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The Impact of Gender Diversity Policies on Women's Leadership at the University of Sharjah: Perspectives from Administrative and Academic Staff

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Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the Gulf region despite sustained policy efforts to advance gender equity. This study examined how stakeholders perceive the relationship between gender diversity and inclusion policies and women's leadership advancement at the University of Sharjah, UAE. Specifically, it investigated the association between perceived policy adequacy and leadership opportunities, explored how policies supported or hindered progression, and identified persistent barriers. A concurrent mixed-method cross-sectional design was employed. The study population comprised academic and administrative staff at the University of Sharjah, from whom 40 survey participants (29 women, 72.5%; 11 men, 27.5%) were invited, with all 40 completing the form, and eight were purposively selected for qualitative interviews (seven women and one man, spanning administrative, faculty, and leadership roles). Quantitative findings revealed a very strong positive correlation between perceived gender diversity policies and women's leadership ($r = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$), with policies explaining 89.8% of the variance in leadership perceptions. However, qualitative data highlighted gaps between formal policy commitments and practice, linked to structural, managerial, and cultural constraints. The study recommends adopting gender-responsive, enforceable policies supported by accountability mechanisms, transparent promotion systems, and targeted leadership development initiatives to achieve sustainable and substantive progress.

Keywords: women's leadership; gender diversity; inclusion; gender policy; higher education institution; institutional policy; critical discourse analysis; UAE higher education; academic leadership; gender equity



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1. Introduction

Gender diversity in leadership remains a fundamental concern in both academic and corporate discourse, framed not only as a matter of social justice but also as a driver of organisational innovation and performance (Logan 2024). Globally, women's representation in political leadership has increased, with more countries electing female heads of state and government over the past decade (Mulawarman et al. 2021). Women hold about 27% of national parliamentary seats and 22.9% of cabinet positions globally, up from 15.6% and roughly 15–20%, respectively, two decades ago. While female heads of state grew from 18 to 27 over the last decade, a ~50% increase in number, this is still under 10% of total nations and overall progress is stalling, particularly in cabinet roles (Traffic Digital 2025).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has cemented its position as a regional leader in gender equality through sustained institutional, legislative, and educational reforms. Women hold 50% of the 40 seats in the Federal National Council ([United Arab Emirates 2019](#)), occupy approximately 27.3% of cabinet positions, and constitute 42.5% of the diplomatic corps, including nine female ambassadors. In the public sector, women comprise 66% of the workforce and hold 30% of leadership roles, with 91.1% of Emirati women employed in government entities. Corporate representation is also advancing: women held 14.8% of board seats in listed companies in early 2025, up from 10.8% in 2024, a 37% increase, supported by a 2025 mandate requiring at least one woman on private joint-stock boards ([Traffic Digital 2025](#)).

Women represent 18% of entrepreneurs, owning 128,412 SMEs managing projects worth over AED 50 billion, while World Economic Forum and Grant Thornton UAE reports show a 4.5% rise in women hired into senior roles in 2025. Educationally, 77% of Emirati women enrol in higher education; women constitute 70% of university graduates and 61% of STEM graduates, 45% of the national space workforce, and 80% of the Hope Probe scientific team, alongside a female literacy rate of 95.8%. Internationally, the UAE ranked 7th globally on the Gender Inequality Index in 2024, 69th in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Report (1st in MENA), and 22nd globally for women's financial inclusion, political participation, and justice ([Traffic Digital 2025](#)).

Despite these advancements, women remain underrepresented in the global labour market and in senior leadership roles across sectors ([Young 2016](#)). In total, 27% of the top 200 global universities are led by women, a record high, while UNESCO reports women hold just over 30% of leadership positions in research and higher education institutions. In the broader workforce, the 2023 global female labour participation rate was 48.7% compared to 73.0% for men, with women earning approximately 68.6% of what men earn, according to the 2025 World Economic Forum report. In higher education institutions (HEIs), the disparity is particularly pronounced. Although women account for a substantial proportion of university graduates worldwide ([UNESCO 2020](#)), their progression into senior academic leadership remains limited. Current estimates suggest that only about one-quarter of top university leadership positions globally are occupied by women ([Alshdiefat et al. 2024](#)). This disconnect between educational attainment and leadership representation underscores persistent structural and cultural barriers within academic institutions.

