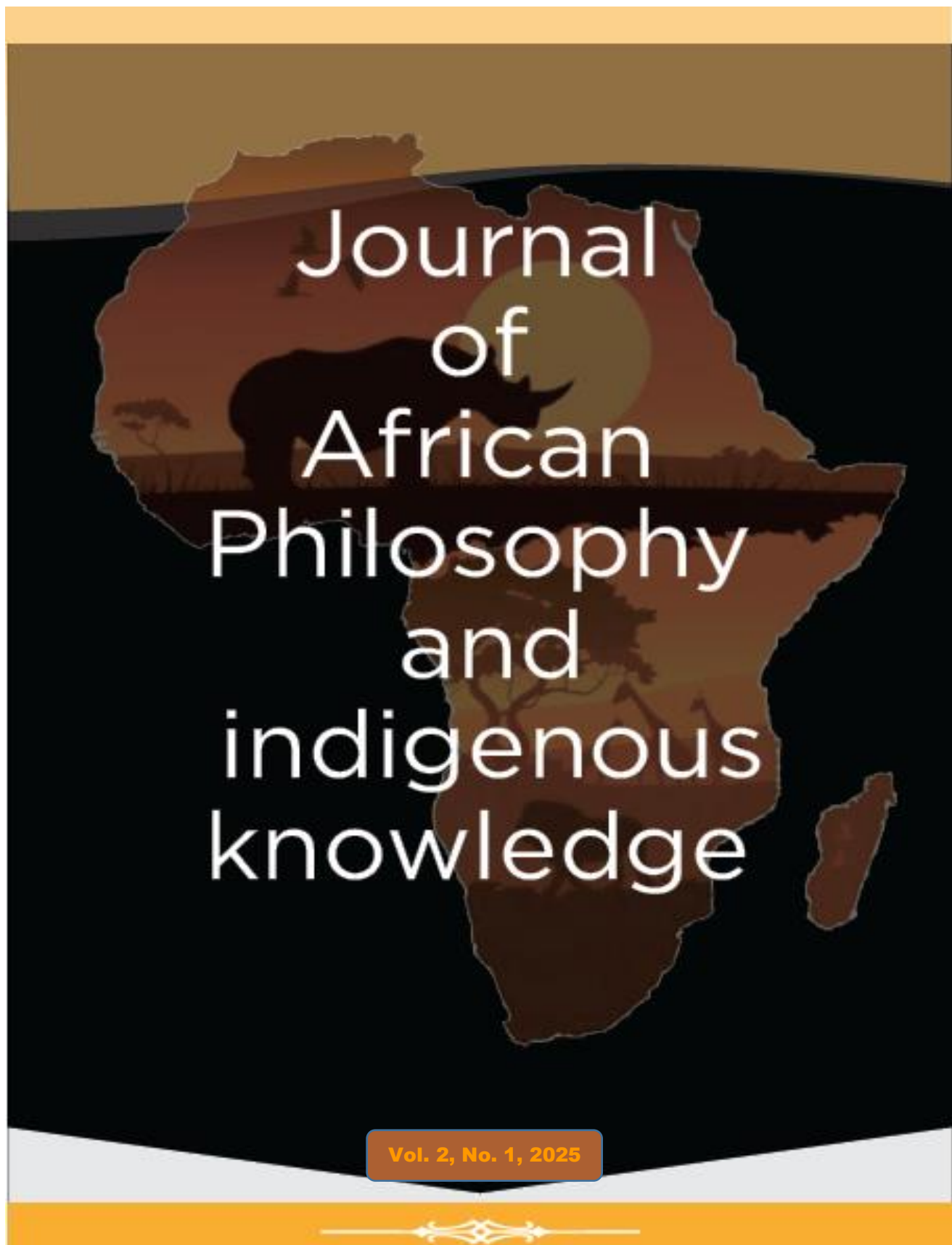




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Editorial Note

This issue of the *Journal of African Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge* presents a diverse yet intellectually unified collection of papers that examine African realities through indigenous epistemologies, philosophical analysis, institutional inquiry, and socio-cultural critique. Collectively, these contributions reaffirm the journal's commitment to centering African knowledge systems while engaging with contemporary debates in health, education, governance, technology, morality, religion, and development.

Several papers in this issue critically examine the relevance of indigenous epistemologies in addressing enduring social challenges. For example, the paper titled *Indigenous Epistemologies and the Reconfiguration of Mental Health in Urban Lagos State, Nigeria*, interrogates the dominance of Western biomedical paradigms in African mental health discourse. Drawing on qualitative interviews with indigenous practitioners, including *Babaláwo* and *Onísẹ̀gùn*, the study demonstrates that mental distress is locally understood as a relational and communal condition shaped by spiritual balance, moral conduct, and ancestral continuity. The paper argues for a pluralistic mental health framework that meaningfully integrates indigenous knowledge into urban mental health policy and practice in Nigeria.

Closely aligned with this epistemic revaluation is the paper on poverty amidst plenty in Nigeria, which interrogates the paradox of persistent poverty despite the country's abundant natural and human resources. Challenging Western-led development paradigms, the study examines African Indigenous Knowledge Systems as adaptive and pragmatic tools for alleviating poverty. By examining indigenous agriculture, informal economic networks, community governance, and traditional healthcare, the paper argues that indigenous knowledge constitutes a living system capable of complementing formal development policies. It advocates for hybrid development models that integrate indigenous practices into education, finance, and governance structures.

The issue also addresses questions of gender, education, and institutional transformation. The study on shifting gender dynamics at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe presents a longitudinal analysis of graduation trends from 2017 to 2023. Using a mixed-methods approach, the paper examines the decline in male graduation rates alongside increased female participation, situating this shift within broader socio-cultural, economic, and policy contexts. The findings link changing gender patterns to affirmative action policies and inclusive education initiatives, contributing to ongoing debates on gender equity and the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive education.

Institutional roles in development are further explored in the paper on religious institutions and grassroots development in Nigeria. Conceptualising religious institutions as faith-based, non-state actors, the study examines their contributions to welfare provision, humanitarian services, healthcare, education, and socio-economic justice, particularly in contexts where local government presence is weak. While acknowledging concerns about abuse and extremist tendencies, the paper highlights the complementary role of religious institutions in grassroots governance and recommends regulatory frameworks, including whistle-blowing mechanisms, to safeguard development outcomes.

Technology and institutional efficiency form the focus of the study on office automation in Oyo State-owned polytechnics. Employing a descriptive survey design and quantitative analysis, the paper demonstrates a significant positive relationship between office automation and job performance among office managers. The findings underscore the importance of technological transformation in public

institutions and recommend upgrading work environments to enhance productivity and administrative efficiency.

Another key thematic strand in this issue concerns the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge in the digital age. The paper on digital preservation and documentation of indigenous knowledge in Africa explores how digital technologies, including databases and machine learning tools, can support the safeguarding of Africa's knowledge heritage. Drawing on case studies from Kenya, Nigeria, and Southern Africa, the study highlights both the opportunities and ethical challenges of digital preservation, emphasising community ownership, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable partnerships as critical to success.

Finally, the paper on contemporary African culture and religion interrogates their influence on the continent's socio-economic development. Using historical and phenomenological approaches, the study attributes Africa's developmental challenges to cultural practices and religious orientations that, in the author's analysis, perpetuate corruption, injustice, and social fragmentation. The paper calls for a critical restructuring of cultural and religious frameworks in alignment with global best practices to enable sustainable development.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue demonstrate the continued relevance of African philosophy and indigenous knowledge in addressing contemporary African challenges. By engaging indigenous epistemologies alongside institutional, ethical, and technological analyses, this volume advances critical conversations on how Africa can draw on its intellectual traditions while navigating modern transformations. The editorial team acknowledges the authors, reviewers, and contributors whose scholarship has made this issue possible and looks forward to continued engagement with rigorous, context-sensitive, and transformative African scholarship. You are invited to enjoy the intellectual content of this issue.

Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu,
Anyanwu.timothy@funaail.edu.ng

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MIDLANDS STATE UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY ON SHIFTING GENDER DYNAMICS IN ZIMBABWE'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Dudziro Nhengu,

Midlands State University,

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4121-207X>

nhenqud@staff.msu.ac.zw

Abstract

This study investigated the concerning decline in male graduation rates in Zimbabwe's higher education sector over the years, through a longitudinal analysis of graduation trends at the Midlands State University over a seven-year period, 2017-2023. A mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative analysis of graduation data with a literature desk review was used to explore the interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and policy factors that contributed to this noted decline in male enrolment. Specifically, the relationship between female-centered empowerment initiatives and male disengagement from education was examined, in addition to the implications of this trend for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Inclusive Education. The initial three years of my investigation male enrolment dominating female enrolment, not only at the Midlands State University but countrywide. The analysis discovered a dramatic shift in the trend for the subsequent four years - 2020 to 2023, with females outnumbering males, achieving a graduation ratio of 52% females to 48% males, a trend which closely mirrors Zimbabwe's demographic reality. Based on the evidence from the literature review, this was attributed this shift to various efforts by the Government of Zimbabwe and the Midlands State University to implement affirmative action policies, inclusive education practices, and supportive initiatives that increased access to higher education for women and girls. The study provided a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing male graduation rates, further contributing to the discourse on promoting gender equity in tertiary education. Introducing a longitudinal aspect, the study's methodology and approach offered new insights into the trend of gender dynamics in Zimbabwe's higher education sector.

Keywords: male enrolment decline, tertiary education

Introduction

Zimbabwe's tertiary education sector has witnessed a concerning decline in male enrolment, with women outnumbering men in institutions of higher learning since 2017. The drop in male enrollment in institutions of higher learning has coincided with two significant

trends: increased efforts to promote female enrollment and a rise in substance abuse, crime, suicide and violence among male students (Nyangena, 2018). This trend has sparked debates about the unintended consequences of female-centred gender empowerment initiatives and the neglect of the male figure.

Research suggests that traditional patriarchal notions of masculinity can contribute to substance abuse among boys as a coping mechanism, or a means to assert their masculinity (Mogano, Letsoalo & Oduaran, 2025). This, in turn, can lead to increased

dropout rates and disengagement from education. Notably, foregoing research found that men exhibit specific patterns of substance abuse, and certain substances affect them differently than women (Klingemann & Klingemann, 2023). This is particularly

concerning in contexts where societal expectations around masculinity breed traditional masculinity norms that emphasize toughness, aggression, and emotional suppression, making it more challenging for boys to seek help (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2013). This can lead to a culture of Research further contends that socioeconomic factors like unemployment levels can fuel negative masculinities among boys who drop out of school, leading them to seek self-employment ventures as a means to assert their independence and provider roles (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2013; Klingemann & Klingemann, 2023). As boys prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term educational benefits, male enrollment in schools may further decline, perpetuating a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement. Such situations in turn may increase their vulnerability to substance abuse as a coping mechanism or a way to showcase the perceived masculine ideals of aggression, substance abuse, or exploitative behaviors (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2013; Klingemann & Klingemann, 2023; Teboho & Matebese-Notshulwana, 2024).

The preceding discussion portrays substance abuse as a predominantly male issue, yet this portrayal is not entirely accurate. Contrary to this notion, research focused on Southern Africa reveals that women and teenage girls are also significantly affected by drug and substance abuse.. Studies have shown that although the patterns and manner of substance use may differ between women and men, females are by no means exempt from this problem (Dada et al., 2018; Stanyard, 2023; Wechsberg et al., 2024). This finding therefore challenges the notion that reductions in male enrollment can be attributed solely to male students' use of drugs and substances, as evidence suggests that female students also engage in substance use. Thus, substance abuse may not be a unique or primary driver of declining male enrollment, and other factors may be at play. Further research is

silence, where men internalize their struggles and resort to substance abuse as a maladaptive coping mechanism, ultimately contributing to poor mental health outcomes, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

needed to explore the relationship between substance use and enrollment trends more nuancedly to better understand the underlying causes of declining male enrollment.

The decline in male enrollment is a complex issue, shaped by intertwined socio-cultural, economic, and policy factors. The analysis argues that the decline in male enrolment in institutions of higher learning is a complex issue often oversimplified by attributing it solely to female-centered gender empowerment initiatives. While it is true that the increasing focus on female empowerment may have unintentionally created a perceived disadvantage among males, this narrative neglects the multifaceted nature of the issue, which this study aims to explore. A nuanced approach is crucial, one that acknowledges the progress made by female empowerment initiatives while also addressing the complex factors driving the decline in male enrollment. This balanced perspective recognizes that promoting gender equality is not a zero-sum game, where one group's gain comes at the expense of another, but rather, an attempt to understand and address the unique challenges faced by the male child, while continuing to support the girl child, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable education system for all. Adopting a comprehensive, evidence-based approach can inform targeted interventions that cater to the specific needs of boys, while promoting inclusive and equitable education for all. Ultimately, this research seeks to support the development of strategies that advance gender equity in education, recognizing that empowering one group doesn't have to come at the expense of another.

Research Gap

The issue of declining male enrollment in higher education has garnered significant attention, yet research addressing this trend remains limited. Existing literature on tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on various inequalities (Appiah Castel et al., 2020; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Dube, 2015), but gender disparities at the graduation stage are underexplored. Past studies often overlook the importance of analyzing graduation rates as a critical indicator of gender equity in higher education.

This study addressed the research gap through a longitudinal analysis of graduation trends, examining graduation data at Midlands State University over a 7-year period, to explore the complex interplay of factors influencing low male graduation rates in higher education. Specifically, tracking students over a 3- or 4-year degree period provided insights into the trends and patterns shaping male graduation outcomes across ten faculties. Furthermore, analyzing the proportion of males and females who complete their studies offered valuable insights into gender dynamics in higher education in Zimbabwe. By placing the experiences of male students within broader social, economic, and cultural contexts, this study informs potential strategies for promoting greater gender balance. The findings have significant policy implications, highlighting the need for targeted interventions that address the specific needs of male students while promoting gender equity. These results can contribute to a more nuanced discussion about gender equity and shape evidence-based policy decisions supporting the success of both male and female students.

Study Objectives and Research Questions

The study investigated the trend of male graduation in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on Midlands State University. Through a longitudinal

analysis of graduation data, this study sought to provide a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing male graduation rates. The study had two main objectives: to assess the extent of gender disparity in graduation rates among university students in Zimbabwe, specifically at the Midlands State University, and to identify key factors contributing to the trend of male graduation rates.

To guide this investigation, two key research questions were formulated. The first research question investigated the trend and extent of gender disparity in graduation rates between male and female students from 2017 to 2023 across all faculties at Midlands State University. The second research question sought to identify effective strategies that could be employed to promote gender balance and address the challenges faced by male students in universities in Zimbabwe..

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the Social Ecological Model (SEM), a theoretical framework that recognizes the complex interplay between individual and environmental factors that influence behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1977/1994). The SEM posits that individual behaviors are shaped by multiple levels of factors, including personal, socio-cultural, economic, and policy-related factors. In the context of this study, the SEM provides a comprehensive framework for examining the complex interplay of factors influencing male students' decisions to pursue higher education. According to the SEM, individual characteristics such as motivation, self-efficacy, and academic preparedness interact with environmental factors, including family support, peer influences, institutional policies, and broader societal norms, to shape educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This model acknowledges that individual behaviors are not solely determined by personal factors, but are also influenced by the social and environmental contexts in which individuals live and learn.

