing in Kenyan universities by gender*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>No. of academic staff</b>	<b>% Academic staff</b>
Male	9,382	65%
Female	5,058	35%
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

The analysis clearly demonstrates that women academics in Kenya face unique challenges due to the combined influences of ethnicity and gender in recruitment and promotion processes. These challenges are shaped by a matrix of domination, where patriarchy, ethnic favouritism, and class privilege intersect to determine who advances within the academic field. As a result, a higher proportion of academic positions are held by men, reinforcing the gender gap in higher education institutions in Kenya.

*Table 9: Academic staff by gender and ranking*

<b>Rank</b>	<b>No. of Staff</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>% Academic staff</b>
Professor	475	83%	17%	3%
Associate Professor	817	76%	24%	6%
Senior Lecturer	1,987	69%	31%	14%
Lecturer	6,052	65%	35%	45%
Adjunct Academic Staff	379	56%	44%	2%
Visiting Academic Staff	875	74%	26%	1%
Management	97	69%	31%	1%
Research Fellow	187	59%	41%	1%
Research Assistant	73	71%	29%	1%
Tutorial Fellow	3,498	60%	40%	26%
<b>Total</b>				<b>100%</b>

According to the NCIC, 86.9% of academic staff in public universities belong to the ten largest ethnic groups, which together account for 96.3% of the workforce (NCIC, 2016). Table 10 indicates that the ethnic representation of academics in public universities is as follows: Kikuyu 23.6%, Luo 15.6%, Kalenjin 15.4%, Luhya 15.3%, Kisii 8.3%, Kamba 8.7%, Meru 4.5%, Mijikenda 2.3%, Embu 1.4%, and Taita 1.2%. Notably, the BSSs (presumably referring to a specific group) constitute 86.9% of the academic staff in Kenyan universities and 72.9% of the entire academic population. Furthermore,

women represent less than 30% of this academic workforce, indicating that academic appointments tend to favour men from politically dominant ethnic communities.

*Table 10: Academic staff representation of gender and ethnicity*

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>% Representation in Universities</b>
Kikuyu	23.6%
Luo	15.6%
Kalenjin	15.4%
Luhya	15.3%
Kambaa	8.7%
Kisii	8.3%
<b>Total Big Six Syndrome</b>	<b>86.9%</b>
Meru	4.5%
Mijikenda	2.3%
Embu	1.4%
Taita	1.2%
<b>Total other Ethnic groups</b>	<b>9.4%</b>
<b>Total % of 10 Ethnic groups</b>	<b>96.3%</b>
More than 32 Ethnic groups	3.7%
<b>Total % of Academic staff</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Women Academic Staff Representation</b>	<b>&lt;30%</b>

The analysis reveals that a significant gender gap persists in Kenyan higher education institutions. This gap is compounded by ethnic imbalances, resulting in overlapping forms of marginalisation for women in these universities. Additionally, the intersection of gender and ethnicity leads to favouritism in appointments and promotions, negatively impacting Kenyan women within higher education. Importantly, the findings indicate that this intersectionality contributes to a gender pyramid, where women are predominantly positioned at the base and largely absent from senior academic and leadership roles.

#### 4.5 Leadership

An ethnic audit conducted by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) revealed that 71.7% of vice-chancellors and principals at public universities in Kenya come from the country's politically dominant ethnic groups. This predominantly includes the Bantu and Nilotic communities, such as the Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Luhya, Meru, Kisii, and Kalenjin, as shown in Table 11. The audit also found that leadership appointments in these institutions are closely aligned with ethnic affiliations and political elites. Furthermore, the appointment of 13 new vice-chancellors in 2023 reinforced this trend: 11 of the appointees were men, while only 2 were women (Mito, 2023), as illustrated in Table 12.

*Table 11: Leadership by ethnicity and gender*

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>% In Kenyan Universities</b>
Luo	19.4%
Kambaa	12.9%
Kikuyu	12.9%
Luyha	12.9%
Kalenjin	6.5%
Kisii	6.5%
<b>Total Big Six Syndrome</b>	<b>71.1%</b>
Meru	12.9%
Mijikenda	9.6%
Somali	3.2%
Teso	3.2%

