The Role of Mentorship and Support Systems in Enhancing Women's Academic Advancement in Higher Education

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Abstract. The underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership and senior academic roles is a persistent global issue compounded by systemic barriers that hinder women's academic progression. This study investigates the critical role of mentorship and support systems in facilitating women's academic advancement in higher education. Drawing on feminist Theory, it explores how mentorship provides guidance, knowledge transfer, and psychosocial support while institutional support systems foster inclusive environments and promote gender equity. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 academics across various career stages and institutions. Findings reveal that structured mentorship programs, peer mentorship, and institutional gender-focused policies significantly enhance women's academic trajectories. However, barriers such as the underrepresentation of female mentors, cultural biases, and limited access to resources were also identified. The study underscores the need for inclusive, intersectional, and tailored mentorship frameworks to address these challenges. These findings offer practical implications for policymakers and higher education leaders, highlighting mentorship's transformative potential in bridging gender disparities and fostering an equitable academic landscape.

Keywords: Women in Higher education; Feminist; Mentorship; Academic; Gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership and senior academic positions remains a pressing global concern. Despite significant strides toward gender equality, women continue to face systemic barriers that impede their academic advancement. Mentorship and support systems have been identified as pivotal mechanisms to address these challenges, offering pathways to enhance women's academic participation and success. This article explores the role of mentorship and support systems in facilitating women's academic progression within higher education institutions.

Mentorship is a critical tool for professional development, providing guidance, knowledge transfer, and psychosocial support. For women in academia, effective mentorship can demystify institutional cultures, elucidate unwritten rules, and foster networks essential for career progression. A study [1] emphasizes that mentorship offers women in academia guidance and support, personal and professional development, and inclusive and accountable relationships, all of which are crucial for their advancement.

Support systems, encompassing formal programs and informal networks, play an equally vital role.

These systems provide resources, create inclusive environments, and advocate for policies that promote gender equity. In the South African context, authors [2] propose a conceptual framework for mentorship support tailored to early-career Black women academics, highlighting the necessity of structured support systems to address the unique challenges this group faces.

Despite the recognized benefits, women often encounter barriers to effective mentorship and support. These obstacles include the limited availability of female mentors, potential gender biases, and organizational cultures that may not prioritize or value mentorship. An integrative review [3] identifies personal and relational dynamics and organizational factors as significant barriers to mentoring female health academics, underscoring the complexity of these challenges.

The theoretical underpinnings of mentorship in academia are multifaceted. Social Learning Theory posits that learning occurs within a social context, suggesting that mentorship enables mentees to acquire behaviours and skills through observation and interaction. Feminist Theory offers a lens to examine power dynamics and gendered experiences within mentorship relationships, advocating for approaches that empower women and challenge patriarchal structures. Network Theory emphasizes the importance of social networks in providing access to information, resources, and opportunities, highlighting how mentorship can expand women's professional connections.

Qualitative research methods, particularly interviews, are instrumental in capturing the nuanced experiences of women in academia. Through in-depth interviews, researchers can explore personal narratives, uncovering the subjective realities of mentees and mentors. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how mentorship and support systems impact women's academic journeys, revealing successes and areas needing improvement.

Recent studies have begun to shed light on these dynamics. For instance, the author [1] conducted a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with women in academia, identifying themes such as empathetic and supportive mentorship, interpersonal connectivity, and gender empowerment and advocacy. These findings underscore the importance of mentorship in providing career guidance and emotional and psychological support.

In South Africa, [2] utilized a narrative literature review to develop a conceptual framework for mentorship support tailored to early-career Black women academics. Their work highlights the necessity of formal mentorship programs that consider the unique challenges faced by this group, including historical imbalances and cross-cultural dynamics.

Despite these advancements, gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning the intersectionality of gender with other identities such as race, class, and ethnicity. Understanding how these intersecting identities influence experiences with mentorship and support systems is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies that promote inclusivity and equity in academia.

