Women’s Access to Senior Management Positions in the University of Abuja – Nigeria

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Introduction

Some views seem established from decades of research on women in higher education management. They include the following:

- Women are fewer in number than men in senior academic and administrative positions in the academic world.

- An established patriarchal culture in the academic world prevents women from climbing the ladder to senior positions.

Some other views seem to be emerging recently. These conclusions are that:

- Years of equal opportunity rule, affirmative action strategy and anti-discrimination legislation in favour of women have failed to deliver the desired rise in hierarchy for female academics. However, universities where female academics achieve senior positions evidence the existence of some supportive characteristics.

Most of the research on women in higher education management has been conducted in the Western setting, particularly in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Similar studies have also been done in Asia, with reference to Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, and in a few cases in Africa, with reference to South Africa and Kenya. Little has been done on the subject in Nigeria. In one of such works on a related issue, Oloruntoba & Ajayi (2006) used data on the research outputs of 219 academics in three Nigerian agricultural universities to compare gender with research attainment. The findings showed that research attainment is slightly higher for male academics than for female, and academic qualifications and rank are significantly associated with gender. The study also observed that more male academic staff are employed at top management positions, while the majority of female academic staff occupy middle management and entry levels. In another case, Nom, Onyeka & Jummai (2008) studied gender imbalance in access to higher education and employment in universities. The study, based upon available data from the National Open University of Nigeria, found that gender imbalance existed in student enrolments and staff recruitment in the institution.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the present study is to evaluate the commitment of the University of Abuja to the goal of gender equality in appointments to senior management positions.

The secondary objectives are:

- To determine from sex disaggregated data progress made in the University to address the issue of under-representation of women in senior management positions, and

- To research the perceptions of females in senior management positions in the University towards the
existence of any barriers against women's advancement in the institution

Besides contributing a perspective to the literature in the field, the relevance of this study is perhaps further underscored by the fact that recently the Nigerian federal government has been scaling up its effort towards meeting the goals of gender equality with the introduction of a National Gender Policy in 2006 and the Strategic Implementation Framework for the Policy in 2008. One of the stated objectives of the National Gender Policy is to “achieve minimum threshold of representation for women in order to promote equal opportunity in all areas of political, social, economic life of the country for women, as well as for men.” (NGP 20) The Policy recommends adopting special measures, quotas and mechanisms for achieving the threshold by pursuing 35% affirmative action in favour of women to bridge gender gaps in political representation in both elective and appointive posts at all levels. (NGP 20) The Framework recognises that the implementation of the Policy demands advice from specialised national institutions like universities, and requires such institutions to develop gender policies and management systems to engender their processes, including recruitment, training, decision-making and representation in senior positions.

Literature Review

I will review the literature on women in higher education management based on three issues or themes: namely, Under-representation of Women in Senior Academic Management Positions, Patriarchy in Universities, and Gender Equality in University Management.

Under-representation of Women in Senior Academic Management Positions

According to a UNESCO-Commonwealth report on women in higher education management, the global picture is one of men outnumbering women about five to one at middle management and about twenty to one at senior management level. Women deans and professors are a minority group and women vice-chancellors and presidents are rare (Dines, 1993). A follow-up survey in 2000 by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) entitled, “Still a Single Sex Profession? Female Staff Numbers in Commonwealth Universities,” states that at the middle management level, men outnumbered women at about ten to one. Women vice-chancellors, deans and professors were still a rarity (Jobbins, 2006).

In 1985 the Association of Commonwealth Universities began a “Women’s Programme” to facilitate the development of women in Commonwealth universities so that they can use their academic, administrative and management skills in contributing to the institutional development of universities. The programme arose in response to the recognition of the extent women were under-represented at senior levels in the Commonwealth university sector. It was inspired by ACU’s concern with equity and enhancement of the participation of women in development; and secondly, concern with the issues of educational access and quality pertaining to higher education. The organisation considers the improved recruitment of women into all levels of management in higher education as integral to the overall development of the institutions in terms of both equity and quality. (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2005)

The under-representation of women in the management of higher educational institutions in Nigeria was the focus of a round table organised in May 2008 by Accessure Educational and Goethe-Institute Lagos. The forum provided an opportunity for women in notable positions in the Nigerian university
system to share their experience and discuss how to raise the number of women in key positions in higher education, how successful female academics achieved their current positions and whether there were typical feminine social and management qualities that could be beneficial to the whole sector.

