

Career Growth And Women's Development In Ugandan Public Universities. A Case Of Mbarara University Of Science And Technology

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Abstract: The study examined the factors influencing career growth and women's development in Ugandan public universities, with a focus on Mbarara University of Science and Technology. The study specifically investigated the effects of Mentorship and Sponsorship, Training and Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, and Promotion Fairness on the professional advancement of female academic and administrative staff. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires administered to 48 female staff members with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the independent variables and women's development. The results revealed that the combined effect of Mentorship and Sponsorship, Training and Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, and Promotion Fairness significantly predicted women's development, accounting for 67.4% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.674$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.652$, $p < 0.001$). Among the predictors, Promotion Fairness had the strongest positive influence ($B = 0.312$, $p = 0.001$), followed by Training and Skill Development ($B = 0.285$, $p = 0.001$), Work-Life Balance Policies ($B = 0.241$, $p = 0.002$), and Mentorship and Sponsorship ($B = 0.219$, $p = 0.002$). Qualitative findings further supported these results, with respondents indicating that transparent promotion procedures, access to professional development programs, supportive work-life balance measures, and structured mentorship significantly enhanced their career progression and professional confidence. One respondent noted, "Through training and mentorship, I have gained the skills and confidence to pursue leadership positions I previously thought were unreachable." The study concluded that women's development at Mbarara University of Science and Technology was significantly influenced by institutional policies and programs that promote fairness, skill enhancement, work-life support, and mentorship. It was recommended that the university strengthen equitable promotion practices, expand training and skill development opportunities, institutionalize comprehensive work-life balance policies, and establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs to enhance women's career growth. These interventions were deemed essential for creating an inclusive and empowering academic environment that fosters professional advancement and leadership opportunities for female staff.

Keywords: Women's Development, Career Growth, Promotion Fairness, Training and Skill Development, Work-Life Balance, Mentorship, Ugandan Public Universities, Mbarara University of Science and Technology

Background of the Study

Globally, the pursuit of gender equality in higher education and research has been recognized as a critical driver for sustainable development, innovation, and inclusive economic growth. International frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, explicitly advocate for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, including their full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making (United Nations, 2015). Despite this global consensus, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior academic, research, and leadership positions within universities worldwide a phenomenon often described as the "leaky pipeline" or the "scissor graph," where the proportion of women declines sharply at each successive stage of the academic career ladder (European Commission, 2021). In STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, this underrepresentation is even more pronounced. Barriers are well-documented and multifaceted, encompassing implicit bias, a lack of female role models and mentors, the disproportionate burden of family and care responsibilities, and organizational cultures that are not always conducive to women's advancement (UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, while access to undergraduate education for women has improved markedly in many regions, their career growth and ascension to professorial and leadership echelons remain a persistent global challenge.

In Africa, the context of women's development in higher education is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and historical educational disparities. While countries like South Africa, Rwanda, and Kenya have made notable strides in promoting gender-aware policies and increasing female enrollment, the continent-wide transition from participation to power and leadership remains incomplete (Mama, 2021). African universities, as key institutions for knowledge production and societal transformation, are often microcosms of broader societal gender dynamics. Women academics frequently confront a "double burden" of demanding professional workloads alongside entrenched domestic expectations, which can stifle research productivity and limit opportunities for networking and career-advancing activities (Beoku-Betts & Njambi, 2020). Furthermore, a legacy of underinvestment in higher education across the continent has created highly competitive environments for research funding and promotion, often disadvantaging those without strong support systems or those who take career breaks for family reasons.

Within East Africa, the landscape of women's career development in public universities presents a mixed picture. Regional bodies like the East African Community (EAC) have protocols promoting gender equality, yet their translation into tangible academic career structures is inconsistent. A study across universities in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania found that while gender equity policies exist on paper, their implementation is often weak, and informal patriarchal structures continue to hinder women's progression (Kwesiga & Ssendiwal, 2021). Women are well-represented in the humanities and education but remain a minority in senior positions and in the science-based disciplines that are prioritized for national development. The lack of robust, institutionalized support systems such as dedicated gender offices, effective sexual harassment policies, mentorship programs, and family-friendly policies (like affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements) are identified as critical gaps across the region (Tumuheki & Zeelen, 2022).