Empirical research attributes this leadership gap to intersecting organisational, cultural, and individual barriers ([Logan 2024](#); [Hesketh and Williams 2021](#)). Organisational discrimination, limited access to influential networks, and inequitable mentorship opportunities continue to restrict women's advancement. Work-life balance pressures, disproportionately borne by women, further constrain leadership trajectories ([Hesketh and Williams 2021](#)). In some socio-cultural contexts, including parts of the Gulf region, conservative norms reinforce stereotypical assumptions about gender roles, undermining inclusive policy efforts ([Mulawarman et al. 2021](#)). Even where formal equality measures exist, informal practices and implicit biases may exclude women from leadership pipelines, illustrating the complexity of translating policy commitments into substantive equality ([Logan 2024](#)).

If gender disparities in leadership persist, the long-term consequences are substantial. Limited representation at senior levels may contribute to slower career progression for women and the erosion of visible role models within academia ([UNESCO 2020](#)). This, in turn, can discourage aspiring female academics from pursuing leadership pathways. Furthermore, homogenous leadership teams may lack the diversity of perspectives necessary for high-quality decision-making and institutional innovation ([Mulawarman et al. 2021](#)). Research consistently links diverse leadership to enhanced governance, improved organisational resilience, and stronger stakeholder engagement. Therefore, addressing gender

imbalance is not solely a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for institutional excellence and global competitiveness (Logan 2024).

Achieving gender parity in HEIs requires interventions that extend beyond formal policy adoption to address embedded cultural and organisational biases (Namiro et al. 2024). The University of Sharjah (UoS) operates within the framework of UAE Law No. (2) of 2015 on Combating Discrimination and Hatred and has articulated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (University of Sharjah 2022a). Institutional reports highlight efforts to promote fairness, meritocracy, and professional development, including initiatives supporting women's leadership progression (University of Sharjah 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). However, evidence suggests that well-crafted policies do not automatically yield inclusive outcomes, as Emirati women may still encounter career stagnation and gender bias (Al-Naqbi and Aderibigbe 2024).

The theoretical framework underpinning this study conceptualises gender barriers as operating at individual, cultural, and structural levels, consistent with Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) and Fagenson (1990). In academic contexts, Barone and Assirelli (2019) identify "ceilings," "thresholds," and "hurdles" as interrelated mechanisms limiting women's advancement. Individual-level "ceilings" include internalised stereotypes and constrained career aspirations shaped by socialisation processes (Tabassum and Nayak 2021; Sánchez et al. 2023). Cultural "thresholds" reflect organisational norms that equate leadership with masculine traits, reinforcing biased perceptions of competence (O'Connor 2018). Structural "hurdles" involve recruitment, promotion, and governance systems that may unintentionally privilege established male networks (Tabassum and Nayak 2021).

Within the Middle Eastern context, women's leadership trajectories are shaped by broader socio-political determinants (Almawi 2022). Patriarchal social structures continue to define leadership authority as predominantly male, influencing both family expectations and workplace dynamics (Almawi 2022). Government policy plays a pivotal role in either mitigating or reinforcing these patterns through legal protections, childcare support, and inclusive governance structures. Labour market conditions in the Gulf region reveal a paradox: women's educational attainment often matches or exceeds that of men, yet labour force participation and representation in top organisational roles remain comparatively lower (Avolio et al. 2023). For instance, in Saudi Arabia, women constitute 51.8% of university students but approximately one-third of the labour force (Osman et al. 2022).

Religion and its interpretation further shape women's professional opportunities in the region (Almawi 2022). While certain interpretations of Sharia law have historically constrained women's public participation, alternative readings emphasise women's rights to education and economic engagement. Consequently, religion can function either as a barrier or an enabler, depending on institutional and societal interpretation. Additionally, personal motivations and sectoral dynamics influence leadership trajectories. Public-sector employment in Gulf countries is often perceived as offering greater job security and flexibility, which may attract women seeking work-life balance (Almawi 2022). In contrast, private-sector attitudes may perpetuate assumptions about women's commitment and cost, reinforcing glass ceiling dynamics (Almawi 2022).