Participants observed that there is gender discrimination, which is often subtle and systemic. Though no policy statements discriminate against women, they noted, yet academia has long been dominated by men, and the male perspective in policy development, performance evaluation, and interpersonal interactions generally prevail. The group said women’s classroom performance was often evaluated more critically than men’s and that research by women or about women was frequently undervalued by male colleagues. Initial salary differentials between men and women increase in favour of men and women take two to ten years longer than men to be promoted. The group recommended that obstacles in institutions that prevent women from achieving their full potentials should be removed and that formal and informal policies which would encourage women to function optimally should be adopted and enforced.

Other recommendations are that, institutions should address inequities in hiring, promotion, tenure, and salaries of women academics; there should exist on-campus childcare facilities; successful female academics should mentor young and aspiring colleagues; scholarship should be provided to bright female scholars and grants to female researchers; there should be increased enrolment of the girl-child into tertiary institutions; women should embrace new technologies in their research and teaching, and women’s achievement should be celebrated for their motivation. (This Day, 2008)

Evidence from literature generally indicates that women academics are under-represented in senior management positions in most universities around the world. In most cases, women only account for a minority of staff and are concentrated in the lower grades. Statistical evidence points to the fact that one reason for this situation is that discrimination exists in the academic profession.

Patriarchy in Universities

Scholars in the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada have carried out volumes of studies on women in higher education in which they have addressed the issues of paucity of women in senior academic positions. In analysing the factors that prevent women from reaching the apex of the academic career, metaphors of “glass ceiling” (Hansard Society, 1990; Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Hede, 1994), “brick wall” (Bacchi 1993), “stone floor” (Heward, 1994), “blocked pipeline (Keohane, 2003), and “maternal wall” (Williams, 2004) have been used. For instance, Luke (1998, p.36) says glass-ceiling barriers are:

… the transparent cultural, organizational, and attitudinal barriers that maintain horizontal sex segregation in organizations… [which] share certain structural features across cultural and institutional contexts such as the concentration of power and authority among male elites, concepts of merit, career, and success based on male experience and life trajectories, and social and institutional practices that reproduce culturally dominant
forms of patriarchy … women [therefore] look up the occupational ladder

and get a clear vision of the top rungs but they can’t always clearly see

where they will encounter invisible obstacles.

Luke (2001, p.6) further observes that despite years of affirmative action and the passing of statutes outlawing sexual discrimination (USA and UK in 1972; Australia in 1984), “the rate at which women have ascended academic career ladders in these countries is maddeningly slow”. Women in the United Kingdom constitute 7-8 percent of the professoriate, in Ireland just over 5 percent, in the United States 16 percent of those with full professorial status and in Finland 18 percent (O’Connor 2000). Luke (2001, p.10) thus refers to universities as: “a hotbed of both vertical and horizontal sex segregation.”

In a study, Forster (2001) reports on the views that women academics have about their career prospects, equal opportunities and the conflicts they experience between their work and personal lives in one UK University. The university in question has formal equal opportunities policies and gender monitoring systems in place. However, very few women have progressed into senior academic roles. They continue to be handicapped by well-ingrained structural and cultural barriers and by promotion systems that still largely rely on the publication records of candidates for appointments and promotions. Some of the women interviewed reported that they had opted to put their careers on hold because of domestic and family responsibilities. A few have resigned themselves to never achieving senior positions because of these commitments. The study observes that the trend may have a negative impact on recruiting women graduates into careers in higher education in the future. Similarly, a report of research projects at five universities around the United Kingdom – namely Oxford, Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt, Luton and Surrey – concluded that universities are unfriendly to women, and female academics fail to climb the ladder as a result. The Athena Project, whose aim was to boost women’s presence in science, engineering and technology, funded the research. The women staff interviewed cited old boy networks and subtle form of discrimination in the universities. None of the women felt comfortable about working in a predominantly male environment (Hodge, 2002).

