

Gender Norms, Workplace Bias, and Career Mobility: A Mixed-Methods Study of Women in Bida Metropolis

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Gender stereotypes; career progression; workplace inequality; Nigeria.

How to cite:

Akanbi, R. T., & Dzukogi, Z. (2026). Gender Norms, Workplace Bias, and Career Mobility: A Mixed-Methods Study of Women in Bida Metropolis. JAKPP (Jurnal Analisis Kebijakan dan Pelayanan Publik), 12(2), 90-114

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31947/jakpp.v12i2.49899>

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of gender stereotypes on women's career progression in Bida Metropolis, Niger State, Nigeria. Drawing on Gender Role Theory and Feminist Theory, it examines how culturally embedded beliefs and institutional practices shape women's access to promotion, training, and professional networks. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining a survey of 398 respondents with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and the Chi-square test of independence. The findings reveal statistically significant relationships between gender stereotypes and key career outcomes, including promotion bias ($\chi^2 = 45.21, p < .001$), limited access to training ($\chi^2 = 39.58, p < .001$), and exclusion from professional networks ($\chi^2 = 18.73, p < .001$). A significant gender difference was also observed in promotion experiences ($\chi^2 = 6.52, p = .011$), with women more likely to report being overlooked. Qualitative evidence indicates that women adopt adaptive strategies such as enhanced performance, mentorship engagement, and peer support to navigate these barriers. The study concludes that gender stereotypes operate through both cultural and structural mechanisms to constrain women's career advancement. It recommends institutional reforms, equitable access to professional development, and targeted awareness initiatives to promote gender-inclusive workplaces.

Introduction

Globally, gender stereotypes remain a persistent barrier to workplace equality and women's advancement into leadership positions. Despite significant progress in gender equality policies, corporate diversity initiatives, and legal reforms, deeply embedded cultural beliefs about gender roles continue to shape occupational segregation, career progression, and access to leadership opportunities (Heilman,

Caleo, & Manzi, 2024; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024). Within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality is recognized as essential for inclusive development. However, global evidence continues to reveal persistent disparities in labour force participation, income distribution, and leadership representation. The 2024 Global Gender Gap Report shows that women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles, with parity projected to take over a century at the current rate of progress (WEF, 2024).

A central explanation for these inequalities is the “double bind” in gendered leadership expectations. Leadership attributes such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance are socially coded as masculine, while women are stereotypically associated with communal traits such as empathy and care (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman et al., 2024). This incongruity produces systematic disadvantage, as women are penalized both when they conform to feminine norms and when they adopt agentic leadership behaviours. Empirical evidence shows that such biases contribute to slower promotion rates, lower leadership evaluations, and persistent wage gaps, even when qualifications and performance are comparable (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014).

These global patterns are also reflected in organizational statistics. Women occupy only about 31.7% of senior leadership roles globally and approximately 27.5% of managerial positions across key sectors including finance, manufacturing, technology, and education (World Economic Forum, 2024; Nkwusi, 2025). This indicates that gender disparity in leadership remains structural rather than incidental.

In Nigeria, these inequalities are intensified by entrenched patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and organizational constraints. Although women increasingly participate in the formal labour force, their progression into leadership roles remains limited. Empirical studies show that gender stereotypes significantly influence promotion outcomes in the civil service, where women are often perceived as less suitable for decision-making roles (Fakiya & Eguonor, 2025). Similarly, research in educational institutions highlights under-representation of women in senior positions due to institutional barriers, weak mentorship structures, and opaque promotion systems (RSI International, 2025). In many organizations, leadership continues to be implicitly coded as masculine, reinforcing women’s confinement to supportive or subordinate roles (Chisom, 2025).

Beyond formal structures, unpaid domestic labour further constrains women’s career advancement. Women are more likely than men to experience work–family conflict, reduce working hours, decline promotions, or exit demanding roles due to caregiving responsibilities (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). These combined pressures reinforce a persistent “double burden” that limits leadership progression.