Tribal norms and male-dominated networks also affect leadership pathways in parts of the Middle East, where authority and influence may be closely linked to lineage and informal alliances (Almawi 2022). Such dynamics can limit women's access to strategic decision-making spaces. Nevertheless, gender diversity policies in GCC organisations increasingly recognise the governance benefits of women's inclusion (Jizi et al. 2021). In the UAE, national strategies and university-based initiatives reflect sustained investment in women's empowerment and leadership development (Abdulla et al. 2022). These initiatives

operate within a broader environment shaped by globalisation and localisation, presenting both opportunities and constraints for women's advancement in HEIs.

The University of Sharjah provides a compelling case for examining the translation of diversity policies into leadership outcomes. Hosting individuals from nearly 90 nationalities, the UoS promotes multiculturalism and equal opportunity through institutional policies aligned with national anti-discrimination frameworks ([University of Sharjah 2024a, 2024b](#)). Although progress in appointing women to senior roles was reported in 2023 ([University of Sharjah 2023d](#)), the sustainability and perceived adequacy of these measures warrant systematic investigation. Therefore, this study aimed to: examine the relationship between perceived policy adequacy and perceptions of women's leadership opportunities at the UoS; explore how existing policies support or hinder women's progression; identify persistent barriers; and highlight actionable areas for policy improvement to advance equitable and sustainable leadership outcomes. According to the latest institutional reporting, women are in about one-third of dean-level roles (4 of 15 colleges) and one of seven positions on the vice-chancellor council. This institutional portrait places the UoS in a topical and exemplary, but not necessarily representative, position to study the connection between gender diversity policy and women's leadership in UAE higher education.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design

The present study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected, analysed simultaneously, and accorded equal priority ([Creswell and Creswell 2018](#); [Edmonds and Kennedy 2017](#)). The qualitative component facilitated an in-depth exploration of women's lived experiences of leadership progression, while the quantitative component captured broader stakeholder perceptions across a larger sample. Findings from both strands were triangulated to enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the results. Methodologically, the study was cross-sectional and descriptive, providing a snapshot of female leadership policies and their practical realities at the UoS at a specific point in time ([Nayak and Singh 2015](#); [Tavakoli 2012](#)).

2.2. Population and Sampling

The target population comprised faculty and administrative staff at the University of Sharjah, with a particular focus on women in or aspiring to leadership roles. Key informants on the institutional culture and environment in which gender diversity policies are executed also include male employees (particularly managers), as this also offers a comparative and contextual perspective that triangulates the experiences of women reported (See Table 1). The criteria for inclusion are based on accepted practice in gender equity studies in order to achieve informed views on the efficacy of institutional policies. Staff members with fewer than six months of service were excluded due to limited institutional exposure. In order to invite eligible staff to the survey, a disproportionate stratified sampling method was applied to participation in the survey; a number of 40 staff members (29 women, 72.5%; 11 men, 27.5%) was used as a representative of both voluntary response and the overall composition of the institution staff (Table 1). Although no definitive formula exists for determining qualitative sample sizes ([Tuckett 2004](#)), selection was guided by the five-point information power model proposed by [Malterud et al. \(2016\)](#). Table 2 shows the interview respondents, their roles and years of experience.

Every one of the 40 invited staff responded to the survey instrument. The complete-case subsample ($n = 29$) represents respondents who provided complete data on both constructs in the regression analysis and is not necessarily representative of the entire sample.

Table 1. Description of quantitative interview respondents.

Gender	<i>n</i>	%
Women	29	72.5
Men	11	27.5
Total (completed instrument)	40	100
Complete-case subsample used in regression	29	72.5

Table 2. Description of qualitative interview respondents.