The SEM's multi-faceted framework is particularly relevant to this study, as it recognizes the various levels of influence that shape male students' decisions to pursue higher education. In the context of this research, the individual level examines personal factors such as motivation and academic preparedness that impact male students' educational trajectories. The interpersonal level highlights the importance of support from family, peers, and educators, whose expectations can significantly influence male students' educational decisions. At the organizational level, institutional policies and practices at Midlands State University are considered, shedding light on how these factors either support or hinder male students' access to education. Furthermore, the community level considers broader societal norms and expectations surrounding male students' participation in higher education in Zimbabwe, revealing potential cultural and social influences on their choices. Finally, the policy level examines national and institutional policies that shape educational opportunities for male students, underscoring the critical role that policy plays in determining their access to higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the SEM conceptual framework, this study is theoretically grounded in masculinities theory, which provides a nuanced understanding of how societal expectations and power dynamics shape male identities and behaviors. Masculinities theory, as posited by Raewyn Connell (1995), recognizes that masculinity is a complex and multifaceted construct that is performed and negotiated in various social contexts. The behaviour of men, and their link to the ways and expectations of being a man are an important category of public and policy debate across the SDGs, including in education. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant, as it provides insight into how societal expectations and norms around masculinity influence men's behaviors,

attitudes, and educational outcomes (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinities theory posits that traditional notions of masculinity can be a barrier to men's engagement in education, as they may be socialized to prioritize aspects of masculinity such as physical strength, economic provision, or emotional stoicism over academic achievement (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). This can lead to a narrow definition of what it means to be masculine, potentially discouraging men from pursuing higher education or valuing academic success. This theory offers valuable insights into how societal expectations and norms surrounding masculinity shape men's behaviours, attitudes and outcomes.

The societal expectations and norms surrounding traditional masculinity can profoundly influence male students' academic experiences, shaping their study habits, help-seeking behaviors, and ultimately, their academic performance (DeGue, Singleton & Kearns, 2023). For instance, the pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals may lead some men to avoid seeking help or displaying vulnerability, potentially hindering their ability to ask questions, seek feedback, or collaborate with peers. Additionally, rigid adherence to masculine norms may also affect study habits, as men might prioritize independence and self-reliance over collaborative learning or seeking academic support. By understanding how these masculine norms impact academic behaviors, educators and policymakers can develop targeted strategies to support male students in achieving their full potential. The way they perceive themselves in relation to women and the need to conform to traditional masculine norms can impact their academic performance and overall well-being. For instance, the phenomenon of men and boys being among the majority who turn to substance abuse, leading to decreased concentration and academic underachievement, can be attributed to the pressures of conforming to societal notions of masculinity. These notions can lead to destructive behaviours as men and

boys attempt to assert their masculinity and prove themselves in a patriarchal society.

Literature review

This section builds upon existing literature on gender disparities in higher education enrollment patterns from the global to the local level, finally zeroing in to investigate the gender dimension across three components of higher education: admissions, academic progress, and graduation rates at the Midlands State University (MSU).

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically Article 26, mandates countries to provide equal opportunities for boys and girls to access the highest level of education, commensurate with the nation's resources (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Similarly, the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 2005) emphasizes education as the cornerstone of human rights, with access and participation being crucial catalysts for accelerating equal educational opportunities for all. Despite these commitments, there continues to be a gap between females and their male counterparts in educational outcomes across sub-Saharan Africa.

The World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1999) reiterated the importance of education for all as the ultimate support for human rights. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) urges member states to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). The global consensus recognizes the pursuit of education to the highest possible level as an inalienable right, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity (Christie, 2010; McCowan, 2010). Specifically, SDG 4 commits member states to eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to affordable, quality education for both men and women at the tertiary level by 2030. Ferguson & Roofe (2020)

present a case on how education can move the sustainable development agenda forward in a practical manner.

Research has shown that patriarchal societal norms, inadequate policies, and historical legacies of colonialism have contributed to gender disparities that favour males against females in institutions of higher learning (Darvas et al., 2017; Machira, 2013), especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where male enrollment surpasses that of females (Norgbey, 2018; Saadat et al., 2022; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). The region exhibits the most pronounced disparity against women, with a Gender Parity Index (GPI) below 1 - 0.73 in 2015 and 0.8 by 2020 (World Bank, 2022), and male students constituting approximately 58% of enrollments (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Certain fields like STEM also exhibit significant underrepresentation of women. Available statistics reveal that the region trails behind the rest of the world (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Furthermore, some countries in SSA significantly lag behind in terms of female participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs (Salmi, 2020; Tandrayen-Ragoobur & Gokulsing, 2021).

For instance, in Ethiopia, Mergo (2013) found a significant gender gap in favor of males across three universities. The study revealed that the gender gap in enrollment was greater than 50%, 80%, and 90% at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels, respectively. Furthermore, females outstripped their male counterparts only in academic dismissal.

Similarly, in Rwanda, Ntawihwa et al. (2018) reported that despite government efforts to promote gender equality, female enrollment remains lower at the secondary and tertiary levels. The study attributed this phenomenon to the under representation of women in teaching staff at higher levels of education, resulting in low levels of enrollment for females in some

programs. Additionally, gender-based violence coupled with rampant early and unwanted pregnancies at the primary and secondary levels have also been found to hinder females' progression into higher learning institutions (Morley, 2005; Ntawiha et al., 2018). For Nigeria, Oludayo et al. (2019) found that across all accredited universities, polytechnics, and colleges in all 36 States of the Nigerian Federation, male enrollments were steadily higher than females across 6 years (2010–2015).

Further research evidence shows that universities in Sub-Sahara Africa continue to exhibit gender disparities at all levels, including low female representation in senior professorial and decision-making positions (Rosa et al., 2020; Teelken & Deem; Winchester & Browning, 2015, Rosa & Clavero, 2022).

On the other hand, efforts to increase women's access to education have led to rising female enrollment, accompanied by a concerning decline in male enrollment in some universities in Sub-Sahara Africa. Substantial progress has been made, particularly following the independence of most African states, to reverse the narrative of male dominance in education created by colonial ideologies. This led to the adoption of continental policies and initiatives, such as affirmative action and STEM programs, aimed at increasing women's and girls' inclusion in education (Gyima-Brempong, 2011). In this pursuit of increasing female students' access to higher education, new patterns of gender inequality have emerged, characterized by increased female enrollment alongside decreasing male enrollment, thereby perpetuating gender disparities.

In South Africa, affirmative action policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality have contributed to a significant shift in tertiary education enrollment trends. According to a report by the Council on Higher Education (2021), the country has seen a notable increase in female enrollment, with women now

constituting a larger proportion of students in higher education institutions (63% in public higher education institutions and 67% in private higher education institutions). This trend is reflected in the country's female to male ratio of 1.41 in tertiary level education, indicating a higher enrollment rate for females (Council on Higher Education, 2019). However, despite progress in female student enrollment, significant gender disparities persist in the academic workforce (Mdlaleneni, Mandyoli & Frantz, 2021). Khuluvhe and Negogogo's 2021 fact sheet on "Gender Parity in Post-School Education and Training Opportunities" revealed that,

... there are more males than females employed in academic positions (i.e. as instruction and research staff); women remain at the lower levels; they remain under-represented in science, technology and engineering and in senior executive and leadership.

Research highlights ongoing challenges faced by female academics, including exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, and victimization (Kiguwa, 2019; Sadiq et al., 2019). These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to address systemic inequalities and promote gender parity in academia. Similarly, in Namibia, efforts to promote gender equality and support women's education have led to a higher enrollment rate for females in tertiary education. The Namibia National Gender Policy (2020) highlights the importance of affirmative action policies and initiatives in promoting women's access to education. The country's female enrolment in tertiary education is 65.9%, compared to the male enrolment of 34.1%, a testament to the success of these efforts (National Council for Higher Education, 2021).