Gender inequality in the workplace remains a persistent global concern, particularly in developing countries where socio-cultural norms strongly influence occupational outcomes. In Nigeria, gender disparities are evident in leadership representation, access to opportunities, and career advancement. While existing

studies have examined gender inequality broadly, many focus on macro-level trends or urban corporate environments, with limited attention to how gender stereotypes specifically shape career progression within semi-urban contexts.

Despite growing literature on gender inequality in Nigeria, there is a lack of context-specific studies that examine the interaction between cultural beliefs and institutional practices in shaping women's career outcomes in locations such as Bida Metropolis. This gap is significant because semi-urban areas often reflect a blend of traditional norms and emerging professional structures, making them critical sites for understanding how inequality persists.

This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of gender stereotypes on women's career progression in Bida Metropolis. It contributes to existing knowledge by integrating Gender Role Theory and Feminist Theory within a mixed-methods framework to provide both cultural and structural explanations for workplace inequality. In doing so, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms translate into tangible career barriers.

Literature Review

Gender Stereotypes and Occupational Segregation

Gender stereotypes are deeply embedded in cultural, religious, and institutional frameworks and continue to shape perceptions of appropriate roles for men and women in society. Globally, research consistently shows that women are associated with communal traits such as care, empathy, and supportiveness, while leadership and technical roles are linked to agentic traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman et al., 2024). This role incongruity produces occupational segregation, as women are systematically channelled into "feminine" occupations such as education, nursing, and clerical work, while men dominate technical and leadership-oriented sectors.

Empirical studies across contexts reinforce this pattern. In Nigeria, Okafor (2024) and Ogunyemi and Ajayi (2023) show that recruitment practices often reflect gendered assumptions, leading to women being concentrated in nurturing roles rather than managerial or technical positions. Similarly, Adewale and Udu (2023) found that social expectations significantly restrict women's participation in paid employment, with over half of respondents acknowledging that cultural norms disadvantage women structurally.

Sectoral evidence further highlights occupational imbalance. In technology, women represent only a small proportion of the workforce, reflecting persistent stereotypes that frame STEM fields as male domains (Balogun, 2024). Wage and employment data also confirm that occupational segregation translates into inequality, with women disproportionately concentrated in vulnerable employment compared to men (Dataphyte, 2023). Although these studies differ in methodology, they converge on a common finding: gender stereotypes consistently shape occupational sorting across global and Nigerian labour markets.

However, while existing studies document segregation, fewer critically examine how these stereotypes are reproduced within specific institutional settings in semi-urban areas, leaving a contextual gap in understanding how occupational patterns are locally sustained.

Gender inequality in the workplace also manifests through wage disparities and limited access to economic opportunities. Global evidence shows that the gender wage gap persists across sectors due to discrimination, occupational segregation, and unequal access to high-paying roles (Blau & Kahn, 2017).

A systematic review by Bishu and Alkadry (2017) found that organizational structures, rather than individual capability, are the primary drivers of gender pay inequality. These inequalities are more pronounced in developing economies, where institutional frameworks for enforcing gender equality are often weak. Another report also indicated that women are disproportionately represented in informal and low-paying sectors, limiting their economic mobility and reinforcing long-term inequality (International Labour Organization, 2018).

Work-family conflict remains a critical barrier to women's career progression. Women are more likely to bear caregiving responsibilities, which affects their availability for leadership roles and career advancement opportunities (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). This dynamic reinforces stereotypes that women are less committed to their careers, leading to biased organizational decisions regarding promotion and leadership selection. In many contexts, including Nigeria, these assumptions contribute to women being overlooked for senior roles despite having the required qualifications.

Gender stereotypes have been widely identified as key drivers of workplace inequality, influencing both perceptions and outcomes. Research by Eagly and Karau (2002) suggests that leadership is culturally associated with masculine traits, creating a mismatch between societal expectations of women and the requirements of leadership roles. Similarly, Heilman (2012) argues that gender bias in evaluation processes often leads to women being perceived as less competent, even when qualifications are equal.