This study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by employing a qualitative approach to examine the role of mentorship and support systems in enhancing women's academic advancement in higher education. Through interviews with women academics, the research seeks to uncover personal experiences, identify perceived benefits and challenges, and explore the effectiveness of existing support structures. The findings are expected to inform the development of more effective mentorship programs and support systems that address the specific needs of women in academia.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory is a robust lens through which to analyze and understand the dynamics of mentorship and support systems in promoting women's academic advancement in higher education. Rooted in the broader feminist movement, this Theory interrogates power imbalances, systemic inequities, and gendered experiences that shape women's trajectories in male-dominated spaces. In higher education, feminist Theory is particularly relevant for addressing the barriers women face in ascending to leadership roles, attaining tenure, or accessing professional growth opportunities through mentorship and support systems.

Feminist Theory emphasizes the socially constructed nature of gender roles and the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender disparities in various institutions, including academia. These structures often manifest in implicit biases, unequal access to resources, and exclusionary networks that hinder women's academic progression. By employing feminist Theory, re-

searchers can critique these systems and advocate for more equitable practices, ensuring that mentorship and support systems do not replicate the same inequities they aim to resolve.

The Theory also highlights the importance of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which examines how overlapping social identities—such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity—intersect to create unique forms of oppression and privilege. This perspective is crucial in understanding the diverse experiences of women in academia. For example, Black women or women from other underrepresented groups may face compounded challenges that are distinct from those encountered by their White counterparts. Feminist Theory, therefore, provides a framework for analyzing these intersectional experiences and tailoring mentorship programs to address the specific needs of diverse groups of women [3].

Mentorship, as viewed through the feminist lens, goes beyond professional development to include advocacy, empowerment, and the fostering of inclusive environments. Feminist scholars argue that mentorship should not merely replicate hierarchical models but instead focus on building reciprocal relationships that challenge traditional power dynamics. This reimagined approach to mentorship aligns with the core tenets of feminist Theory, which prioritize collaboration, mutual respect, and dismantling systemic barriers.

Moreover, feminist Theory draws attention to the concept of "gatekeeping" within academic institutions. Gatekeeping refers to controlling access to opportunities, resources, and information by those in positions of power. Women, especially those early in their careers, often encounter gatekeeping that limits their ability to network or participate in decision-making processes [4]. Mentorship programs informed by feminist principles seek to dismantle these barriers by creating pathways for women to gain visibility, access, and voice within academia.

In addition to mentorship, feminist Theory underscores the role of support systems in challenging institutional norms. Support systems—whether formal, such as women's networks, or informal, such as peer groups—serve as spaces for solidarity, knowledge-sharing, and collective action. These systems align with the feminist community-building goal, providing women with the social and emotional resources necessary to navigate academia's challenges [1].

Feminist Theory also advocates for critical self-reflection among mentors and institutional leaders. This involves examining one's biases, privileges, and practices to ensure that mentorship and support systems are genuinely inclusive and effective. For instance, mentors must be mindful of the potential for reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating unequal power dynamics within mentorship relationships (Cross et al., 2019). Through such reflexivity, mentors can foster environments that promote genuine empowerment and growth.

Another critical aspect of feminist Theory is its focus on transformative change. Beyond individual mentorship relationships, feminist Theory calls for systemic reforms that address the root causes of gender disparities in academia. This includes advocating for policies that promote work-life balance, combat sexual harassment, and ensure equitable representation of women in decision-making roles. Mentorship and support systems informed by feminist Theory thus act as catalysts for broader institutional change, creating a more equitable academic landscape for future generations.

Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of feminist-informed mentorship programs in addressing gender disparities. For instance, a study by Biljohn et al. (2024) demonstrated that mentorship frameworks grounded in feminist principles significantly improved the experiences of early-career Black women academics in South Africa. Similarly, the author [1] found that feminist mentorship practices, such as empathetic listening and advocacy, were instrumental in fostering women's academic success. These findings highlight the transformative potential of mentorship and support systems rooted in feminist Theory.