These trends in South Africa and Namibia reveal that significant strides have been made in expanding access to education, particularly for girls and women, in an effort to redress the

historical disparities perpetuated by patriarchal and colonial systems. While these affirmative actions have yielded notable progress in promoting women's and girls' education, a growing body of research suggests that men and boys are now facing distinct challenges in the education sector (Alemu, Adeagbo, Muchie and Tigabu, 2022). The pendulum's swing towards addressing gender inequality has, in some cases, led to unintended consequences, such as boys being more likely to disengage from education, underperform on standardized tests, and pursue lower-paying career paths. This emerging trend warrants closer examination, as it threatens to undermine the very fabric of inclusive and equitable education systems. By acknowledging these challenges, we can work towards creating a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play and develop targeted interventions that support all students, regardless of gender (Alemu, Adeagbo, Muchie & Tigabu, 2022; Welmond & Gregory, 2021). This phenomenon has been observed in both developed and developing countries, prompting concerns about the long-term implications for economic growth, social stability, and gender equality (Alemu, Adeagbo, Muchie & Tigabu, 2022).

The dynamic of the staggering drop in the numbers of males enrolment in institutions of higher learning is not unique to universities in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is a global challenge. Globally, the issue of declining male enrollment in higher education institutions is particularly pronounced (Ilie & Rose, 2016). According to recent statistics, the number of male students pursuing higher education has decreased significantly over the past decade, while the number of female students has continued to rise. Even in OECD countries, where significant progress has been made in promoting gender equality, notable disparities persist across various domains. For example, in the spring of 2021, men represented just 40.5 percent of undergraduate students in America — an all time low. Although this dynamic was amplified

by the Covid-19 pandemic, there is evidence that the trend has been building for 40 years (Mangan, 2022). Research investigations carried out on the same subject for universities in California, Illinois, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania revealed a 52% female vs. 42% male degree holders in the year 2025 (The Change Leader Inc., 2025). Figure 1 shows the global average for gender representations in institutions of higher learning, with female students outnumbering male students.

On average, world figures stood at 113 women for every 100 men enrolled in universities in 2020 (UNESCO, 2024). For comparative purposes, countries like Zimbabwe, which are not part of the OECD, can learn from these trends. In OECD countries, long-standing gaps in educational and job opportunities have largely narrowed or closed, yet subtle yet significant differences remain. For instance, boys tend to excel in mathematics and science, whereas girls consistently outperform boys in reading and literacy.

Moreover, the trend has been reversed in higher education, with more women than men now holding tertiary degrees. These persistent differences highlight the complexity of gender dynamics and underscore the need for nuanced approaches that address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by both boys and girls (OECD, 2024). This trend has sparked concerns among educators, policymakers, and researchers, who are seeking to understand the underlying causes of this phenomenon and identify effective strategies for promoting greater gender balance in higher education.

However, the increasing presence of women in education doesn't necessarily translate to equal opportunities or outcomes. Despite holding more tertiary degrees, women often face lower employment rates and are paid less than their male counterparts with similar qualifications. This disparity highlights that education alone is not enough to achieve gender equality.

Furthermore, stereotypical notions about girls' abilities in math persist, with many 15-year-old students still holding biases about girls' math capabilities, as evidenced by the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2019). These findings underscore the need to address the systemic and cultural barriers that prevent women from realizing their full potential, even when they have access to education, while also ensuring that boys receive equal educational opportunities and support to help them thrive alongside girls.

In fact, recent trends indicate that female students are not only enrolling in higher education at higher rates than their male counterparts but are also outperforming them academically. This shift challenges the conventional narrative that universities need to increase female representation among faculties to inspire and motivate female students (Rosa & Clavero, 2022). Instead, it highlights the need to explore the underlying factors contributing to the decline in male enrollment and academic performance. Moreover, the success of female students in STEM fields, despite the low representation of women professionals in these areas, underscores the importance of factors beyond role modeling, such as institutional policies, curriculum design, and support services. This phenomenon warrants a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between gender, academic environment, and student outcomes.

The preceding discussion has highlighted the varied landscape of gender disparity in Sub-Saharan Africa's higher education sector, revealing a complex picture. A closer examination of enrollment trends across the region shows that while some countries still exhibit male-dominated enrollments, others have transitioned to female-dominated enrollments.

Consequently, the complexity of gender disparity in Sub-Saharan Africa's higher education sector makes it challenging to pin down a single narrative that favors one gender over the other. The region has become a rainbow territory, with countries exhibiting different patterns of gender disparity. Trends vary across countries, with some still grappling with low female enrollment, while others are witnessing a surge in female students, often accompanied by declining male enrollment. This diversity of experiences within the region underscores the need for context-specific solutions. Acknowledging these differences can help policymakers and educators to develop targeted strategies that address the unique challenges and opportunities in their respective contexts. This might involve tailored interventions to support male students in countries with declining male enrollment or initiatives to promote female participation in STEM fields in countries where women remain underrepresented.

Gender and Education In Zimbabwe

The higher and tertiary education system is the last stage of the education system in Zimbabwe, made up of a highly diversified system comprising all post-secondary institutions including universities, training colleges, and professional institutes. The history of higher education in Zimbabwe evokes memories of the pre-independence era, where only one university, the University of Zimbabwe, served the higher and tertiary needs of the whole country (Mifa, 2024). The increase from one university to the current twelve universities is an indication of developments in institutionalizing education, in line with SDG 4.

While the substantial growth in the number of higher educational institutions in the country is noted, several challenges remain. Predominantly, there is a lack of institutional capacity to absorb the increasing demand for higher education, and disparities in participation. Gender-based disparity is one such inequality which has characterized higher

education, especially for women in Zimbabwe (Chauraya, 2014). The institutional patriarchal system established during the colonial era has been cited as a contributing factor to this disparity. This system had perpetuated gender-based discrimination since colonialism to the first decade of independence, limiting women's access to higher education and restricting their career choices.

In the need to bridge the gender disparities, the government of Zimbabwe targeted the removal of barriers for women's access to higher education (Mashininga, 2022). For instance in 1995, the government introduced affirmative action to place more females at universities, at a time when enrolled female students constituted only 25% (Mashininga, 2022). In 1996 the University of Zimbabwe had a total of 5,444 male students compared to 2408 females (Zindi, 1998), while the Great Zimbabwe University had 3,324 male students compared to 2,794 female students in 2009 (Mareva, 2014). The total enrolment for all universities in the country was 8223 males against 3302 females (Nziramasanga, 1999). Affirmative action in education in Zimbabwe was designed to combat discrimination against women across all ethnic groups, but also focusing more attention on women with diverse needs such as those from ethnic minorities, women with disabilities and women from the war of liberation (Chitsatanga, Rember & Rembe, 2020). In this period affirmative action as implemented by lowering university entry levels for female students, as well as integrating all willing women who had come back from war into secondary schools despite their age.

Building on these efforts, the government of Zimbabwe has implemented additional remedial policies, including scholarships and targeted interventions, to address disparities in science, technology, and mathematics (STEM) subjects (Mufanechiya & Makgwala, 2024). Notably, the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) provides a foundation for promoting gender inclusivity,

with Section 81(2) prohibiting discrimination on grounds of pregnancy or marital status, and Section 82 guaranteeing the right to education for all citizens, including persons with disabilities. This constitutional framework has enabled the development of pro-gender laws and policies, such as the National Disability Policy (2013), the Inclusive Education Policy (2015), and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education Disability Policy. These policies promote equal opportunities, social inclusion, and inclusive learning environments for learners with disabilities, resulting in increased enrollment of female students with disabilities in universities. Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education's Policy on Pregnancy and Childcare (2018) protects pregnant students' right to continue their education, supporting their academic and personal well-being. These policy advancements have been instrumental in promoting inclusive education and addressing historical disparities.