However, while these studies provide strong theoretical insights, they are largely based on Western contexts and may not fully capture the dynamics of gender inequality in culturally embedded societies such as Nigeria. In such contexts, traditional norms surrounding gender roles often intersect with institutional practices, reinforcing inequality in unique ways.

Empirical studies in developing regions indicate that gender inequality extends beyond promotion to include limited access to training and exclusion from professional networks. For instance, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) highlight that women are often denied leadership development opportunities due to assumptions about their long-term commitment to work. Similarly, Barkhuizen et al. (2022) emphasize the role of informal networks in career advancement, noting that women are frequently excluded from these spaces.

Despite these contributions, existing research tends to examine these factors in isolation rather than as interconnected mechanisms. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on semi-urban Nigerian contexts, where cultural expectations may exert stronger influence on workplace dynamics.

This study builds on existing literature by providing an integrated analysis of gender stereotypes, structural barriers, and career outcomes within Bida Metropolis, thereby addressing a critical gap in both regional and theoretical scholarship.

Gender Stereotypes and Career Progression

Beyond occupational entry, gender stereotypes significantly influence women's career progression through mechanisms such as the glass ceiling, promotion bias, and exclusion from developmental opportunities. The "double bind" framework explains this challenge: women are penalized both for conforming to feminine traits (perceived as lacking leadership ability) and for adopting masculine traits (perceived as unfeminine or unlikeable) (Heilman et al., 2024).

Quantitative and qualitative studies consistently show that these biases affect promotion and leadership selection. For example, Shrestha et al. (2023) found that stereotypical perceptions of women's leadership abilities significantly reduced promotion chances in Nepalese banks, even when qualifications were comparable. Similarly, Ketchiwou and Dzansi (2023) demonstrated in South Africa that workplace discrimination operationalised as stereotyping limits access to training and development opportunities, creating indirect barriers to promotion.

In Nigeria, Pepple et al. (2024) observed that women in the banking sector are often perceived as less committed due to family responsibilities and are frequently channelled into "soft" roles such as customer service or human resources rather than core financial functions. Comparable findings in Ethiopia and Timor-Leste also show that stereotypes about emotionality and domestic responsibility undermine perceptions of women's leadership suitability (Wolle, 2024; Silva et al., 2021).

While these studies differ across contexts, they collectively show that stereotypes operate through both formal and informal organizational processes: promotion systems, mentorship access, networking opportunities, and performance evaluation. However, most studies focus on large urban organizations, leaving limited evidence on how these mechanisms function in smaller semi-urban labour markets where institutional structures may be weaker and cultural norms stronger.

Coping Strategies and Women's Agency

Despite structural barriers, women are not passive recipients of stereotype-based discrimination; they actively adopt coping strategies to navigate workplace constraints. Studies indicate that women employ adaptive mechanisms such as seeking informal mentorship, building peer support networks, and strategically balancing assertiveness with relational behaviour to avoid stereotype penalties.

Barkhuizen et al. (2022) found that exclusion from "old boys' networks" limits women's access to sponsorship and promotion opportunities in South Africa. In

response, women often develop alternative networking strategies outside formal structures to increase visibility. Similarly, qualitative findings from Pepple et al. (2024) reveal that Nigerian women in banking sectors engage in impression management, carefully moderating leadership behaviour to avoid negative judgment associated with assertiveness.

At a broader level, women also cope through resilience strategies such as career recalibration, sector switching, and prioritizing flexible work arrangements to manage work–family conflict (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). However, while these strategies demonstrate agency, they often represent adaptive responses to structural constraints rather than solutions to inequality itself.

A key limitation in the literature is that coping strategies are often studied in isolation from the structural environments that necessitate them. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how women in semi-urban Nigerian contexts like Bida Metropolis develop and sustain such strategies in environments with weaker institutional support systems.

The literature reviewed demonstrates strong consensus that gender stereotypes significantly influence occupational segregation, career progression, and leadership inequality across global and African contexts. However, several gaps remain evident.