In Uganda, the national context is defined by a constitutional and policy framework that actively promotes gender equality. The Uganda Gender Policy (2007) and the National Development Plan III emphasize the importance of women's empowerment in all sectors. However, a significant disconnect persists between these high-level policies and the lived experiences of women in academia. Ugandan public universities exhibit a stark vertical stratification by gender. According to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2022), women constitute approximately 42% of university students but only about 24% of academic staff. This figure drops precipitously at higher ranks: women make up less than 15% of associate professors and a mere 8% of full professors nationally. The challenges are systemic and include socio-cultural biases, limited access to research grants, high teaching loads that constrain research time, and, notably, a lack of strategic focus on targeted career development programs for female academics (Ahikire, 2021). Many universities have gender mainstreaming directorates, but their mandate and capacity to effect meaningful change in academic promotion pathways are often limited by inadequate funding and institutional authority.

Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST) presents a critical and revealing context. As a premier institution dedicated to science, technology, and health sciences, MUST operates in fields where the global gender gap in academia is most acute. According to MUST's own Human Resource records (2023), the gender disparity within its academic staff is a cause for concern and a critical area for intervention. While the university has made commendable efforts in student admissions, achieving a nearly 50:50 gender ratio in some programs, this parity vanishes among staff. Women constitute only 30% of the total academic staff. More alarmingly, this representation becomes increasingly sparse at senior levels: women hold only 22% of senior lecturer positions, 15% of associate professor positions, and there is currently only one female full professor at the university, representing less than 10% of the professoriate (MUST HR Office, 2023). In top leadership, the picture is similar; since its inception, MUST has never had a female Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Academic Affairs.

The university has established a Gender Mainstreaming Directorate (GMD) tasked with addressing these inequities. The GMD has initiated valuable programs, including mentorship dialogues, sensitization workshops, and advocacy for better maternity leave provisions. However, these efforts are often hampered by a lack of binding authority and insufficient integration into the core academic promotion and recruitment systems of the university (Nabachwa et al., 2022). Furthermore, the demanding clinical and research schedules in MUST's primary fields (Medicine, Nursing, Sciences) can disproportionately affect female academics who bear the bulk of family responsibilities. The absence of on-campus childcare facilities is frequently cited as a major impediment to concentration and productivity for early-career female researchers and lecturers (Tindyebwa, 2023). Therefore, while MUST embodies the national and global challenge of women's career stagnation in academia, its science and technology focus intensifies this challenge, making it an ideal case for investigating the interplay between institutional policies, socio-cultural barriers, and individual agency in shaping the career growth and development of women in a Ugandan public university. This study seeks to delve into this specific context to generate evidence-based recommendations for fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for women's academic advancement at MUST and similar institutions.

Problem Statement

Ugandan public universities operate within a national policy framework that explicitly mandates gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the academic career trajectory for women within these institutions, particularly at Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), tells a different and concerning story. Data from MUST's human resources department illustrates a persistent and severe underrepresentation of women in senior academic and leadership roles. In the 2020/2021 academic year, women constituted only 18% of Senior Lecturers and a mere 10% of Associate and Full Professors. Over the subsequent five years, this imbalance has shown no meaningful improvement. By the 2024/2025 academic year, the figures have only inched forward to approximately 20% and 12%, respectively. This near-flatline trend occurs despite a growing pipeline of female graduates and junior lecturers, indicating a systemic blockage in career advancement pathways.

The core of the problem is that the specific, day-to-day institutional practices, cultural norms, and administrative policies at MUST actively hinder women's progression. Barriers such as a lack of structured mentorship programs tailored for women, promotion criteria that do not account for gendered interruptions like maternity leave, an overwhelming service burden on female staff, and the absence of on-campus childcare facilities are widely acknowledged anecdotally but remain poorly documented and quantified. Consequently, university leadership lacks the concrete, evidence-based analysis required to design and implement effective

interventions. This ongoing stagnation represents a significant waste of human capital, undermines the university's research and innovation potential, and directly contravenes national development goals. This study is therefore necessary to systematically identify, analyze, and provide actionable solutions to the institutional barriers that have stifled the career growth of women academics at MUST.