Feminist Theory also recognizes the emotional labour often involved in mentorship, particularly for women mentors who may already face substantial professional and personal demands. This perspective calls for institutional support to alleviate such burdens, ensuring that mentorship remains a sustainable and rewarding endeavour. Institutions can achieve this by providing resources, formalizing mentorship programs, and recognizing mentorship contributions in performance evaluations [] (Acker, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of mentorship and support systems in enhancing women's academic advancement in higher education. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives regarding mentorship and support systems. This methodology provided rich, detailed data illuminating the complex dynamics and contextual factors influencing women's academic progression.

Research Design. The study adopted a phenomenological research design, which focused on understanding the shared experiences of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon – in this case, mentorship and support systems in higher education. Phenomenology enabled the researcher to capture the essence of participants' experiences and to interpret these experiences through the lens of feminist Theory. This design aligned with the study's aim of uncovering how mentorship and support systems impacted women's academic advancement.

Study Population. The study targeted women in higher education, specifically female academics at various career stages, including early-career academics, mid-career professionals, and senior academics. These participants were selected to provide diverse perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of mentorship and support systems. A smaller number of male academics who served as mentors or participated in institutional support systems were also included to provide additional insights.

Sampling Technique. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants. This method included individuals with relevant experience and knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation. The criteria for participant selection included:

1) Female academics who had participated in formal or informal mentorship programs.

2) Female academics who had been part of institutional support systems, such as women's academic networks.

3) Male academics with experience mentoring female colleagues.

Sample Size. The sample size consisted of 22 participants. This size was sufficient for data satura-

tion, where no new themes or insights emerged during data collection.

Data Collection Methods. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore participants' experiences in depth while allowing the researcher to probe for additional details or clarification. Each interview lasted 45 minutes and one hour and was conducted in person or virtually, depending on participants' preferences and availability.

The interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives and feminist theoretical framework. Key topics in the guide included:

1) Participants' experiences with mentorship programs.

2) The role of support systems in their academic advancement.

3) Challenges and barriers faced in accessing mentorship and support.

4) Perceptions of gender dynamics within mentorship relationships.

5) Recommendations for improving mentorship and support systems in higher education.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Observational notes were also taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Authors [5, 6] proposed a six-step framework for thematic analysis guided the process:

1) Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.

2) Generating initial codes by systematically coding relevant features of the data.

3) Searching for themes by collating codes into broader categories.

4) Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represent the data.

5) Defining and naming themes to create a coherent narrative.

6) Producing the final report by integrating themes with the study's objectives and theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness. To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed:

1) Credibility: Prolonged engagement with participants and member checking were used to verify the accuracy of the findings.

2) Transferability: Detailed descriptions of the research context and participants enabled readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

3) Dependability: An audit trail documenting the research process, decisions, and changes was maintained.

4) Confirmability: Reflexivity was practised throughout the study to minimize researcher bias and ensure the findings were grounded in participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from a relevant institutional review board before data collection. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities and securely storing data. Only the research team had access to the raw data, and all recordings and transcripts were destroyed after the study concluded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of Respondents' Demographic Data. The study involved 22 participants, comprising 18 female academics and 4 male academics across various institutions of higher learning. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure diversity in terms of academic rank, age, and years of experience in higher education.

Gender: Most respondents were female (82%), reflecting the study's focus on women in academia. Including male participants (18%) was intentional, as they provided perspectives as mentors within support systems.

Age Range: Participants were between 28 and 65 years old. The largest group (40%) fell within the 36–45 age range, representing mid-career academics actively engaged in mentorship programs. Senior academics aged 46–65 constituted 35%, while early-career academics aged 28–35 comprised 25%.