First, existing studies are heavily concentrated in metropolitan and organizational settings, with limited attention to semi-urban environments where cultural norms and institutional weaknesses may intensify stereotype effects. Second, while the mechanisms of bias such as the glass ceiling, promotion discrimination, and mentoring exclusion are well documented, fewer studies integrate these mechanisms within a single explanatory framework in local Nigerian contexts. Third, although coping strategies are acknowledged, they are often under-theorized and not linked systematically to structural constraints at the community level.

Specifically, there is a dearth of empirical research focusing on Bida Metropolis and similar semi-urban Nigerian settings, particularly regarding how gender stereotypes influence women's access to training, promotion, mentoring, and leadership opportunities. This study therefore addresses this gap by critically examining how gender stereotypes shape women's career progression in Bida Metropolis, while also exploring how women navigate these constraints within their professional environments.

Gender Stereotypes, Gender Role Theory, and Occupational Segregation

Gender stereotypes remain a persistent global determinant of occupational inequality and labour market segmentation. From the perspective of Gender Role Theory (GRT), individuals acquire socially constructed expectations about appropriate male and female behaviours through early socialization processes. These internalized norms shape occupational preferences and institutional expectations, reinforcing the belief that leadership and technical roles are inherently masculine, while caregiving and supportive roles are feminine.

Globally, empirical studies confirm that such gendered socialization produces role incongruity, where women are perceived as less suitable for leadership because leadership traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness are culturally coded as masculine (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman, 2012). This incongruity contributes to occupational segregation by limiting women's entry into male-dominated sectors and reinforcing their concentration in education, health, and administrative roles.

Cross-national evidence supports this pattern. In Zambia, Chisala and Mwanza (2019) found that cultural expectations privileging male authority significantly reduced women's access to leadership positions. Similarly, in Kenya, survey evidence indicates that many women perceive leadership roles as incompatible with socially prescribed feminine behaviours, which discourages upward mobility. These findings reinforce GRT's central assumption that gendered expectations are socially learned and continuously reproduced.

In Nigeria, occupational segregation is strongly evident across sectors. Studies show that women are disproportionately concentrated in administrative, clerical, and care-related occupations, while men dominate technical and managerial roles. A Lagos and Abuja-based survey revealed that a majority of women believe cultural expectations constrain their career aspirations (Adewale & Udu, 2023). Sectoral data further indicate that women remain underrepresented in technology and engineering fields, reflecting persistent stereotypes that associate STEM careers with masculinity (Balogun, 2024).

At the sub-national level, evidence from Niger State and Bida Metropolis suggests that occupational decisions are also influenced by social expectations and familial pressures. Although empirical studies remain limited, qualitative accounts indicate that women may self-select out of leadership pathways due to anticipated social disapproval, reinforcing the predictive validity of GRT in semi-urban contexts.

However, while GRT effectively explains the formation and reproduction of stereotypes, it is less capable of explaining the institutional mechanisms through which these stereotypes translate into career disadvantage, a limitation addressed by Feminist Theory.

Feminist Theory (FT) provides a structural explanation of gender inequality by emphasizing how patriarchal systems embedded in organizations and institutions systematically disadvantage women. Unlike GRT, which focuses on socialization processes, FT highlights how inequality is reproduced through workplace structures such as recruitment systems, promotion criteria, and organizational cultures.

Empirical studies globally demonstrate that organizational systems are rarely neutral. Catalyst (2020) shows that recruitment and promotion processes often favour men due to implicit biases embedded in evaluation criteria and leadership norms. In many contexts, leadership is implicitly defined in masculine terms, resulting in systemic disadvantages for women regardless of competence.

These structural inequalities are evident in mechanisms such as the glass ceiling, promotion bias, and mentorship exclusion. Shrestha et al. (2023) found that stereotypical perceptions of women's leadership abilities significantly reduced promotion opportunities in Nepalese banks, even when qualifications were equivalent. Similarly, Ketchiwou and Dzansi (2023) demonstrated that workplace discrimination limits access to training and development, indirectly restricting career progression through reduced human capital accumulation.