Furthermore, based on the provisions for special quotas for women in education provided by the Constitution of Zimbabwe, all universities, including the Midlands State University, introduced quota systems to increase female enrollment in certain programs. Additionally, scholarships and bursaries were established to support students, including female students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the Midlands State University introduced a number of policies that promote the enrolment and retention of female students in the university. In 2006, Midlands State University developed its gender policy as a response to widespread gender inequalities within the institution and society. The policy's primary objectives include mainstreaming gender and eliminating practices that hinder equality between sexes (Midlands State University Gender Policy, 2006, p.3). Specifically, the policy aims to achieve gender balance in staff recruitment, promotion, and retention by 2010 and ensure that women comprise at least 50

percent of decision-makers at all levels by December 2010 (Midlands State University Gender Policy, 2006, p.3). To increase women's participation in leadership, the policy outlines strategies such as advocating for female staff recruitment and retention, equitable funding for staff development, and formulating gender-sensitive policies (Midlands State University Gender Policy, 2006, p.5-6). Additional strategies include affirmative action to redress gender imbalances, empowerment, and training the university community to implement and evaluate the policy. Furthermore, the university introduced the Sexual Harassment Policy, complemented by various strategies to disseminate the policy and train all students and staff on upholding female students' and other women's rights, ensuring they can pursue their education without disturbances. Without claiming that the Midlands State University policies have succeeded in enhancing women's representation in leadership positions, the levels of awareness and knowledge brought to the university community by the gender sensitive policy environment have indeed positively affected female enrolment and retention at the Institution.

A significant shift in the demographics of Zimbabwean higher education institutions was reported by University World News in January 2022. Over a three-year period, from 2020 onwards, the number of female students surpassed that of their male counterparts. This trend is supported by data from Mupupuni, Kunakahakudyiwi, Munesi and Muchenga (2024), which highlights a notable increase in female enrollment. In 2018, universities in Zimbabwe recruited 50,699 female students, outnumbering the 43,432 male students. By 2020, this gap had widened, with 62,629 female students enrolled compared to 53,699 male students.. Furthermore, available statistical evidence further reveals that female students made up 53% of the 5, 483 students who graduated in 2021, while at the Zimbabwe Open University, 54% of the 1,367 graduates were

women (Mashininga, 2022). This data suggests a reversal of the traditional gender imbalance in higher education, with women now constituting a larger proportion of the student body. However, the increase in female enrollment does not necessarily translate to a straightforward achievement of gender equality. As previously discussed, merely having more women in higher education is not enough to address the systemic barriers and biases that prevent them from advancing to leadership positions. This nuance is reflected in the ongoing debates surrounding affirmative action policies. There is ongoing debate among scholars about the benefits and relevance of affirmative action. Mareva (2014) has criticized affirmative action for reducing the worth of women, contending that female students can do better than male students, hence there is no need for affirmative action if quality education as opposed to quantity was to be prioritised.

Other critics have argued that focusing on affirmative action alone as a remedial action for narrowing the gender gap created over the colonial period has neglected a focus on other variables that can bring equity and a conducive environment for all children (Musingafi & Mafumbate, 2014), further argues that in Zimbabwe affirmative action can only be realised when the equality mark is attained in all institutions. A pertinent argument to consider is whether achieving a 50-50 gender parity in higher and tertiary is feasible, given the demographic reality that women already outnumber men in the population.

At a time when opposition of affirmative action is gaining momentum, building on the initial criticisms raised by Mareva (2014), the debates surrounding the effectiveness and fairness of such policies has become increasingly contentious. Within this rubric, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on gender disparities in higher education, with a specific focus on the Zimbabwean context. By examining the complex interplay of factors

contributing to these disparities, this research seeks to inform policy interventions and promote greater gender equality in higher education. Within this framework, this study undertook a comprehensive analysis of the gender dynamics in higher education, with a specific focus on investigating the underlying factors contributing to the recent surge in female enrollments and participation rates, which have surpassed those of their male counterparts. Challenging the conventional wisdom that the gender discourse advocating for women's rights is the primary driver, this analysis delves deeper to explore alternative factors that may be contributing to the gender dynamics in higher education.

Methodology

This study employed a single case study design, focusing on a typical case that accurately represents the study's population of interest (Gerring, 2017). The selection of a typical case study design enabled me to garner in-depth insights into the dimensions of gender disparity in higher education, ultimately enhancing the understanding of this phenomenon across various higher education institutions within and beyond Zimbabwe. A longitudinal approach was adopted, analyzing graduation trends over a seven-year period (2017-2023) to identify patterns and changes in male graduation rates. This specific timeframe was chosen due to the availability of comprehensive graduation data and significant policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in higher education during this period.

Faculties within Midlands State University were my unit of analysis, while the study population comprised universities in Zimbabwe. Universities were prioritized over other higher education institutions due to their diverse range of programs and larger student populations. Midlands State University was selected as the research's typical case, representative of the university system in Zimbabwe, due to its broad spectrum of programs and various levels of

study. The choice of MSU was informed by its typical characteristics, which align with the broader university system in Zimbabwe. The longitudinal analysis of quantitative graduation data from MSU's official records allowed me to examine trends and patterns in male graduation rates, providing insights into the factors contributing to the decline. The data was collected from MSU's official records and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including the creation of pie charts and bar graphs to visualize male-female representations, calculation of ratios, and examination of trends over time.

To further contextualize the quantitative findings, a desk review of literature and policy documents was conducted, focusing on various national education policies and MSU policies. This review examined policy initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in Zimbabwe's education sector and their potential impact on male graduation rates. The policies reviewed included national education policies, such as those related to access and equity, as well as MSU-specific policies and initiatives. The desk review data was analyzed using thematic analysis, where policy documents were coded and themes were identified to understand the underlying rationales, objectives, and potential implications of these policies on male graduation rates.

The use of a longitudinal design strengthened the study by enabling me to track changes in graduation rates over time, identify patterns and trends in male graduation rates, and examine the impact of policy interventions and initiatives on male graduation rates. Combining the case study design with a longitudinal approach and desk review of policies, the research gained a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing male graduation rates in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. The study's validity and reliability were ensured through the use of official records, careful

analysis of policy documents, and rigorous application of thematic analysis.

The dataset (Table 1) includes actual graduation numbers from 2017 to 2023 and projected

graduands for 2024, sourced from MSU Student Records. Focusing on the 2017-2023 dataset allows us to examine historical trends without incorporating projections.

Table 1: MSU graduants from 2017 to 2023 and prospective graduants for 2024

Source: University records

MIDLANDS STATE UNIVERSITY			
Graduand Statistics 2017 to 2024			
Year	Male	Female	Total
2017	3383	3228	6611
2018	1979	1778	3757
2019	3629	3348	6977
2020	1692	1815	3507
2021	3268	3327	6595
2022	3476	3519	6995
2023	3825	4507	8332
Prospective 2024	2917	3351	6268

Data Limitations and Justification

This study encountered several limitations in data collection and analysis. A primary limitation was the use of aggregated data, which combines information from multiple faculties, potentially masking faculty-specific trends. Unfortunately, disaggregated data was unavailable, necessitating the use of aggregated data. Furthermore, the study lacked contextual information on the university's overall student population. According to recent estimates, Midlands State University has a diverse student body of approximately 22,000 students enrolled.