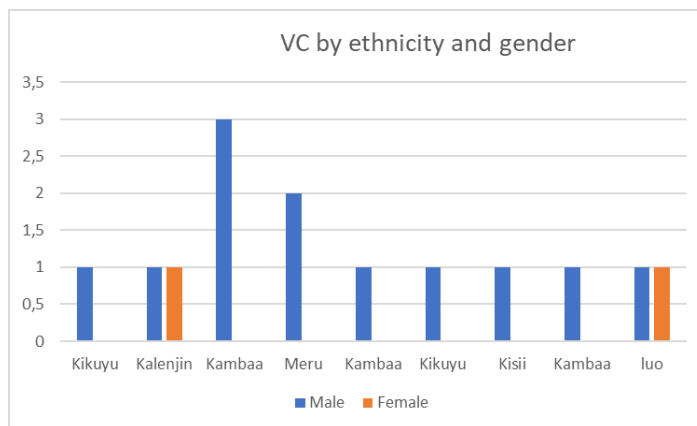
<b>Total</b>	<b>28.9%</b>
<b>Total % of leadership</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Women's representation</b>	<b>&lt;30%</b>

The analysis reveals that the intersection of ethnicity and gender significantly impacts top leadership in Kenyan higher education institutions. Most Vice Chancellors (VCs) tend to come from the regions where the universities are located, with very few exceptions. Additionally, these VCs and principals often belong to the dominant ethnic groups within their countries. This situation becomes further complicated when VCs are chosen from the local community (Taaliu, 2017). The gender and ethnic inequities intersect and reinforce one another in leadership roles at Kenyan higher education institutions, particularly in key positions such as Vice Chancellors (VCs), Deputy VCs, College Principals, and members of the University Council. This analysis emphasises that female candidates from dominant ethnic groups are more likely to attain leadership positions than those from ethnic minority groups, such as the Teso or Turkana.

*Table 12: New VCs by gender and ethnicity*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Male VC</b>	<b>Female VC</b>
Kikuyu	2	
Kalenjin	1	1
Kambaa	3	
Meru	2	
Kisii	2	
Kikuyu	1	
Luo	1	1
<b>Total number of VC</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>

The analysis reveals that political and socio-cultural factors significantly influence women's leadership in Kenyan higher education institutions across the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence periods. The relationship between the government and these institutions evolves with each new administration (Kamau et al., 2023). An examination of the appointment of 13 new Vice Chancellors (VCs) highlights the dynamic interplay between ethnicity and gender within Kenyan universities. Among the new appointments, 11 are male, and 2 are female. This analysis highlights the intersection of ethnicity and gender, indicating that female candidates from the Bantu, Cushitic, and Nilotic (BSS) ethnic groups are more likely to secure leadership positions than those from ethnic minority groups, such as the Teso or Turkana.



*Figure 4: VC by ethnicity and gender*

The analysis highlights the important role that the intersection of ethnicity and gender plays in the appointment to top leadership positions. In Kenyan public universities, individuals from the BSS ethnic groups hold 71.7% of Vice Chancellor and Principal roles. Additionally, the data shows that

Kenyan women occupy less than 20% of these positions and are more likely to be appointed if they belong to the BSS ethnic groups rather than any other minority ethnic group. The findings indicate that women from ethnic minority communities face compounded exclusion. The combination of gender and ethnicity creates significant barriers for Kenyan women from minority groups, such as the Rendile or Gabbra, making it more difficult for them to attain leadership positions in Kenyan higher education institutions compared to those from the dominant BSS ethnic groups.

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

Authorities at Kenyan universities often overlook that higher education institutions have historically been characterised by elitism and exclusion. Women in academia contend with a strong masculinist culture and face numerous gatekeepers within the hierarchical structures of university management. This situation persists despite official data highlighting these challenges. Although there has been some progress towards achieving diversity in higher education, Kenyan universities still struggle to fully incorporate women. Despite policy efforts and growing awareness, data from Kenyan higher education reveal ongoing inequities at the intersections of gender and ethnicity.

### **5.1 Literacy and early education**

The study found that the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity impacts the literacy and early education for Kenyan women, indicating that women from the BSS ethnic group have a higher likelihood of accessing higher education compared to women from ethnic minority groups, who often face significant oppression. This research highlights that the underlying causes are multifaceted: neglect of colonial-era infrastructure, persistent ethnic-regional inequalities, cultural norms favouring boys' education, early marriage practices, and post-colonial development imbalances, all of which continue to reinforce gender inequality for Kenyan women in academia. This BSS phenomenon is reflected in gendered access patterns. Even among women, those from marginalised ethnic groups are significantly less likely to attend university. It is estimated that 95% of women in predominantly Muslim and pastoralist communities have never attended school. In contrast, nearly all children in the former Central Province, historically home to communities such as the Kikuyu that benefited early from missionary schooling, attend primary school. These statistics reveal a complex interplay of gender, ethnicity, and region. Women from historically marginalised ethnic groups and geographically peripheral areas, such as Somalia, Borana, and Turkana, face systemic exclusion from basic education. This situation effectively inhibits many Kenyan women from accessing higher education and academic opportunities.