In Nigeria, similar dynamics persist. Pepple et al. (2024) found that women in the banking sector are often perceived as less committed due to family responsibilities and are consequently channelled into "soft" roles such as customer service and human resources rather than strategic functions. Onuoha (2022) further reports that despite formal gender equality policies in public institutions, informal practices such as favouritism toward male employees and gendered division of labour continue to shape promotion outcomes.

At the regional level in Niger State and Bida Metropolis, emerging evidence suggests that women face limited access to mentorship, training, and leadership pipelines. However, these findings remain largely qualitative and fragmented, highlighting a lack of robust empirical studies that quantify or systematically analyse these structural constraints in semi-urban Nigerian contexts.

Thus, while FT explains how patriarchal systems sustain inequality, the literature shows a need for integrated analysis that also considers individual responses to these constraints.

Coping Strategies and Women's Agency

Despite structural barriers, women are not passive actors; they actively develop strategies to navigate gendered constraints in the workplace. Empirical research highlights a range of coping mechanisms including impression management, informal networking, strategic compliance, and adaptive leadership behaviours.

Barkhuizen et al. (2022) found that exclusion from informal "old boys' networks" significantly limits women's access to sponsorship and promotion opportunities in South Africa. In response, women develop alternative networks and support systems to enhance visibility. Similarly, Pepple et al. (2024) report that women in Nigerian banking carefully moderate assertiveness to avoid negative stereotype penalties, balancing competence with relational expectations.

Across contexts, coping strategies also include career adaptation, sector switching, and prioritization of flexible work arrangements to manage work-family conflict (Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). However, while these strategies demonstrate resilience and agency, they do not fundamentally alter the structural conditions producing inequality. Instead, they often represent survival mechanisms within constrained systems.

A key limitation in the literature is that coping strategies are frequently studied in isolation from the structural and cultural systems that necessitate them.

Additionally, there is limited understanding of how women in semi-urban Nigerian environments like Bida Metropolis combine agency with structural constraints in shaping their career trajectories.

The Gender Role Theory and Feminist Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender inequality in career progression. GRT explains the micro-level psychological and socialization processes through which individuals internalize gender norms, shaping occupational preferences and self-perceptions. In contrast, FT explains the macro-level structural and institutional mechanisms through which these norms are embedded in organizational systems, producing systemic disadvantage.

Together, these theories suggest a dual-layered process:

- GRT pathway (socialization mechanism): gender norms → internalized expectations → occupational segregation
- FT pathway (structural mechanism): institutional bias → promotion barriers → exclusion from leadership pipelines

These pathways are reinforced by organizational practices such as biased recruitment, limited mentorship access, and unequal evaluation systems. Coping strategies operate as intermediate adaptive responses but do not eliminate structural inequality.

Despite extensive global and regional literature, three key gaps remain. First, most studies focus on metropolitan or institutional settings, limiting understanding of gender dynamics in semi-urban environments. Second, existing research tends to analyse occupational segregation, promotion bias, or coping strategies separately rather than integrating them into a unified analytical model. Third, there is limited empirical evidence from Bida Metropolis and similar semi-urban Nigerian contexts where cultural norms, religious influences, and institutional weaknesses may intensify stereotype effects.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining how gender stereotypes influence women's career progression in Bida Metropolis, integrating both structural and socialization perspectives while also exploring women's coping strategies within this context.

Research Methods

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, allowing for the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Both datasets were collected during the same phase, analysed independently, and then merged at the interpretation stage to enable triangulation and provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender stereotypes influence women's career progression in Bida Metropolis, Nigeria.

The study area is Bida Metropolis, Niger State, a semi-urban setting characterised by formal employment structures coexisting with strong socio-

cultural norms that shape gender roles. The quantitative population comprised of women aged 18 years and above engaged in various occupational sectors within the metropolis.

A sample size of 398 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error. A multi-stage sampling procedure was applied: wards were first used as strata, followed by random selection of wards. Proportional allocation determined sample distribution, and systematic random sampling was used to select eligible respondents.