Main Objective of the Study

To determine the influence of career growth on women's development in Ugandan public universities with a case of Mbarara University of Science and Technology

Literature Review

A study conducted by Morley (2013) identified the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, where the proportion of women declines sharply at each successive academic rank, a trend observed across both Global North and South contexts. This is often attributed to deeply embedded structural barriers including gendered biases in promotion, unequal service loads, and the marginalization of women in research collaborations. Furthermore, a study conducted by O'Connor (2020) emphasized the impact of organizational culture in European universities, finding that masculine-normed standards of excellence and a lack of work-life balance provisions systematically disadvantage female academics, particularly those in STEM fields. A study conducted by Mama (2011) argued that African universities, while being sites of potential transformation, often reproduce the same patriarchal structures found in the wider society. Research in Nigeria by Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2018) corroborates this, identifying a significant gap between gender policies on paper and their implementation in practice, with women facing limited access to research grants and networks essential for promotion. A study conducted by Beoku-Betts (2018) in Sierra Leone and Ghana further detailed how familial responsibilities and a lack of institutional support, such as childcare, severely constrain women's research productivity and conference attendance, which are critical for career advancement.

A study conducted by Lihamba et al. (2011) in Tanzania documented how women academics face pervasive cultural stereotypes that question their leadership capabilities, limiting their appointments to heads of department and other management roles. In Kenya, a study conducted by Onsongo (2019) found that mentoring programs for women were rare and that sexual harassment remained a significant yet underreported barrier to professional development and retention. In Uganda, scholars have begun to scrutinize this imbalance within public universities. A study conducted by Ahikire (2014) provided a foundational analysis of the gendered nature of academic promotions, noting that women are often sidelined in favor of their male counterparts. A study conducted by Kwesiga and Ssendiwala (2019) at Makerere University confirmed that women spend disproportionately more time on teaching and administrative duties than on research, directly impeding their publication records and subsequent promotion to senior ranks. More recently, a study conducted by Tumuheki and Zeelen (2022) highlighted that a lack of strong female role models and sponsors in leadership perpetuates a cycle of exclusion for junior female academics.

Nevertheless, a significant research gap remains. While these studies effectively diagnose the broad national and regional challenges, there is a scarcity of granular, institution-specific research that delves into the precise mechanisms hindering women at different career stages within a single university. Furthermore, few studies have quantitatively tracked the progression rates of women over a significant multi-year period to visually demonstrate the stagnation in promotions. Moreover, the existing literature has not sufficiently explored the intersectional experiences of women in science and technology-focused universities like Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), where the global gender gap in STEM converges with local cultural barriers. Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by conducting a detailed, empirical analysis of career progression at MUST.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate the phenomena of career growth and women's development at Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST). The research design was an explanatory sequential design, which involved first collecting and analyzing quantitative data, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper context and explanation for the initial findings. The target population consisted of all female academic and administrative staff at MUST. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the participants were strategically selected based on their relevance to the research problem, specifically targeting women in roles with a clear career progression pathway. From this population, a sample size of 48 participants was selected for the quantitative phase.

Data collection commenced with a quantitative survey administered to all 48 participants. The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions divided into sections measuring demographic variables, perceptions of career growth opportunities (including promotions, training, and funding), and institutional support systems for women's development. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale to gauge levels of agreement and satisfaction. Prior to the main study, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of female staff not included in the final sample to ensure the clarity, validity, and reliability of the instrument. Following the analysis of the survey results, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 12 participants purposively drawn from the initial 48. These participants were selected to represent a diverse range of ages, academic ranks, administrative positions, and years of service to capture a wide spectrum of experiences. The interview guide was developed directly

from the emergent themes of the quantitative data to explore specific issues in greater depth, such as detailed experiences with mentorship, the impact of institutional policies, and personal narratives of career advancement challenges and successes.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were generated to summarize the data and describe the general trends and characteristics. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson correlation analysis, were used to examine the relationships between key variables, such as the availability of professional development programs and perceived career growth. The qualitative data from the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis. This involved a meticulous process of reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify initial codes, which were subsequently grouped into broader themes and sub-themes that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, member checking was performed by sharing summaries of interviews with participants for verification, and an external colleague was engaged in peer debriefing to review the thematic structure.