One study investigated the career experiences of female academics in a Western and in an Indian cultural setting in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to their career progression. The study examined the factors such as national culture, gender stereotypes and leadership, work and family conflict, mentoring and informal networks that impact on the career progression of women academics in two different cultural settings, namely Mauritius and Australia. Thirty in-depth interviews from two universities were used. The findings illustrate that the barriers to progression are remarkably similar to women from both universities despite their different cultural background. Women from both cultural settings face significant barriers to career progression in their academic roles. (Thanacody, Betram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006) A study to explore how women academics view their professional advancement at a higher education institution in South Africa found that women within higher education institutions felt isolated, alienated, and their ideas unheard. (Butler, 2005) Similarly, being ignored, excluded, regarded as ‘light weight’, and receiving unequal treatment were the recurring themes in interviews with women in a study on “Women in the Professoriate in Australia.” White (2001) concludes from the study that the academia remains a hostile work environment for senior women. One of the important challenges for women in the professoriate in Australia, the study says, is to impact on the highly masculinist culture of higher education. “You are just
sort of ignored, very pleasantly, but you are not part of the male culture.” (White 2000, 7-10). White
(2001) observes that it would appear that once women reach senior levels in any organization they
encounter the power of the male hegemony that is prepared to accommodate some women, but not to
have their dominance challenged. Thornton comments that this structural discrimination is a corollary of
any hierarchical and bureaucratised organization, since the raison d’etre of bureaucracy is to maintain
the status quo, including the power of existing elites” (Thornton 1996, p. 290).

Although most literature point to an established patriarchal culture in the academic world, there are,
however, a few exceptions. For instance, respondents in a study conducted in Ankara University, one of
Turkey’s foremost universities, said there is no gender discrimination in both academic promotion and
management in the University. The study by Ozkanli and Korkmaz (2000) measured the attitude
towards gender discrimination in academic promotion and administration in Ankara University. The
study asked respondents: “Do you think being a woman is an advantage for academic administration?”
Answers were in three categories: 1) It is an advantage; 2) It is a disadvantage; 3) There is no
discrimination. Most female academics responded that there is no gender discrimination in academic
management. Some think that to be a woman is a disadvantage in academic management. A very
small minority think that it is an advantage. The study concludes that most female academics in Turkey
(67.3 %) think that there is no gender discrimination, and being a woman is far from being an
advantage. The ratio of female academics in Ankara University is 42 percent. Another study used in-
depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of women academics at the Rand
Afrikaans University, South African. The study found positive and negative experiences. The positive
included the lessening of overt discrimination and flexible work hours. The negative included the
“double workload” of traditional female duties combined with work life and ambivalent feelings about
observes that it very often happens that when women have encountered discrimination within the
university they fail to recognise it, because the university is “perceived as an institution that emphasises
objectivity, fairness, the pursuit of knowledge, and merit as a basis for evaluation”. Consequently,
women who experience discrimination may not only fail to recognise it, but will come up with some
explanation for differential treatment and thereby deny the existence of discrimination at all.

Gender Equality in University Management

Lorber (1994:200) defines gender equality as meaning:

“…that women and men of all races would have the same opportunities to obtain professional
credentials and occupational training, and would be distributed in the same proportions as they are in
the paid work force across workplaces, job titles, occupations, and hierarchical positions”.

heard), access (to positions of power, resources) and representation (on boards and committees, etc)
…has not been achieved (in the academic context)”. Davies, Lubelska and Quinn (1994:10) note that
despite equal opportunities policies, most women continue to feel disadvantaged and oppressed in
relation to their prospects, representation and needs within higher education.

Since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the call for gender equality has been
much louder. A review of the Beijing conference in 2000 showed that while there is increasing political,
constitutional and legal support for achieving gender equality, there are still major gaps in all sectors
and in every region of the world. The 2002 report of the Progress of the World’s Women notes that women make up less than 5 percent of the world’s heads of state, heads of major corporations and top positions in international organisations. The report concludes that despite some improvements in the previous two decades, women’s achievements still lag far behind those of men in terms of power, wealth, decision-making and opportunity.