Acknowledging these limitations ensures transparency and provides a more accurate representation of research findings. The aggregated data may impact the interpretation of findings, as certain faculties might exhibit unique gender dynamics obscured by the combined data. Future studies would benefit from more detailed data to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in higher education. Midlands State

University's diverse student body and range of programs underscore the complexity of analyzing gender trends.

Some potential suggestions for future research could include data Disaggregation: Obtaining faculty-specific data to analyze trends and patterns unique to each faculty and student Population Analysis: Examining the total student population and demographic characteristics to better understand the university's diversity. Acknowledging these limitations and potential areas for future research enables this study to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in higher education.

Findings

This section presents findings of the study that sought to investigate the claim of declining male enrollment and graduation in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, with a particular focusing on the Midlands State University. The study objectives were to (i) assess the extent of gender disparity among university students in

Zimbabwe; and (ii) evaluate possible strategies to promote gender balance in universities in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by the following research questions: What is the extent of gender disparity between male and female students who graduated from 2019 to 2024 in the six selected faculties at MSU? What are the main causes of the gender disparity between these male and female students? What strategies can be employed to promote gender balance in universities in Zimbabwe? Findings are presented thematically.

Objective 1

This study examined the gender dynamics of student enrollment at Midlands State University, leveraging seven years of graduating student data (2017-2023) across all faculties. The findings directly addressed Research Question 1, revealing a shift in gender disparities over the seven-year period, with male dominance in the first three years (2017-2019) giving way to female dominance in the latter years (2020-2023), thereby showcasing the depth and breadth of changing gender disparities among university students.

Table 2: Gender disaggregated graduation statistics for 7 years, 2017-2023

Year	Male students	Female students	Total
2017	3383	3228	6611
2018	1979	1778	3757
2019	3629	3348	6977
2020	1692	1815	3507
2021	3268	3327	6595
2022	3476	3519	6995
2023	3825	4507	8332

According to Table 1 and Table 2, from 2017 to 2019, male students outnumbered female students by a significant margin, as reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentages of graduants by gender 2017-2019

Graduands from 2017-2019 by gender

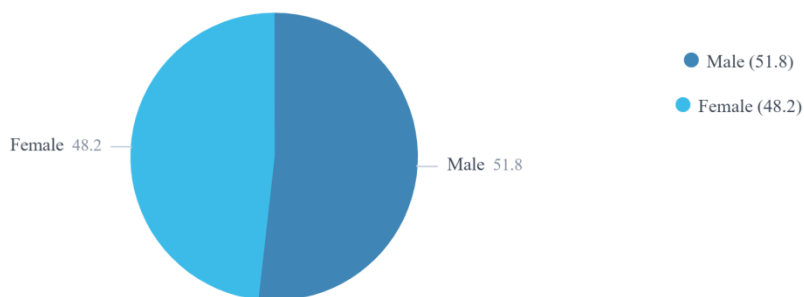
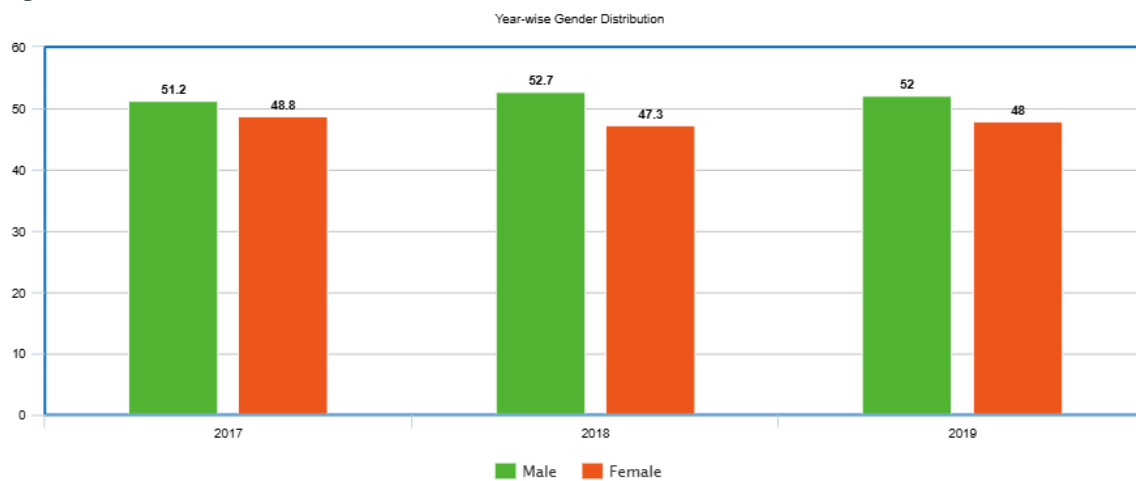


Figure 2: Year-wise Gender Distribution 2017-2019



However, the gap narrowed over the years, and by 2020 to 2023, female students gradually outnumbered male students.

Figure 1: Percentages of graduants by gender 2020-2023

Percentages of graduands by gender 2020-2023

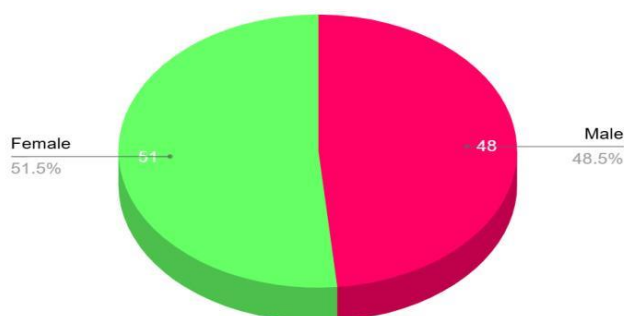
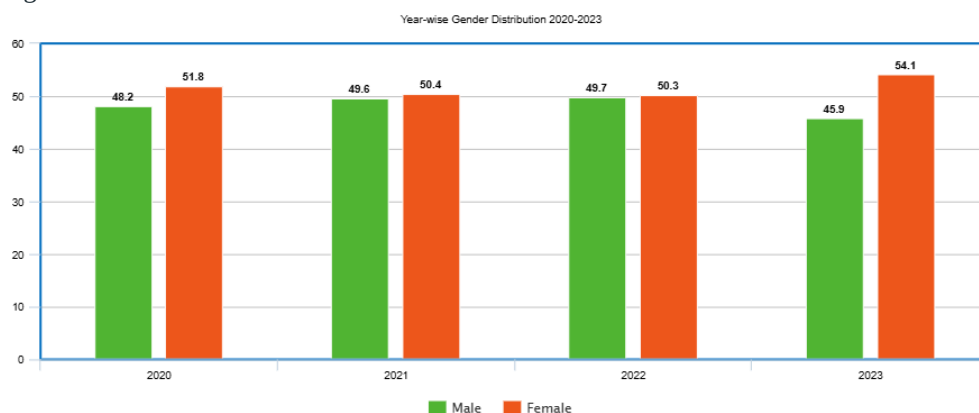
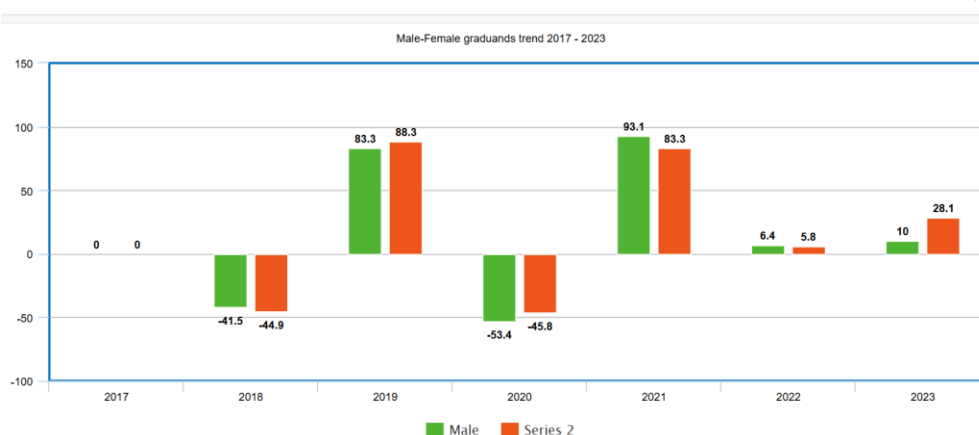