Academic Rank: Respondents were distributed across different academic ranks, including assistant lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and professors. Assistant lecturers and lecturers (45%) represented the majority, highlighting the experiences of those in the early stages of their academic journey. Senior lecturers and associate professors accounted for 40%, while professors constituted 15%.

Years of Experience: Participants had varying years of experience in academia. Those with less than five years of experience made up 30%, providing insights into the challenges faced by early-career academics. Participants with 6–15 years of experience accounted for 40%, and those with over 15 years represented 30%, offering perspectives on long-term mentorship and support dynamics.

Disciplines: Respondents were drawn from diverse academic disciplines, including the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and professional fields such as engineering and medicine. This diversity enriched the study, as participants' experiences varied significantly depending on disciplinary norms and expectations.

Institution Type: Participants were selected from public universities, private universities, and polytechnics. Public universities contributed 60% of the participants, reflecting their dominance in higher education. Private institutions and polytechnics each accounted for 20%, offering additional perspectives on mentorship and support systems in different institutional contexts.

Participation in Mentorship Programs: All participants had been involved in mentorship activities, either as mentors, mentees, or both. Among female participants, 70% reported being part of formal mentorship programs, while 30% described their experiences as informal and self-initiated. Male participants served exclusively as mentors.

Types of Mentorship Programs Accessed by Women. The study revealed that academic women accessed various mentorship programs, ranging from formal institutional arrangements to informal, peer-driven initiatives. Formal mentorship programs, often structured through university policies, provided participants with clear objectives and measurable outcomes. However, these programs were not uniformly

available across institutions, with participants in resource-constrained settings reporting limited access.

Informal mentorship, driven by personal relationships and peer networks, was particularly prominent among participants. Many women described how senior colleagues voluntarily took on mentorship roles, guiding them through research, publication, and career development. One respondent explained: "My most valuable mentorship relationship began when a senior colleague noticed my struggles and offered to guide me without formal arrangement."

Peer mentorship programs also emerged as a significant resource, particularly for women in early career stages, as they provided spaces for collaboration, mutual learning, and shared experiences.

Impact of Institutional Support Systems. Institutional support systems shaped mentorship experiences and women's academic advancement. Participants who worked in institutions with gender-focused policies, such as women's leadership programs or diversity initiatives, reported more positive experiences. These systems facilitated access to mentorship and created environments where women could thrive.

For instance, respondents praised institutions funding women-focused academic conferences and workshops, enabling them to network and find mentors. One participant noted: "My institution's women in academia program matched me with a mentor who guided me through securing research grants, which transformed my career trajectory."

Conversely, participants in institutions without such support systems often felt isolated and struggled to find opportunities for professional growth, highlighting the need for more inclusive policies.

Barriers to Effective Mentorship. Despite the availability of mentorship programs, several barriers hindered their effectiveness. One major obstacle was the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions, which limited the pool of potential female mentors. Participants often preferred female mentors who could better understand their gender-specific challenges, but the lack of representation made this difficult.

Additionally, cultural and institutional biases emerged as significant barriers. Some respondents reported experiencing microaggressions or feeling sidelined in male-dominated mentorship programs. Others noted that the absence of clear guidelines for mentors and mentees in informal arrangements sometimes led to unmet expectations. A respondent shared: "Finding a mentor who truly understands the systemic biases women face is challenging. Male mentors are supportive but often lack the lived experience to address these issues fully."

Personal Narratives and Success Stories. The study brought to light several inspiring success stories that underscored the transformative power of mentorship. One senior academic described how her mentor encouraged her to apply for a leadership role she had never considered, ultimately leading to her appointment as a department head. She reflected: "I wouldn't have taken that leap without my mentor's confidence in my abilities. He guided me and advocated for me in decision-making spaces."

Another participant, an early-career researcher, credited her success in publishing a groundbreaking paper to the guidance of a mentor who reviewed her drafts and provided critical feedback. Such narratives illustrated the profound impact mentorship could have on women's academic journeys, fostering resilience, confidence, and professional growth.