Results

Multiple linear regression analysis between Mentorship & Sponsorship, Training & Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, Promotion Fairness and Women's Development.

Table 1: Model Summary for Predictors of Women's Development

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.821	0.674	0.652	0.42145

a. Predictors: (Constant), Mentorship & Sponsorship, Training & Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, Promotion Fairness.

Source: Primary Data, 2020

The model summary (Table 1) indicates a strong relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable, with an R value of 0.821. This suggests a high positive correlation between the independent variables and women’s development. The R Square value of 0.674 implies that approximately 67.4% of the variance in women’s development is explained by these four predictors, while the remaining 32.6% may be influenced by other factors not captured in this study. The Adjusted R Square of 0.652 shows that the model remains robust after adjusting for the number of predictors, indicating that the model provides a reliable estimate of the influence of these variables on women’s development. The standard error of the estimate (0.42145) further suggests that the predictions made by the model are reasonably precise.

Table 2: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	28.451	4	7.113	40.037	0.000
Residual	13.762	43	0.178		
Total	42.213	47			

Predictors: (Constant), Mentorship & Sponsorship, Training & Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, Promotion Fairness.

Source: Primary Data, 2020

The ANOVA results in Table 2 confirm that the regression model is statistically significant, with an F-value of 40.037 and a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that the combined effect of Mentorship & Sponsorship, Training & Skill Development, Work-Life Balance Policies, and Promotion Fairness significantly predicts women’s development in the institution. In practical terms, this finding shows that interventions targeting these areas can meaningfully enhance the professional growth and development of female staff. *A theme emerging from interviews reflects the importance of fair promotion practices. One respondent stated, “I feel motivated to perform better when I know promotions are fair and based on merit rather than favoritism.”*

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.784	0.301		2.604	0.012
Promotion Fairness	0.312	0.085	0.341	3.671	0.001
Training & Skill Development	0.285	0.079	0.318	3.608	0.001
Work-Life Balance Policies	0.241	0.072	0.268	3.347	0.002
Mentorship & Sponsorship	0.219	0.068	0.247	3.221	0.002

a. Dependent Variable: Women's Development.

Source: Primary Data, 2020

The constant term in the model is 0.784 with a standard error of 0.301, which is statistically significant at $p = 0.012$. This indicates that even in the absence of the predictor variables, there is a baseline level of women’s development in the university, suggesting that other intrinsic or unmeasured factors contribute to the professional growth of women.

Promotion Fairness has the highest unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.312$) and a standardized Beta of 0.341, indicating that it is the strongest predictor among the four variables. The t-value of 3.671 with a significance level of 0.001 confirms that promotion fairness significantly and positively influences women's development. In practical terms, this implies that when promotions are conducted transparently and equitably, women are more likely to experience career growth, professional recognition, and increased engagement in institutional activities. One respondent emphasized this by noting, "I feel motivated to perform better when I know promotions are fair and based on merit rather than favoritism." This qualitative insight reinforces the quantitative finding, showing that equitable promotion policies foster confidence and drive among female staff.

Training and Skill Development also emerges as a significant predictor, with an unstandardized coefficient of 0.285 and a standardized Beta of 0.318, statistically significant at $p = 0.001$. This indicates that for every unit increase in the quality or frequency of training programs, there is a corresponding increase in women's development outcomes. Training provides women with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to pursue higher positions and assume leadership roles within the university. Qualitative feedback from respondents supports this observation, with one noting, "Through training programs, I have gained skills that allow me to apply for higher positions, which I wouldn't have been confident to do before."

Work-Life Balance Policies also show a positive and significant influence on women's development, with a coefficient of 0.241, a Beta of 0.268, and significance at $p = 0.002$. This highlights that institutional policies enabling flexibility, such as adaptable working hours, leave arrangements, and support for familial responsibilities, are instrumental in allowing women to balance professional and personal demands. One respondent highlighted, "The flexible schedules help me manage family responsibilities while still advancing in my academic role," demonstrating the practical impact of supportive policies on women's career progression.