Figure 2: Year-wise Gender Distribution 2020-2023



Male - Female Graduates Trend 2017 - 2023



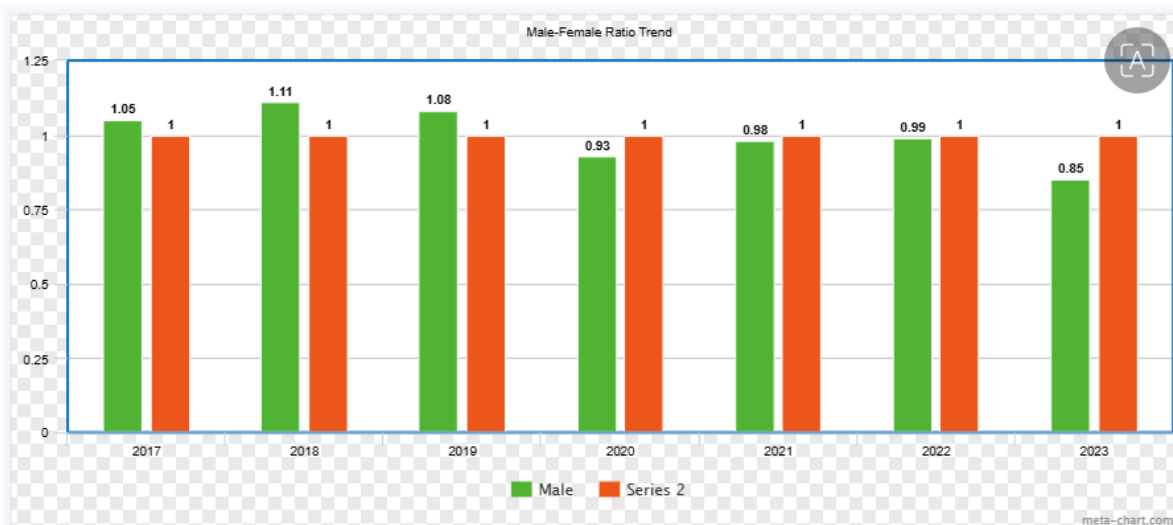
The analysis of graduation trends over the 7-year period revealed fluctuations in both male and female student numbers. Notably, significant declines were observed in 2018 and

2020, with 2018 experiencing a more pronounced decrease. However, the numbers rebounded in 2019 and 2021, with substantial increases in both male and female graduates. In

2022, the graduation numbers stabilized, with a slight increase. The most recent year, 2023, saw a marked surge in female graduates, with a 28.1% increase, outpacing the 10.0% growth in male graduates. These trends suggest that the

institution has experienced variability in graduation numbers, with recent years showing signs of growth and increased female representation.

Male-Female Ratio 2017 - 2023



The male-female ratio bar graph reveals a shifting trend in the proportion of male to female graduates over the 7-year period. The ratio has generally trended downwards, indicating an increasing proportion of female graduates. Notably, the ratio dipped below 1:1 in 2020 and remained below parity in subsequent years, with the lowest ratio observed in 2023. This suggests that female graduates have outnumbered male graduates in recent years, with the gap widening over time. The trend is indicative of a growing representation of female students in the graduating cohorts, which may have implications for the institution's policies and programs aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion.

Finally, the analysis of graduation trends reveals fluctuations in both male and female student numbers over the 7-year period, with a notable increase in female representation in recent years. The male-female ratio has trended downwards, indicating a growing proportion of

female graduates. These findings suggest that the institution has experienced variability in graduation numbers, with female students increasingly dominating the graduating cohorts. Several factors have contributed to this shift. Targeted interventions, such as specific bursaries and scholarships for women, have played a crucial role in enabling more women from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education. Additionally, investments in enabling infrastructure, including female-only dormitories, childcare facilities, and safe transportation options, have created a more supportive environment for female students. Inclusive practices, such as flexible study arrangements, mentorship programs, and counseling services, have also been instrumental in promoting female students' academic success and well-being. Furthermore, demographic realities and growing awareness about the importance of education for women have likely contributed to the surge in female enrollments.

This nuanced understanding of gender parity highlights the complexity of achieving equality in higher education. While affirmative action policies are essential, they must be complemented by a range of enabling factors to create a level playing field for female students. The Zimbabwean context demonstrates that a combination of targeted interventions, inclusive practices, and demographic realities can contribute to a significant reversal of gender disparities in higher education. Ultimately, these findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to promoting gender equality, one that addresses the unique needs and challenges of female students and fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Discussions

This study's finding that male graduates outnumbered female graduates between 2017 and 2019 aligns with existing literature on gender representation in higher education in Southern Africa. Research indicates that the region exhibits a pronounced disparity against women, with a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 0.73 in 2015 and 0.8 by 2020 (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, male students constitute approximately 58% of enrollments (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). This disparity is consistent with findings from various studies, including those by Norgbey (2018), Saadat et al. (2022), and Salmi & D'Addio (2021), which highlight the persistent gender gap in higher education. In Zimbabwe, specifically, Chauraya (2014) noted that gender-based disparity has long characterized higher education, particularly for women. Historical data supports this assertion, with the University of Zimbabwe reporting 5,444 male students compared to 2,408 female students in 1996 (Zindi, 1998). Similarly, Great Zimbabwe University had 3,324 male students compared to 2,794 female students in 2009 (Mareva, 2014). Nationally, the total enrollment for all universities in 1999 was 8,223 males and 3,302 females (Nziramasanga, 1999). These

findings underscore the need to address the persistent gender disparities in higher education.

The persistence of gender disparities in higher education can be attributed, in part, to the institutional patriarchal system established during the colonial era. This system has perpetuated gender-based discrimination, limiting women's access to higher education and restricting their career choices from the colonial period to the first decade of independence. Research by Darvas et al. (2017) and Machira (2013) supports this assertion, highlighting the role of patriarchal societal norms, inadequate policies, and historical legacies of colonialism in contributing to gender disparities that favour males over females in institutions of higher learning. These findings underscore the significance of understanding the historical and systemic factors that have shaped gender dynamics in higher education.

Following the independence of most African states, significant progress has been made to reverse the narrative of male dominance in education perpetuated by colonial ideologies. This shift has led to the adoption of continental policies and initiatives, such as affirmative action and STEM programs, designed to increase women's and girls' inclusion in education (Gyima-Brempong, 2011). In Zimbabwe, for example, the government has targeted the removal of barriers to women's access to higher education (Mushininga, 2022). A notable initiative was the introduction of affirmative action in 1995, aimed at increasing female representation in universities, where women comprised only 25% of enrolled students at the time (Mushininga, 2022). Building on this effort, additional remedial policies have been implemented, including scholarships and targeted interventions, to address disparities in science, technology, and mathematics (STEM) subjects (Mufanechiya & Makgwala, 2024). Some universities in Zimbabwe have introduced quota systems to increase female enrollment in specific programs, while scholarships and bursaries have

been established to support female students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These initiatives demonstrate a concerted effort to promote gender equality in higher education.

Consequently, a paradigm shift in gender demographics has emerged in Zimbabwean higher education institutions, characterized by a significant change in enrollment patterns. Notably, data from 2020 onwards indicates that female students have outnumbered their male counterparts over a three-year period. This trend is corroborated by Mupupuni et al. (2024), who observed a marked increase in female enrollment in their study, suggesting a notable shift in the gender dynamics of higher education in Zimbabwe.