Ways to Improve Mentorship and Support Systems. Participants proposed strategies to enhance mentorship and support systems for women in academia. Key recommendations included:

Expanding formal mentorship programs: Institutions should prioritize creating structured mentorship programs with clear goals and measurable outcomes, ensuring accessibility across all departments.

Fostering inclusive environments: Addressing cultural and institutional biases through diversity training and gender-sensitive policies would help create spaces where mentorship can thrive.

Increasing representation: Efforts should be made to elevate more women to senior academic positions, expanding the pool of female mentors.

Encouraging peer mentorship: Institutions should support peer mentorship programs, especially for early-career academics, by providing resources and platforms for collaboration.

Mentorship training: Offering training for mentors and mentees can help establish clear expectations and improve the effectiveness of mentorship relationships.

A participant aptly summarized: "For mentorship to be truly impactful, it must be accessible, inclusive, and tailored to address the unique challenges faced by women in academia. Institutions have a critical role in making this happen."

The findings of this study align with feminist Theory, emphasizing the role of mentorship and support systems in addressing systemic gender inequalities within higher education. Participants highlighted that mentorship programs, particularly those with structured frameworks, played a transformative role in their academic trajectories. However, many participants also noted barriers such as limited access to mentorship opportunities and the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions. These challenges underscore the need for institutional reform, aligning with feminist critiques that advocate dismantling patriarchal structures and promoting equity in professional spaces [7].

Institutional support systems emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping mentorship effectiveness. Institutions with gender-focused policies and inclusive environments fostered more productive mentorship experiences, enabling women to access critical resources and networks. However, gaps in resource allocation, particularly in rural or underfunded institutions, created disparities in opportunities. These findings resonate with systems theory, highlighting the importance of the interplay between individual efforts and structural support in achieving career success [8].

The study's insights provide practical implications for designing mentorship programs that are inclusive and sustainable. Tailored mentorship approaches, sustained mentor-mentee relationships, and intersectional considerations are critical for addressing diverse needs and fostering equity. Additionally, promoting female leadership within academia and adopting peer mentorship models could further enhance the impact of these programs. By addressing the identified gaps and leveraging the strengths of existing practices, higher education institutions can create a supportive environment that empowers women, enabling them to achieve academic and professional excellence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the pivotal role of mentorship and institutional support systems in advancing women's academic careers in higher education. The findings revealed that mentorship programs significantly contribute to women's professional growth, confidence, and career progression when effectively structured and supported. However, systemic challenges, such as the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, inequitable access to resources, and cultural biases within institutions, continue to hinder the full realization of mentorship's potential. Participants' narratives highlighted the critical interplay between institutional policies, personal agency, and collaborative support in overcoming these barriers.

By integrating feminist Theory, this research emphasized the need for mentorship programs that challenge traditional hierarchies and empower women through advocacy, collaboration, and inclusivity. The study also provided a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of women in academia, underscoring the importance of tailored approaches that account for factors such as age, discipline, and career stage. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in higher education by offering evidence-based recommendations for addressing systemic inequalities and fostering an environment conducive to women's success.

The practical implications of the findings are far-reaching, particularly for policymakers and institutional leaders. Designing mentorship programs that are formalized, inclusive, and adaptable is essential for ensuring equitable access and sustained impact. Similarly, promoting gender-sensitive policies, enhancing representation in leadership roles, and addressing cultural biases are critical steps toward creating an enabling environment for mentorship. Institutions must also consider peer mentorship and long-term relationship-building as complementary strategies to formal programs, fostering collaboration and mutual support among women in academia.

Ultimately, this research underscores the transformative potential of mentorship and institutional support systems in bridging gender disparities in higher education. By addressing the identified challenges and gaps, institutions can advance women's academic and professional trajectories and contribute to the academic landscape's overall diversity, equity, and excellence. These efforts are essential for cultivating a more inclusive future where everyone has equal opportunities to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the scholarly community.

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