The persisting gap has increased the focus on women’s access to, and participation in governance. It is now generally accepted that unless women constitute a “critical mass” of at least one third of those in decision-making, their mere presence makes little difference to the outcomes of governance. Thus, there are attempts to achieve targets of one third of women in decision making, as well as efforts to remove institutional barriers to the effective participation of women, such as more family friendly work practices. A growing body of literature suggests that, where women are present in critical numbers and are able to participate effectively, the result is more socially responsive governance outcomes.

Nigeria’s National Gender Policy notes that gender inequality within the overall society, and across all sectors, reflect the wide disparities between women and men. For example, 76% of the Federal Civil Service workers are men, while women make up 24% and occupy less than 14% of the overall management positions (NGP 7-8). A World Bank report on Nigerian universities reveals that women form a minority of university teachers and female academic staff stagnate at a level of about 14 percent.

Development imperatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, support the goal of gender equality. The commitment of African governments to gender equality is equally expressed in the African Charter on human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), adopted in 1981 and its Women’s Rights Protocol of 2003; the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance 2001; and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) adopted in 2001. Gender equality is a central issue in international treaties, covenants and declarations because inequality has negative impact on sustainable development and economic growth. In the university system, inequality denies access to some of the best minds for teaching and research and undermines the academic development of female students who lack female role models and mentors.

Gender mainstreaming, as a redress mechanism, arose from the recognition that gender inequality is so deeply rooted in the behaviour and experiences of people, and in systems, institutions and structures, that a transformation is needed in order to bring about equality. The goal of gender mainstreaming is ‘the organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making’ (Council of Europe, 1998). The factors that facilitate gender mainstreaming have been identified as: Political will (at the top of the organisation); adequate resources; gender-disaggregated statistics; training for civil servants; the development of an infrastructure such as focal points; representation of women in decision-making processes; and openness or transparency in policy-making processes. (Council of Europe, 1998; Verloo, 1999)

Some findings validate the claim that universities in which female academics achieve senior positions are those in which some supportive practices toward women exist. For instance, Chesterman (2004) sought to verify if five Australian universities where women achieved promotion to, and remained in,
senior positions, had particular cultural characteristics that supported and sustained women. Universities around Australia had been encouraged by government equity legislation to adopt a proactive measure towards the promotion of women into senior management. Across all five universities, there was unanimity about the factors that encouraged women to apply for senior positions and that sustained and supported them in those positions. These were clear support from organisational leaders, a critical mass of other women in senior positions, opportunities to network and strong statements on values. Those interviewed indicated that the most significant support was that from the chief executive or the direct superior to the woman. Executives had to go beyond rhetoric, and demonstrate their support of women and equity through endorsement of women’s performance, encouragement of women to apply for promotion, and commitment of resources to development, such as training courses. The finding supports research that suggests that organisational leaders, especially the CEO, critically influence an organisation’s direction, its performance and its organisational practices (Johnson, 2002, qtd in Chesterman 2004). The interviewees also defined the culture that supported women as one with women present in significant numbers and in positions of significant power. Women in these interviews supported the view that the level at which women were appointed was more important than numerical equality.

Similarly, Switzerland, Germany and Austria each has a national policy for gender equality in higher education that has led to the establishment of organizational and administrative structure – offices that create target programmes and open funding-lines for support of activities in equal opportunities. At La Trobe University Melbourne, Australia, recruitment processes required that at least one female was included on every employment selection panel. The institution’s faculty deans were required to ensure that female representation on all major faculty committees was not less than 50%, and that both sexes were represented on all university committees. La Trobe’s gender balance of academic staff is similar to that of three other Australian tertiary institutions – the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, the Australian Catholic University and Notre Dame University. In 2007, the proportion of women academics at La Trobe was 49%, with 50 female and 85 male professors. There were 56% to 58% women academics at the three other institutions. More women than men were provided with career development at La Trobe, and the university offered a diploma in university administration that was particularly attractive to women. (Jones, 2007)

**Methodology and Findings**

In evaluating the commitment of the University of Abuja to the goal of gender equality in appointments to senior management positions, this study set out to accomplish two objectives. These are to determine from sex disaggregated data progress made in the University to address the issue of under-representation of women in senior management positions, and to research the perceptions of females in senior management positions in the University on the existence of any barriers against women’s advancement in the institution.