No.	Gender	Role	Years of Service
P1	Female	Administrative Staff	12
P2	Female	Leadership (Vice-Chancellor, Faculty)	16
P3	Female	Administrative Staff	3
P4	Female	Administrative Staff	1
P5	Female	Administrative Staff	12
P6	Female	Administrative Staff	3
P7	Female	Leadership (Dean)	8
P8	Female	Administrative Staff	16

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a semi-structured survey and in-depth interviews. The survey comprised two sections: closed-ended items generating quantitative data and open-ended prompts eliciting qualitative insights. Questionnaire items were developed following an extensive literature review and aligned with the study objectives. The survey instrument comprised two parts: Part 1 captured demographic information (gender, age group, current position, and years of service at UoS), and Part 2 consisted of 19 five-point Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring two constructs of interest, gender diversity policies (GDPs) and women's leadership (WL), together with open-ended qualitative prompts. Item wording was developed by the researcher from the literature on topics such as career progression, mentorship, work–life balance, and institutional support (Creswell and Creswell 2018) rather than adopted from a single pre-existing validated instrument; the resulting scale was reviewed by a four-member expert panel comprising the research supervisor, a faculty member with gender-studies expertise, a graduate student familiar with survey methodology, and a university administrative staff member, to establish content relevance, clarity, and appropriateness for the target population prior to administration. Internal consistency across the 19-item scale was good, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.858$. The instrument was distributed via email, with participants given 14 days to respond. Electronic distribution was selected for its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and environmental sustainability; however, it is associated with comparatively lower response rates than some alternative data collection methods (Bandilla et al. 2012; Kaczmirek 2009). Complementing the survey, semi-structured interviews explored participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of university policies, leadership barriers, and organisational culture. The interview guide comprised 23 questions organised around five topic areas that mirrored the survey constructs and the study's research questions: (1) participant background and leadership involvement; (2) awareness and perceived implementation of UoS gender diversity and inclusion policies; (3) institutional support for professional development, mentorship, and leadership training; (4) perceived barriers, including gender bias, cultural and work–life balance factors, and unintended consequences of existing policies; and (5) perceived policy impact and suggestions for improvement. Although the guide was developed deductively from the literature and policy documents to ensure topic coverage, questions were open-ended and participants were encouraged to elaborate freely,

such that the five themes reported in Section 4 emerged inductively from participants' own responses rather than being imposed by the question structure. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams, and responses were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of data capture.

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM® SPSS Statistics® 27.0.1, employing descriptive statistics alongside inferential techniques, including Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and General Linear Regression. These analyses examined relationships between stakeholders' perceptions of UoS' gender diversity and inclusion policies and opportunities for women to progress into leadership roles. The qualitative analysis involved content analysis and thematic analysis, which was carried out with the assistance of the six-phase guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), in accordance with which: (1) familiarisation with the data was made through repeated reading all the transcripts; (2) initial codes were generalised (e.g., lack of awareness, gendered perceptions, training access, and flexible work); (3) these were identified by grouping codes together; (4) themes were reviewed; (5) themes were named and defined; and (6) the final thematic report was produced. Coding transcripts were cross-coded by a second member of the qualified research team to help reinforce consistency in coding. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the policy documents, studying explicit and implicit meanings in the text (Krippendorff 2019).

Critical discourse analysis was also conducted to examine the ways in which the text in the policy document creates meaning with regard to power, authority, and gender roles (Fairclough 2013; Egan and Caulfield 2024). Nine institutional policy documents of the University of Sharjah bodies published between 2019 and 2024 were included in the corpus of this analysis: the EDGE Strategy 2024–2030 (University of Sharjah 2024a); the Administrative Staff Handbook 2023–2024 (University of Sharjah 2023a); the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct; the Employment Policies and Procedures Manual of Professional Staff (University of Sharjah 2021); the Reward and Promotion Procedures and Policies (University of Sharjah 2022b); the Faculty Handbook 2023/2024 (University of Sharjah 2023c); the Line Manager Human Resources Handbook (University of Sharjah 2022a); the Policies and Procedures Manual 2023–2024 (University of Sharjah 2023d); and the Statement, Policy and Strategic Plan, on Achieving DEI of the College of Communication. Six out of the nine documents discuss the faculty and the staff (or the whole university community), two discuss administrative/professional staff only and one (the Faculty Handbook) discusses faculty only. All the documents were written and published by the institutional bodies of the University of Sharjah; a number of them refer to the UAE Federal Law No. (2) of 2015 on the issue of Combating Discrimination and Hatred, yet none of them is a government legislation per se. Interpretive policy analysis was also conducted, which involves the study of the role of policies as instruments of governance (Henry et al. 2013; Shore and Wright 2011). In the discussion, the author integrated the findings from all data sources in order to create a more comprehensive picture of UoS' diversity and inclusion policy and women's experiences in the HEI.