The interaction of gender and ethnicity does not simply aggregate; rather, it engenders qualitatively distinct experiences for Kenyan women. An intersectionality perspective elucidates how, for example, a Kikuyu girl in Nairobi may encounter gender-based challenges, such as pressure to prioritise domestic roles, yet is significantly more likely to attend school than a Samburu girl in a rural pastoralist area. Similarly, while a Samburu boy may have a slightly better chance of educational opportunities compared to a girl from the same background due to patriarchal privilege, he still performs worse than both boys and girls from more privileged ethnic and regional contexts. Intersectionality assists in addressing the research question by illuminating these complex, layered dynamics that remain obscured when gender or ethnicity is examined in isolation. This is particularly pertinent when addressing gender inequality in Kenya.

From a gender performativity perspective (Butler, 1990), literacy disparities can also be understood as the result of socially sanctioned roles. In some Kenyan communities, girls are not expected or allowed to continue their education beyond a certain age. Instead, their roles are culturally scripted to align with marriage, caregiving, or domestic responsibilities. These gender expectations, often reinforced by economic pressures such as dowry or bride price incentives, lead to educational disengagement. In these contexts, high female illiteracy is not only a matter of access but also a

reflection of social norms that dictate gendered performances. By highlighting literacy and early education, this analysis demonstrates that inequities in higher education are rooted in early-stage exclusions for Kenyan women. Any strategy to increase women's participation in universities should begin with targeted interventions at the primary and secondary levels, particularly in marginalised regions. Without such foundational reforms, later-stage measures, such as university quotas or scholarships, risk being ineffective due to the limited pipeline of eligible candidates. Therefore, the intersectional inequity in literacy poses both a moral and a practical challenge. It reflects deep-seated injustices against certain groups of women and is practical because it jeopardises efforts to build inclusive and equitable higher learning institutions. If universities are meant to serve as engines of national development and social mobility, they should reflect the full diversity of Kenya's population in both rhetoric and real, measurable representation.

## **5.2 Student admission**

The study demonstrates that research conducted through the lens of structural intersectionality elucidates the mechanisms underlying student admissions to Kenyan universities. University admissions are heavily predicated on performance in the Kenyan Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Schools situated in marginalised counties, which frequently host minority ethnic communities, are often under-resourced and generate fewer students who meet the requisite thresholds for university admission. Within these institutions, girls generally exhibit lower academic performance compared to boys due to systemic disadvantages, including limited access to quality education, substantial household labour burdens, and socio-cultural constraints. Consequently, when the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) allocates placements, a minimal number of girls from marginalised backgrounds qualify. Furthermore, affirmative action measures, such as slightly lower cut-off points for female applicants (Onsongo, 2009), fail to address the intersecting disadvantages associated with ethnicity and region. Political intersectionality further underscores how policy agendas addressing gender and ethnicity frequently operate in isolation rather than in conjunction. For instance, initiatives aimed at increasing women's enrolment may predominantly target urban populations or specific professional fields, neglecting ethnic diversity. Conversely, programmes focused on ethnic equity may disregard the unique challenges encountered by women. As a result, individuals marginalised on the basis of both gender and ethnicity often fall through the gaps in policy interventions.

This research corroborates that disparities in gender admissions persist, which has implications for overall enrolment figures and access to prestigious, high-reward careers. The ethnic bias in admissions is influenced by representational intersectionality, with enduring stereotypes regarding the intellectual capacities and educational inclinations of specific communities. Colonial narratives depicted certain ethnic groups, particularly the Kikuyu and Luo, as more modern and educable, while others, such as pastoralist communities, were portrayed as backward or resistant to education. This legacy continues to impact self-selection, institutional outreach, and decision-making processes. The intersectionality of gender and ethnicity reveals that the underrepresentation of Kenyan women from minority communities is not attributable to cultural deficiencies but rather to a systemic denial of opportunities. The analysis indicates that the gender and ethnic imbalances in university admissions in Kenya reflect deeply entrenched patterns of intersectional exclusion. Consequently, Kenyan men from dominant ethnic groups continue to enjoy the greatest access to educational opportunities.