**Progress made to address the issue of under-representation of women in senior management positions at the University of Abuja**

Sex disaggregated data on membership of the Senate of the University of Abuja in the 2000/2001 and 2008/2009 sessions provide some information on progress made in the University to address the issue of under-representation of women in senior management positions.
As the tables on membership of the Senate of University of Abuja in 2000/2001 and 2008/2009 show, women are under-represented in senior academic and administrative positions. Female Professors, Deans, Deputy Deans and Deputy Directors (DDS) and HoDs are a minority group in the University. Nevertheless, women are not under-represented in the position of Directors. Five of the University’s eleven Directors are females.

The key officers and bodies involved in the management of the university are the Governing Council and the Senate, the Vice-Chancellor, Two Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic and Administration), the Registrar and secretary of Council, the Bursar, the University Librarian, Deans of Faculties, Directors of Centres and Institutes and Heads of Departments.

The Senate is the forum for the senior academic and administrative hierarchy, and the highest University authority on academic matters. The Senate comprises the Vice-Chancellor as Chairman, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors, the Professors, the University Librarian, Deans, Directors and Deputy Deans, Deputy Directors, heads of academic departments, one member of academic staff representing each Faculty and the Registrar as Secretary.

In 2000/2001, the Vice Chancellor and a Deputy Vice Chancellor (Administration) were both females. In 2008/2009, the Vice Chancellor and all two Deputy Vice Chancellors were males. During both periods, men filled the positions of Registrar, Bursar and Librarian.

Eight years ago, in the 2000/2001 academic session, there were 50 Senate members: 44 (88%) were males, while six (12%) were females. Currently there are 113 Senate members: 96 (85%) are males, while 17 (15%) are women. Thus in a period of eight years, the representation of women in the Senate of the University increased only by 3%.

In terms of numerical equality, women lag far behind men in attainment of senior positions at the University of Abuja. Nevertheless, with 23% of Deans and 45% of Directors as females, women may be considered present in significant numbers in those positions. Thus, the visibility accorded females in the University by those high profile positions perhaps accounts for the perception among the interviewees that the institution has a supportive culture toward women.

The perceptions of females in senior management positions about barriers against women’s advancement in the institution

To determine the perceptions, I employed the qualitative method that emphasises the importance of direct observation, the value of subjective human interpretation, and the importance of evaluation participants. In eight recorded interactive interviews, lasting an average of 23 minutes each, I sought the responses of eight female academics in senior management positions as Deans, Directors and HoD. I interviewed two out of three female Deans, all five female Directors, and one out of six female HoD’s. I considered the purposeful selection as representatives of the widest range of experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The interviews took place between February 10 and March 20, 2009.
With semi-structured questions, I sought to determine if the interviewees knew of any policy driving women’s appointment into management positions in the University, in what ways the incumbent VC had encouraged women’s participation, whether they share the view that women are faced with a patriarchal culture in the university system that hinders their attainment of senior positions (VC, DVC, Professor, Dean, Director, HoD); and what prejudices or notions they know to pose a discouragement to women’s participation in the management of the University. I played the recordings repeatedly in order to extract and present from each interview the substance of the response directly assessing the commitment of the University of Abuja on the points of number of women in senior management positions, incidence of patriarchal culture and policy of gender equality.

My finding does not confirm the view about the existence of a male culture that subverts females’ access to management hierarchy in the institution. All but two female interviewees said there was no patriarchal culture hindering the rise of women to senior positions in the university. This evidence does not confirm the time-tested hypothesis on the subject, but validates a more recent hypothesis, namely; that “universities where female academics achieve senior positions evidence the existence of some supportive characteristics.” Most of the female interviewees attributed what they considered a favourable status of women at the University of Abuja to the commitment of the serving VC to the principles of gender equity. Here is the substance of each response:

Dean

I cannot say there are biases of any kind against women in this University. With respect to promotions, there are established objective yardsticks applied in the process. Whether or not you are a woman, you must satisfy the requirements for promotion. A number of females who are not professors are members of Senate because the VC appointed them into certain positions. The incumbent VC is gender sensitive and respectful of the womenfolk. As an elected female dean, I got the full support of male academics across the departments.