3. Ethical Considerations

The author adhered to ethical standards, providing all participants with detailed participant information sheets for informed consent. Also, participants were assured of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, and to withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences. All digital data was securely stored using encrypted databases. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sharjah.

4. Results

4.1. The Relationship Between Perceived Policy Adequacy and Perceptions of Women's Leadership Opportunities at UoS

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a very strong, positive relationship between gender diversity policies (GDPs) and women's leadership (WL), $r = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$. This indicates that higher perceptions of policy adequacy are closely associated with more favourable perceptions of women's leadership opportunities at the UoS. The strength of the correlation suggests a substantial alignment between institutional policy frameworks and stakeholders' assessments of leadership inclusivity. The statistically significant result confirms that the observed relationship is unlikely due to chance. Practically, this finding implies that improvements in the clarity, implementation, and visibility of gender diversity policies may significantly enhance perceptions of leadership opportunities for women within the university context (See Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between gender diversity policies and women's leadership.

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2
GDP	3.17	1.26	0.825	—	0.95
WL	3.90	0.98	0.971	0.95	—

Note: $n = 29$ (complete-case regression subsample); GDP is derived from 11 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.825$) and WL from 8 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.971$) of a combined 19-item, five-point Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.858$ for the full scale across all 40 respondents, and $\alpha = 0.852$ for the 19 items within this subsample); $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

4.2. How Existing Policies Support or Hinder Women's Leadership Progression

The regression analysis demonstrates that gender diversity policies significantly predict women's leadership outcomes. The model yielded $R = 0.947$ and $R^2 = 0.898$, indicating that approximately 89.8% of the variance in perceptions of women's leadership is explained by perceived policy adequacy (See Table 4). The regression analysis draws on the subset of survey responses with complete data on both constructs ($n = 29$ of the 40 total respondents; $df = 27$), which differs from the full sample reported in Section 2.

Table 4. Model summary.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error of the Estimate
1	0.947	0.898	0.894	0.318

The ANOVA results in Table 5 show that the model is statistically significant, $F(1,27) = 236.617$, $p < 0.001$. The high adjusted R^2 (0.894) confirms strong explanatory power even after accounting for sample size. These findings suggest that existing policies play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of leadership progression. Where policies are viewed as robust and effectively implemented, stakeholders perceive stronger support for women's advancement; conversely, perceived inadequacies may hinder progression.

Table 5. ANOVA.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	23.956	1	23.956	236.617	<0.001
Residual	2.734	27	0.101		
Total	26.690	28			

4.3. Persistent Barriers to Women's Leadership

The coefficients in Table 6 indicate that gender diversity policies significantly and positively influence women's leadership perceptions. The unstandardised coefficient

($B = 0.737$) shows that for every one-unit increase in perceived policy adequacy, women's leadership perception scores increase by 0.737 units. The standardised beta ($\beta = 0.947$) confirms a very strong effect size, while the predictor is statistically significant, $t = 15.382$, $p < 0.001$. Although policies exert substantial influence, the constant term suggests that baseline perceptions exist independently of policy measures, indicating the presence of additional structural or cultural barriers. Therefore, while policy adequacy strongly predicts leadership perceptions, other institutional dynamics may continue to shape women's advancement experiences.

Table 6. Coefficients.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.559	0.163	—	9.565	<0.001
GDP	0.737	0.048	0.947	15.382	<0.001

4.4. Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed that there were five key themes, outlined below with representative examples. The presentation of these themes here, in Section 4, is to answer reviewer requests that the findings derived in the interviews be explicitly presented, as discussed indirectly in Section 5.