Consequently, a paradigm shift in gender demographics has emerged in Zimbabwean higher education institutions, characterized by a significant change in enrollment patterns. Notably, data from 2020 onwards indicates that female students have outnumbered their male counterparts over a three-year period. This trend is corroborated by Mupupuni et al. (2024), who observed a marked increase in female enrollment in their study, suggesting a notable shift in the gender dynamics of higher education in Zimbabwe.

The dynamics in the education sector highlight two crucial issues. Firstly, the significant decline in male enrollment in higher education institutions is a global challenge, not unique to Sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, declining male enrollment is pronounced, with a notable decrease in male students pursuing higher education over the past decade, while female students' numbers continue to rise (Ilie & Rose, 2016). Even in OECD countries, where progress has been made in promoting gender equality, disparities persist. For instance, in the US, men comprised only 40.5% of undergraduate students in spring 2021, an all-time low (Mangan, 2022). Although this dynamic was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, there is evidence that the trend has been building for 40

years (Mangan, 2022). Research investigations carried out on the same subject for universities in California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania revealed a 52% female vs 48% male degree holders in the year 2025 (The Change Leader Inc., 2025). This data underscores the shifting gender dynamics in higher education, highlighting a notable trend that warrants further exploration

The second issue necessitates an examination of whether the increase in female representation in higher education is a true indicator of success in achieving gender equality, particularly given that male students are now outnumbered by their female counterparts, thereby creating a new gender disparity in favor of females. According to Musingafi (2014), affirmative action in Zimbabwe can only be considered truly effective when equality is attained across all institutions. Recent data supports the notion that female students are increasingly outpacing their male counterparts in higher education. For instance, Mushininga (2023) found that female students comprised 53% of the 5,483 students who graduated at the University of Zimbabwe in 2021. Similarly, at the Zimbabwe Open University, 54% of the 1,367 graduates were women (Mushininga, 2022). It is worth noting that Zimbabwe's population demographics reveal a ratio of 91 males per 100 females, with females making up 52% of the population and males 48%. In contrast, the average percentage of males graduating from the University of Zimbabwe and Great Zimbabwe University in 2021, based on Mushininga's (2022) findings, is 46% males and 54% females, translating to a ratio of approximately 79 males per 100 females. This disparity raises questions about the nature of gender equality in higher education.

Encouragingly, an analysis of graduate data from Midlands State University, the case study for this research, revealed that between 2020 and 2023, there was an average of 52% female and 48% male graduates, closely mirroring Zimbabwe's population ratio. This finding

aligns with the notion that gender equality in higher education should be based on equity rather than equal numbers, taking into account the demographic reality on the ground. Musingafi's (2014) argument that affirmative action in Zimbabwe can only be realised when equality is attained across all institutions is noteworthy; however, the 52:48 ratio in favour of females at Midlands State University over the four-year period signifies gender parity.

While Mushininga's (2022) findings indicate a disparity in gender representation at the University of Zimbabwe and Great Zimbabwe University, with 58% females and 42% males in 2021, the Midlands State University data presents a contrasting picture. The MSU data reveals a more balanced ratio of 52% females and 48% males, closely aligning with Zimbabwe's national demographic ratio of 52% females and 48% males. Mushininga's findings may actually indicate a gradual shift from male dominance towards gender parity, aligning with the national demographic ratio, rather than a stark disparity. This suggests that MSU's graduation trends reflect a more equitable representation of males and females, in line with the country's population dynamics. In fact, the perceived decline in male graduate figures from 2020 to 2023 at Midlands State University actually reflects the country's demographic reality. The positive trend of achieving graduation ratios of 52:48, closely mirroring the country's demographic ratio, can be attributed to several factors. These include the affirmative action laws and policies introduced by the Government of Zimbabwe, inclusive practices enabled by disability-inclusive policies, and the Higher Education Policy that allows pregnant students to continue their education. Additionally, flexible study arrangements, mentorship programs, and internal policies such as the Gender Policy and the Sexual Harassment Policy implemented by Midlands State University have likely contributed to this outcome. These collective efforts appear to have created a more inclusive and supportive environment, enabling students from diverse

backgrounds to pursue their education and achieve graduation.

This finding refutes the claims made by some researchers who have attributed the the low enrollment of male students to substance abuse among boys (Nyangena, 2018). This argument overlooks the fact that girls also resort to substance abuse. Contrary to the notion that substance abuse is a predominantly male issue, research focused on Southern Africa reveals that women and teenage girls are also significantly affected by drug and substance abuse (Dada et al., 2018; Stanyard, 2023; Wechsberg et al., 2024). These studies have further shown that although the patterns and manner of substance use may differ between women and men, females are by no means exempt from this problem (Dada et al., 2018; Stanyard, 2023; Wechsberg et al., 2024). This finding therefore challenges the notion that reductions in male enrollment can be attributed solely to male students' use of drugs and substances, as evidence suggests that female students also engage in substance use.

This implies that substance abuse may not be a unique or primary driver of declining male enrollment, and that other factors may be at play. A more nuanced exploration of the relationship between substance use and enrollment trends is warranted to better understand the underlying causes of declining male enrollment. However, the decline in male enrolment in institutions of higher learning is a complex issue often oversimplified by attributing it solely to female-centered gender empowerment initiatives. While it is true that the increasing focus on female empowerment may have unintentionally created a perceived disadvantage among males, this narrative neglects the multifaceted nature of the issue. In reality, the decline in male enrollment is likely the result of interrelated factors, including also, shifting societal expectations, changing workforce demands, broader systemic issues such as economic inequality and access to

education, in addition to inadequate support systems for male students.

Finally, the research argues that in the case of MSU, gender parity has been reached between male and female graduants, as the ratio of graduants closely corresponds with Zimbabwe's demographic ratio of 52% females and 48% males. However, this parity in graduation rates does not necessarily mean that all barriers to equal access and participation have been eliminated, as other factors such as socioeconomic conditions, lack of support, and limited access to education might still play a significant role in determining enrollment rates.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of gender disparities in higher education enrollment patterns in Zimbabwe, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relies on statistical data, which may not capture the nuances and complexities of the experiences of female students. Secondly, the study focuses on a single country, Zimbabwe, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Conclusions

This study aimed to assess the gender dimensions of student graduation in Zimbabwe's higher education sector, with a focus on disparities and the effectiveness of affirmative action policies. Using Midlands State University as a case study, we examined enrollment patterns across ten faculties from 2017 to 2023. Initially, the data revealed a male-dominated trend, with males constituting 52% of graduates compared to 48% females from 2017 to 2019. However, a significant shift occurred from 2020 to 2023, with females outnumbering males, achieving a ratio of 93 females to 100 males, translating to 52% females and 48% males. The analysis reveals a notable reversal of gender disparities in higher education enrollment patterns in Zimbabwe. This trend suggests that a combination of

factors, including affirmative action policies, targeted interventions, inclusive practices, and demographic realities, has contributed to this shift. The findings of this study have implications for policymakers, higher education institutions, and stakeholders seeking to promote gender equality in higher education. Ultimately, the study highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of gender parity, recognizing that affirmative action policies alone may not be sufficient to address the complex and multifaceted nature of gender disparities.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender parity in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. Future research endeavors could build upon these findings by exploring the complexities of gender disparities in greater depth. Potential areas for further investigation include qualitative studies on the lived experiences and perspectives of female students, examining the impact of affirmative action policies on male students, and investigating the role of demographic realities such as population growth and urbanization on gender disparities. By pursuing these research directions, scholars and policymakers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing gender equality in higher education and develop more effective strategies to promote inclusivity for all students.

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