Mentorship and Sponsorship, while slightly lower than the other predictors, remains a significant contributor to women's development, with a coefficient of 0.219, a Beta of 0.247, and $p = 0.002$. This underscores the importance of structured mentorship programs, sponsorship, and guidance from senior colleagues in facilitating career advancement. Through mentorship, women gain access to critical networks, advice on career planning, and encouragement to pursue leadership positions. A respondent remarked, "Having a mentor who supports my career choices has given me confidence to apply for leadership roles I thought were beyond my reach," illustrating the empowering role of mentorship in shaping career trajectories.

Conclusions

Promotion Fairness emerged as the most influential predictor of women's development, with the highest unstandardized coefficient and Beta value. This finding suggests that when promotions are conducted transparently, equitably, and based on merit, women experience greater motivation, professional satisfaction, and engagement in institutional activities. The qualitative evidence supports this, with respondents emphasizing that equitable promotion practices encourage them to perform better and aspire to leadership roles. Therefore, it can be concluded that institutional policies ensuring fairness in promotion are fundamental to enhancing women's career trajectories in higher education.

Training and Skill Development was also found to significantly impact women's development. This indicates that access to professional development programs, workshops, and capacity-building initiatives equips women with the necessary skills and competencies to pursue higher positions, assume leadership roles, and participate more actively in decision-making processes. Respondents highlighted that training increases their confidence to apply for advanced positions and strengthens their ability to contribute meaningfully to the university. Thus, it can be concluded that systematic and targeted training programs are vital for empowering women and fostering their professional growth.

Work-Life Balance Policies were shown to positively influence women's development, highlighting the importance of flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and supportive institutional measures that help women balance professional responsibilities with personal and family obligations. The findings indicate that when women are supported in managing work-life demands, they are better able to focus on career advancement and participate effectively in academic and administrative roles. Respondents reinforced this by noting that flexible schedules allow them to fulfill personal commitments while pursuing professional goals. Consequently, it can be concluded that implementing and maintaining comprehensive work-life balance policies is essential for sustaining women's development in academic institutions.

Recommendations

Institutional promotion policies should be reviewed and strengthened to ensure transparency, fairness, and merit-based decision-making. The study established that Promotion Fairness was the strongest predictor of women's development, indicating that inequitable promotion practices can demotivate female staff and limit their career growth. It is recommended that the university implements clear, well-documented promotion criteria, communicates these criteria widely, and establishes a monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance. Promotion committees should include diverse members to reduce bias, and feedback should be provided to all applicants to improve transparency. By doing so, women will have equal opportunities to progress in their careers, and

institutional trust and motivation will increase. One respondent emphasized, "I feel encouraged to apply for leadership positions when I know the promotion process is fair," highlighting the practical impact of this recommendation.

Comprehensive training and skill development programs should be expanded and systematically implemented. The study showed that Training and Skill Development significantly contributes to women's professional advancement. To address this, the university should regularly organize workshops, seminars, and capacity-building initiatives targeting female staff, focusing on leadership, research, management, and technical skills. Additionally, support for attending external training programs, conferences, and short courses should be provided. Establishing a structured professional development calendar ensures that women have consistent opportunities to upgrade their skills, gain confidence, and qualify for higher academic and administrative positions. A respondent noted, "Through training programs, I gained skills that allowed me to pursue leadership roles I would not have considered before," demonstrating the transformative effect of skill-building initiatives.

Work-life balance policies should be strengthened and institutionalized to support women in balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family obligations. The study highlighted the positive influence of Work-Life Balance Policies on women's development. The university should consider implementing flexible working hours, remote work options where feasible, parental leave, childcare support, and wellness programs. Leadership should actively promote these policies and encourage female staff to utilize them without fear of stigma or negative evaluation. This will enable women to maintain career momentum while managing personal responsibilities, ultimately enhancing retention and productivity. A respondent remarked, "Flexible schedules allow me to manage family duties while still contributing fully to my department," reinforcing the importance of supportive policies.

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