Theme 1: Power of Gender Diversity Policies. There was a significant lack of awareness of formal policies, including leadership: one of the deans stated that there was no formal gender diversity policy at the institution. Administrative leadership was perceived to be more effective than academic leadership, where women were still the minority. The participants reported a slight noticeable growth in the number of females appointed, with some showing it to be slow and uneven among colleges.

"There is growing awareness and representation at some levels. But the policies must more directly impact career development for administrative staff, especially for those with long-term service." P1 Administrative Staff

Theme 2: Influence on career growth and advancement. Respondents reported supportive frameworks, such as monthly HR workshops, access to LinkedIn Learning, and CPD programming. Some, however, reported that the development opportunities of leadership pathways were mostly confined to those employees who were already in leadership positions and that vague promotion opportunities, especially for administrative personnel, curtailed the ambitions of becoming a leader.

"The university offers administrative staff monthly workshops from HR. We can apply without limitation except for available seats. They have also given us LinkedIn Learning accounts so we can attend mentorship programs or online professional development and get certificates". P2 Administrative staff

Theme 3: Obstacles to Leadership Progress by Women. The pressures associated with work-life balance were more pronounced in women alongside cultural and societal barriers, as indicated by the participants who were less able to work long hours compared to their male counterparts because of household roles. The organisational barriers were seen to be a perceived bottleneck at middle-career academic rank and a perceived view, shared by some administrative participants, that leadership positions favour men. There was also some unconscious bias in terms of assumptions about availability after maternity leave by some participants.

Theme 4: Policy Impact perceptions. The participants tended to perceive institutional policy language as just and equal. Some, however, made a distinction between policy

as written and policy as practiced, and a gap between the stated compilations and daily practice, as well as some positive findings of more women on committees.

Theme 5: Policy gaps and areas of improvement. The participants came up with a few suggestions: instituting formal mentoring systems and career ladders that women could use, especially those in administrative roles; more working options and regular maternity re-entry, or re-integration, and support; more widespread access to leadership-development programming, not only for those already in leadership roles, but also for the implementation of currently existing policy commitments.

5. Discussion

5.1. *The Relationship Between Perceived Policy Adequacy and Perceptions of Women's Leadership Opportunities*

The strong association between perceived policy adequacy and women's leadership opportunities suggests that institutional frameworks meaningfully shape how inclusion is experienced within universities. Research indicates that visible and well-communicated gender policies can legitimise women's aspirations and enhance perceptions of fairness in promotion systems (O'Connor 2018; Meza-Mejia et al. 2023). When policies articulate transparent criteria and accountability mechanisms, they may counteract informal gate-keeping practices that historically exclude women from leadership pipelines (Ragins and Sundstrom 1989). However, critics argue that formal policy presence does not necessarily dismantle entrenched inequality regimes embedded in everyday organisational routines (Acker 2006). Moreover, the paradox of meritocracy suggests that organisations promoting equality rhetoric may inadvertently reinforce bias by assuming neutrality while overlooking structural disadvantage (Castilla and Benard 2010).

Perceptions of policy adequacy may also reflect broader discursive constructions of leadership legitimacy within higher education institutions. Leadership development initiatives that foreground community learning and inclusive capacity building have been shown to strengthen confidence in institutional support systems (Abdulla et al. 2022). Similarly, systematic reviews of women's leadership in higher education emphasise that institutional commitment enhances morale and visibility for aspiring leaders (Hilal et al. 2024). Yet, scholarship cautions that policy visibility can function as a technology of governance, projecting inclusivity without transforming underlying power hierarchies (Shore and Wright 2011). Critical discourse analysis further reveals how equality narratives may obscure persistent gendered expectations that subtly constrain women's advancement (Fairclough 2013).