Dean

There is no policy as such driving women’s appointment in the University. The VC looks out for the best irrespective of gender. If a woman happens to have the quality he is looking for, he does not hesitate to appoint her. He does not go out to look for a female to appoint. He looks for competence. When he identifies that quality in a woman, he is a lot more predisposed to encouraging that woman. I have not seen any prejudices manifested against women in appointments and promotions in the University of Abuja.

Director

The first female VC of the University began the appointment of women into senior management positions. One of her DVC’s was a female. She also appointed some female HoD’s and Directors. The success of the female appointees made women to realise that they could compete favourably and work side by side with their male colleagues and make their contribution in the management of the University. Her successor continued with similar enthusiasm for empowering women, and gave women even more positions. He is supportive with his encouragements. He openly recognised the achievement of women.
Females may be appointed to any positions, if the university Management considers them capable. There are no prejudices as such in the University of Abuja. Discrimination against women is not obvious. In my day-to-day interaction with male colleagues in the University in the discharge of my office, I have generally received their respect. Their acceptance of my contribution boosts my confidence and helps to inspire me. Talking about so-called odds against women in the workplace, some of the experiences women relate about the odds they face, border on problems in their attitude to people or their interpersonal relationships. I have enjoyed working side by side with men as much as I have enjoyed their respect for my position.

Director

Appointments should be based on merit and capability rather than gender. Whoever is best qualified, best capable should have it, whether male or female. Usually, male authorities relegate women to the background or give them token appointments that exclude them from vital decision-making positions. Even when they are qualified or better qualified than men are, they still do not get the positions. In this sense, more opportunities should go to women. Nevertheless, with the incumbent VC we have had the highest number of women in appointive positions in the history of the University. He has tried, but more can be done. In terms of academic promotions in the University of Abuja, there is no discrimination against women. Once academic staff have their publications and are eligible, they earn their promotions, whether or not they are women.

Director

The VC wants both male and female members of staff to contribute to the development of the University. He does not discriminate against women; rather he values their participation and encourages their appointment. It is to the credit of the incumbent VC that there is some form of proportionate representation of women in senior management positions, but more could be done since there is only one female in the core management team. Women’s opinions and contributions to issues are respected and valued. However, the patriarchal culture is at work, just as there are many prejudices against women still observable in the University. Colleagues still express reservations or raise objections when women are appointed to certain positions they think men are more suited to occupy. Men think women should be more focused at home, and hold negative notions about females that devote themselves to official responsibilities outside the home.

Director

Things have improved in the University of Abuja in respect of appointments and promotion of women, but the problem of paucity of women in senior management positions cannot go away overnight. Under a female VC, another female academic became DVC. Women may not be experiencing discrimination per se in the University. However, the VC, as in the case of the incumbent, may be gender sensitive, encourage gender equality, and want to work with competent women, but he needs the support of the University authorities to go far enough.

Director

Based on my own personal experience, I can say definitely that discrimination against women exists in the University of Abuja, although it may not be so obvious. There is no policy of affirmative action
operational in the institution. Women appointees in the University are those the authorities have identified as achievers, those they found could deliver. Those women occupy the positions because they are achievers, not because they are women. There is no deliberate attempt to get a certain number of women into senior management positions. The VC appoints people that can deliver, not women. He has made a name for himself by appointing talented people, whether they are male or female. Nevertheless, he could have done better by having affirmative action. There are talented women he is yet to discover but whom he will never get to know unless such policy is in place.

HoD

I am not aware of any deliberate policy aimed specifically at encouraging women into management positions in the University of Abuja.

The Vice-Chancellor has indeed encouraged women's participation in the management of the University. He did many appointments in favour of women. We have witnessed an upsurge of women appointments during this VC’s administration.