## **5.3 Programme enrolment**

The study found that ethnicity plays a role in shaping gendered programme choices, often in indirect ways. Although the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) aims to promote gender balance in university enrolment, evidence indicates limited success in achieving this objective. A government report shows that while women now represent nearly 50% of total

university enrolment in some regions, their participation in technical fields remains around 30%. This suggests that the increase in female enrolment has largely occurred through greater access to arts and social science programmes, particularly in private institutions, rather than through more substantial integration into STEM disciplines.

Women from historically marginalised ethnic communities face significant barriers to accessing university education. Those who do manage to enrol often self-select into fields with lower entry requirements, lower costs, or closer geographical proximity. For instance, a woman from a rural pastoralist community might choose to study education or humanities at a nearby institution rather than pursue a resource-intensive STEM course that would require relocation and additional expenses. Fields like agriculture or environmental studies may seem more practical in communities where such knowledge is directly applicable.

In contrast, women from urbanised or politically dominant communities are more likely to enrol in elite, high-prestige programmes like engineering, medicine, or finance. Data also reveal a further layer of stratification within the female student population: women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and the larger BSS ethnic groups are over-represented in professional and technical disciplines, while women from smaller or marginalised groups tend to cluster in less resource-intensive and lower-prestige fields.

### **5.3 Staff recruitment and promotion**

Importantly, this study reveals that the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity fosters ethnic and gender favouritism in appointments and promotions. This favouritism is often linked to entrenched patronage systems that frequently manifest in informal "old boys' networks." Such networks play a crucial role in the processes of appointments and promotions, further marginalising Kenyan women, particularly those from ethnic minority groups. The data clearly illustrate the complexities that women academics encounter due to the combined effects of ethnicity and gender in Kenyan universities. The recruitment and promotion processes for academic staff in Kenya are influenced by a matrix of domination, wherein patriarchy, ethnic favouritism, and class privilege intertwine to determine who ascends within the academy. From a structural intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1992), women with marginalised identities are disadvantaged through various interconnected mechanisms. The research emphasises that the intersection of gender and ethnicity is particularly pronounced among academic staff in Kenyan universities. Although an increasing number of women are entering academia, their advancement is significantly hindered, resulting in a dramatic drop-off at senior levels, a phenomenon commonly referred to as a "leaky pipeline." Women, especially those from marginalised ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, are significantly underrepresented at senior levels, which limits diversity, equity, and inclusion in the production of scholarly knowledge. The promotion system, which heavily emphasises research output, inadvertently penalises women, who often bear disproportionate teaching and administrative responsibilities and may lack access to mentorship and collaborative networks. This aligns with Onsong'o's (2003) findings that Kenyan women are frequently assigned roles related to service, committee work, student support, and pastoral care. While these roles are essential, they are often undervalued in promotion criteria. To address this imbalance, comprehensive institutional reforms are necessary. This includes establishing diverse, inclusive recruitment panels, implementing mentoring and capacity-building programmes for women in academia, creating transparent, equitable promotion criteria, and actively dismantling gendered and ethnic stereotypes.

### **5.4 Leadership**

The intersection of gender and ethnicity contributes to a gender pyramid in which women are predominantly situated at the base, while they are largely underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions. Furthermore, these gender disparities intersect with ethnic imbalances,

resulting in compounded forms of marginalisation within Kenyan universities. Notably, this research indicates that the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity engenders ethnic and gender favouritism in leadership appointments. Such favouritism is often linked to entrenched patronage systems that frequently manifest in informal "old boys' networks." These networks significantly influence the appointment processes, further marginalising Kenyan women, particularly those from ethnic minority groups who aspire to attain senior academic and leadership roles. Many Kenyan universities profess to be equal opportunity employers and assert their commitment to rejecting discrimination in academic hiring and employment. However, while overt discrimination may not be evident, subtle biases are apparent in the criteria employed for promotions and appointments. The complexity of the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity is reinforced by corroborating findings from Sifuna (2006), Raburu (2015), and Chacha (2021), which indicate that these informal "old boys' networks" possess political and social dimensions that limit access for all women in Kenyan universities. For instance, it is not uncommon to observe university faculties dominated by members of the Vice-Chancellor's ethnic group, who are predominantly male. Consequently, a woman from an ethnic minority group faces dual disadvantages: ethnic exclusion and gender bias. Historical and political events have intensified these patterns. Following the post-election violence of 2007-2008, many academics relocated to areas where their ethnic groups were predominant for safety (Cole, 2020), resulting in ethnic clustering within universities. Institutions in certain counties began recruiting and retaining staff from the local ethnic majority, reinforcing homogeneity. This double exclusion creates barriers to entry and professional advancement for women outside these dominant groups. They may be perceived as outsiders in both ethnic and gender contexts, which limits their access to informal support networks and promotion opportunities.