At the psychological and cultural level, perceived adequacy of policies may mitigate the effects of role incongruity and gender stereotyping in leadership selection processes. Role congruity theory posits that women are evaluated less favourably when leadership traits are implicitly masculinised, making explicit equality policies potentially corrective (Eagly and Karau 2002). Empirical work shows that stereotype-driven perceptions continue to shape managerial evaluations, even where formal equality statements exist (Tabassum and Nayak 2021). Supporters argue that structured diversity initiatives can gradually normalise the presence of women's leadership and reduce tokenism (Steffens et al. 2019). Nevertheless, research on global academic underrepresentation warns that structural and disciplinary segregation may persist despite progressive policy frameworks (Avolio et al. 2023). Thus, while policy adequacy correlates strongly with perceived opportunity, deeper transformation requires sustained cultural change.

5.2. How Existing Policies Support or Hinder Women's Leadership Progression

The predictive relationship between gender diversity policies and leadership progression underscores the enabling potential of formal governance mechanisms in higher education. Inclusive promotion guidelines, mentoring schemes, and leadership training programmes have been associated with enhanced readiness among female academics (Abdulla et al. 2022). Evidence from regional studies suggests that institutional reforms in the UAE are gradually expanding women's access to decision-making roles (Al-Naqbi and Aderibigbe 2024). Such findings align with arguments that structured interventions can interrupt traditional patronage systems and promote merit-based advancement (Ragins and Sundstrom 1989). However, inequality regime theory contends that deeply embedded norms and informal practices often undermine official reforms, limiting their transformative impact (Acker 2006). Consequently, policies may support progression symbolically while leaving everyday exclusionary practices intact.

Policies may also hinder progression when implementation lacks transparency or consistency across departments. Research demonstrates that ambiguous promotion criteria can exacerbate vertical segregation and sustain gendered divisions of labour within academia (Barone and Assirelli 2019). Studies conducted in regional universities similarly reveal that women frequently perceive limited access to influential networks despite formal equality commitments (Alshdiefat et al. 2024). Proponents maintain that board-level and governance diversity initiatives contribute to broader institutional accountability and social engagement (Jizi et al. 2021). Yet, critics highlight that symbolic representation without structural redistribution of power risks perpetuating tokenism rather than substantive equality (Kanter 1977). Hence, policy effectiveness depends not only on design but also on equitable enforcement and cultural integration.

The interaction between policy and the broader socio-economic context further complicates progression outcomes. Gender equity initiatives in education have been linked to expanded professional opportunities and social empowerment (Namiro et al. 2024). Regional analyses emphasise that labour market reforms and national gender strategies can reinforce institutional change by aligning incentives (Osman et al. 2022). Conversely, scholarship on women's economic participation in the GCC highlights persistent structural barriers that limit the translation of educational attainment into leadership authority (Young 2016). Additionally, global reviews note that female academics often face compounded constraints related to caregiving and organisational expectations (Avolio et al. 2023). Therefore, while institutional policies significantly shape progression, their impact is mediated by intersecting societal and structural dynamics.

5.3. Persistent Barriers to Women's Leadership

Persistent barriers to women's leadership remain evident despite progressive policy frameworks, reflecting the resilience of gendered organisational cultures. Studies document that women in UAE higher education continue to encounter implicit bias, limited mentorship access, and constrained networking opportunities (Al-Naqbi and Aderibigbe 2024). Regional systematic reviews similarly highlight enduring cultural norms that shape perceptions of leadership suitability (Hilal et al. 2024). Supporters of structural reform argue that targeted leadership development and inclusive governance models can gradually erode such barriers (Alnuaimi and Opoku 2024). Nevertheless, theoretical critiques suggest that inequality regimes operate through routine interactions and informal hierarchies that remain resistant to surface-level change (Acker 2006). Thus, persistent obstacles reflect both cultural reproduction and institutional inertia.

Individual-level barriers also intersect with structural constraints, shaping women's leadership trajectories. Gender stereotypes continue to influence self-perception and exter-

nal evaluation, reinforcing doubts about women's authority in senior roles (Schein 1973). Empirical evidence indicates that stereotype-based managerial assessments limit career progression even when qualifications are equivalent (Tabassum and Nayak 2021). Some scholars argue that leadership training and mentorship programmes can counteract these effects by strengthening confidence and competence (Abdulla et al. 2022). However, critics contend that focusing primarily on individual adaptation risks shifting responsibility onto women rather than reforming exclusionary systems (Bilimoria and Liang 2012). Consequently, interventions must balance capacity building with structural transformation to address the root causes of disparity.