I have not seen any patriarchal culture at work in the University of Abuja. There is no law discriminating against women in recruitments and promotions. I do not agree with those who say women should be given some preferential treatment in academic promotions because of their domestic responsibilities. Men and women should compete equally based on merit. In the University of Abuja, men and women have equal chances. Here we have had a female VC, DVC and Pro Chancellor in one administration.

When a woman gets appointed, it is usual in this University to hear that she used “bottom power” or she is VC’s girlfriend. Nevertheless, once the woman begins to achieve results, as evidence of her capability, the rumour fizzles away. Such rumour comes from people, including women, who do not believe a female can achieve anything based on merit, unless she is supported. However, my view is that women in the University of Abuja have not been prevented from achieving their goals. There are female Professors and Associate Professors who attained those positions competing with men based on the same standards.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Numerically, women trail behind men in senior positions in the University of Abuja. With 15% female representation in the management cadre, the university is still a long way from the 35% minimum threshold recommended in the Nigerian gender policy. However, with 23% of Deans and 45% of Directors as females, women are present in significant numbers in those positions. Thus, the perception among the interviewees that the institution has a supportive culture toward women, notwithstanding the numerical imbalance in favour of men, collaborates the finding of Chesterman (2004) in which the women interviewed supported the view that the level at which women were appointed was more important than numerical equality.

Nevertheless, the interviewees in Chesterman’s study equally defined the culture that supported women as one with women present in significant numbers as well. The conclusion from this is that the paucity of women in senior positions is indicative of a culture that is unfriendly to women. Why then did most of the female interviewees characterise the University of Abuja as non-discriminatory towards women despite their inferior number in the top positions? The observation of Carli (1998, pp 278-279) perhaps
explains that trend of response. The researcher notes that usually when women encounter discrimination in the university they fail to recognise it because the university is “perceived as an institution that emphasises objectivity, fairness, the pursuit of knowledge, and merit as a basis for evaluation”. As a result, women who experience discrimination may not only fail to recognise it, but will come up with some explanation for differential treatment and thereby deny the existence of discrimination at all.

With the non-existence of a policy for gender equality in the University of Abuja, the institution may not correctly be described as non-discriminatory towards women. The university happened to have a Vice Chancellor, between June 2004 and June 2009, who was supportive of women’s participation in his administration. In an interaction with this researcher on the subject of the research, the VC described his reasons for appointing females in the following words:

A certain principle of education says that when you educate a man, you only educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation or a community. This implies that the worth of a woman is immeasurably more than the worth of a man. There is a potential multiplier effect in the community from the positive influence of most women. It is this principle that I have applied in my administration in the University of Abuja. I believe women have perspectives to contribute, a role to play. Give them a role to play and they are likely to do it more efficiently or as efficiently as men.

My philosophy, therefore, is to see both genders to be equal and equally relevant. None is more relevant than the other. If there is a person showing potentials among the women, encourage her. As much as possible create equal opportunities. You will be surprised how females will try to optimise such opportunities. In terms of practical university management, I have exceeded the fine concepts of equity, equal opportunities and what have you, to practice mentoring. The goal is to try to mentor women especially, by giving them opportunities to prove their potentialities. So far, the women who got the appointments have not disappointed me.

Besides ensuring the presence of women in considerable numbers in the management of the University of Abuja during his administration, this approach of the VC will only survive as an outstanding example to his successors. As research suggests, organisational leaders critically influence an organisation’s direction, performance and practices (Johnson, 2002, qtd in Chesterman 2004). Nevertheless, this influence may go one way or the other, for or against the inclusion and advancement of women, depending on the orientation of the incumbent chief executive. Thus, in order to make sustained progress in the direction of gender balance, it is desirable for the University of Abuja to formulate and implement a gender equality policy that spells out measurable, attainable goals. Like Switzerland, Germany and Australia, Nigeria should develop a national policy for gender equality in higher education and equally set up administrative structures or offices that support activities in equal opportunities in the tertiary institutions. Such policy will spell out quota for representation of women in recruitment processes and key faculty and university committees. Policies of equal opportunity, affirmative action and anti-discrimination in favour of women, will likely result in remarkable numerical increase and rise in hierarchy for female academics in institutions where the chief executive is supportive of women.

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