From an intersectional perspective, leadership appointments serve as a focal point of political intersectionality, where women are systematically excluded from political patronage networks, and individuals from marginalised ethnic groups face similar disadvantages. Socio-cultural and political factors significantly influence women's leadership in Kenya across precolonial, colonial, and post-independence periods. The relationship between the government and higher education institutions varies with each successive administration (Kamau et al., 2023). The appointment of the first female vice-chancellor at a public university in Kenya in 2006, who belonged to the ruling government's ethnic community, highlights the dynamic interaction between ethnicity and gender in Kenyan higher education. This pattern is further evidenced by the appointment of a female vice-chancellor at the country's most prominent public university in 2023, where she shares an ethnic background with the ruling government. Women candidates from dominant ethnic groups (BSS) are more likely to secure leadership positions than those from ethnic minority groups, such as the Teso or Turkana. The intersection of gender and ethnicity creates significant barriers for Kenyan women from ethnic minority groups, such as the Gabbra or Rendile, in advancing within academia or even accessing higher education compared to those from dominant groups like BSS. Women from ethnic minority communities face compounded exclusion. For instance, a highly qualified female professor from the Taita community (a small Bantu group) has slim prospects of becoming a vice-chancellor, not due to a lack of merit but because of her gender and the limited political capital of her ethnic group. Even formal recruitment processes, which are ostensibly merit-based, often lead to decisions influenced by political considerations that reinforce existing hierarchies. This cycle of exclusion is self-perpetuating. By undertaking these intentional, intersectional efforts, Kenyan universities can foster environments where women in Kenyan higher education institutions are possible, intentionally nurtured, actively valued, and supported.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Gender inequality in Kenyan higher education remains elusive, hindered by intersecting forces of ethnicity and region. The intersectional framework reveals the importance of disaggregating the 'Kenyan women' category. Although women from some privileged ethnic and socioeconomic

backgrounds have made incremental gains, many others remain virtually excluded. This research highlights the complex dynamics of how the intersection of ethnicity and gender manifests in literacy and early education, student admissions, programme enrolment, staff recruitment and promotion, and leadership in Kenyan higher education institutions. Kenyan women continue to navigate a system historically structured around male and ethno-political dominance, from classroom dynamics to institutional leadership in higher education. This dual burden limits not only their participation but also their advancement. The result is a persistent gender and ethnic stratification at all levels of higher education, underpinned by both visible and invisible barriers that Kenyan women encounter. This study underscores the need for context-sensitive, multifaceted, and decolonial reforms that respond to the lived realities of diverse Kenyan women.

This article suggests structural reforms to address intersecting inequalities in Kenya's higher education through an intersectional and decolonial feminist lens. Key reforms include enforcing existing diversity regulations, such as limiting staff representation from any one ethnic group to one-third and ensuring gender representation at two-thirds, supported by robust accountability mechanisms. Oversight bodies like the CUE and NCIC should monitor compliance. The long-stalled gender bill is essential for institutionalising gender parity and equity by prioritising women from underrepresented ethnic communities. Admission strategies need to be restructured to address pipeline disparities, with targeted initiatives for girls in marginalised counties, including reserved STEM slots and scholarships. Academic mentorship should focus on female postgraduates from minority backgrounds, and there should be increased investment in PhD programmes for women in male-dominated fields to enhance retention and professional development.

Inclusive governance in Kenyan academia requires gender-balanced and ethnically diverse decision-making bodies. Cultivating male allyship through leadership programmes can frame inclusion as vital to institutional performance. Gender equity indicators should be included in leadership evaluations, and universities must publicly affirm diversity as a core value. Achieving this goal involves collaborative efforts from the Ministry of Education, university leadership, and civil society, including women's groups. Reforming these institutions is essential to dismantling privilege through exclusionary systems and unlocking Kenya's intellectual potential. An intersectional approach is necessary to address the diverse experiences of women in academia. Proposed reforms must disrupt colonial legacies and ensure that all women have equitable access to leadership roles and opportunities in academia, fostering an environment of intellectual diversity and meaningful social change.

## **7. Declarations**

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation (C.A.G.); Literature review (C.A.G & S.S.B.); methodology (C.A.G.); software (N/A.); validation (C.A.G., & S.S.B.); formal analysis (C.A.G. & S.S.B.); investigation (C.A.G.); data curation (C.A.G.); drafting and preparation (C.A.G.); review and editing (S.S.B.); supervision (C.A.G. & S.S.B.); project administration (C.A.G.); funding acquisition (N/A.). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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