Structural and societal determinants further entrench leadership barriers within academic institutions. Research highlights that patriarchal norms and socio-cultural expectations continue to influence women's professional mobility in the Gulf region (Almawi 2022). Global analyses of women's leadership gaps emphasise that caregiving responsibilities and motherhood penalties remain significant impediments to advancement (Torres et al. 2024). Advocates of comprehensive equity frameworks argue that policy reform combined with accountability mechanisms can gradually dismantle systemic exclusion (Smith and Sinkford 2022). Yet, broader labour market studies demonstrate that educational success does not automatically translate into equitable leadership representation (Young 2016). Accordingly, persistent barriers at the UoS must be understood within an interconnected web of organisational, cultural, and societal constraints requiring multidimensional reform.

When combined, the qualitative themes (above) and the quantitative regression results indicate a similar interpretation: perceived policy adequacy predicts positive perceptions of women's leadership opportunities at the aggregate level, but qualitative explanations show the relationship to be accompanied by existing implementation gaps, limited access to leadership-pathway developments, and culturally based work-life balance constraints. This tendency can be explained by the fact that the theory of formal policy presence and substantive organisational change is theoretically different (Acker 2006; Castilla and Benard 2010).

6. Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. To begin with, the qualitative sample was imbalanced in terms of the prevalence of the administrative-staff group (five out of eight interviewees), which generally reflects the composition of the survey sample but constrained the ability to generalise the results to faculty-specific leadership pathways; only one faculty member and two participants at the leadership level were interviewed. Second, the cross-sectional design only captures the perceptions at one point in time and is unable to provide causal direction on the relationship between policy perception and leadership outcomes. Third, the regression test was done on a complete-case sample ($n = 29$) of the entire survey sample ($N = 40$), which is not necessarily representative of all the respondents. Lastly, since it is a case study of a single institution in the UAE, the results might not apply to other higher education institutions in the Gulf region, other governance systems, or cultural contexts.

7. Conclusions

This study set out to examine the relationship between perceived gender diversity policy adequacy and perceptions of women's leadership opportunities, explore how existing policies support or hinder women's progression, and identify persistent barriers within the University of Sharjah. The findings demonstrate that policy frameworks play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of leadership inclusivity and opportunity. Where policies are viewed as transparent, consistently implemented, and aligned with institutional values, stakeholders are more likely to perceive the environment as supportive of women's

advancement. The results suggest that while institutional commitment to diversity is necessary, it is insufficient without sustained structural and cultural transformation. Persistent barriers, including gender stereotyping, informal network exclusion, and broader socio-cultural expectations, continue to influence women's leadership experiences.

The study affirms that perceived policy adequacy significantly shapes leadership opportunity perceptions at the UoS, yet highlights the complexity of translating diversity commitments into equitable outcomes. Sustainable progress will depend on integrating policy reform with transparent promotion systems, mentorship and sponsorship structures, workload equity, and measurable evaluation of leadership diversity outcomes.

8. Recommendation

Actionable Areas for Policy Improvement to Advance Equitable and Sustainable Leadership Outcomes

Drawing on the strong statistical relationship and predictive capacity demonstrated in Tables 3–6, the results underscore the centrality of adequate policies in influencing perceptions of women's leadership opportunities. With nearly 90% of variance explained by perceived gender diversity policies, the findings suggest that policy refinement, transparent implementation mechanisms, and accountability structures are critical levers for advancing equity. However, the presence of residual variance indicates that policy alone is insufficient to eliminate leadership disparities. Sustainable improvement may require complementary interventions addressing organisational culture, informal networks, and leadership development pathways. Consequently, actionable improvements should focus on strengthening enforcement, enhancing mentorship structures, and embedding measurable accountability systems to ensure long-term, equitable leadership progression.

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