For the qualitative strand, 15 participants were purposively selected based on relevance and diversity of experience. These included professional women, housewives, male professionals, and officials from the Niger State Ministry of Women Affairs.

Variables and Measurement

The independent variable was gender stereotypes, defined as socially constructed beliefs regarding appropriate roles, behaviours, and capabilities of women in the workplace. It was measured using Likert-scale questionnaire items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) covering leadership perceptions, gender role expectations, workplace bias, and organisational attitudes toward women.

The dependent variable, women's career progression, was operationalised using three indicators: promotion opportunities, access to training and professional development, and inclusion in professional or organisational networks. Higher scores indicated greater career advancement outcomes. Contextual factors such as organisational practices, mentorship access, and cultural expectations were considered in interpreting relationships between variables.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews exploring lived experiences of gender stereotypes, career barriers, and coping strategies.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics. Cross-tabulation was used to examine associations between variables, while the chi-square test of independence was applied at a 0.05 significance level to test hypotheses.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically. Interview transcripts were coded, and themes were developed around stereotype experiences, barriers to advancement, workplace exclusion, and coping mechanisms.

Data Integration

Findings from both strands were integrated during interpretation. Quantitative results identified statistical relationships, while qualitative findings explained the social and institutional contexts underlying these patterns, enabling a more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Identify prevailing gender stereotypes affecting women's career progression

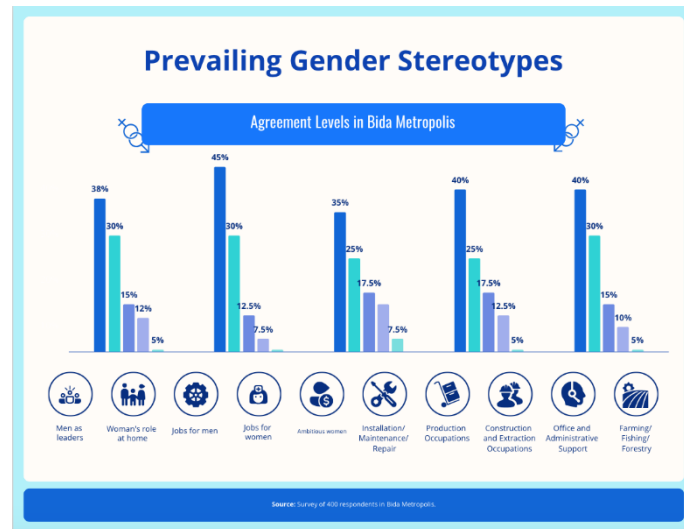


Figure 1. Bar chart showing Agreement Levels for Statements on Prevailing Gender Stereotypes, e.g., "Men better leaders," "Woman's role is family"

Figure 1 represents the bar chart on agreement levels for prevailing gender stereotypes indicates a high level of normative consensus around traditional gender roles in Bida Metropolis. The quantitative findings show that 68% of respondents agreed that men are naturally better suited for leadership, while 75% affirmed that a woman's primary responsibility is to her home and family. These results reflect both descriptive stereotypes (beliefs about competence) and prescriptive stereotypes (beliefs about appropriate roles), suggesting that gender bias operates at both cognitive and normative levels. The clustering of responses toward agreement categories on the bar chart indicates not just the presence but the social normalization of these beliefs.

Further evidence of occupational stereotyping is observed, with over 60% of respondents associating male-dominated professions such as engineering and politics with men, while 65% identified care-oriented professions such as teaching and nursing as more suitable for women. This distribution reflects a statistically meaningful pattern of occupational segregation, where perceptions of role suitability align with traditional gender expectations. Additionally, the finding that 70% of respondents believe ambitious women risk neglecting family responsibilities highlights the presence of social penalties for female ambition, reinforcing constraints on women's career progression.

Interview narratives reveal that gender stereotypes are not merely abstract beliefs but are actively reproduced in everyday organizational practices. For instance, this account of a female lecturer;

"It's subtle, but if there's a need to organise a welcome party or a farewell for a colleague, it's always the women making up the committee to do the preparation, cooking, and so on. You hardly see men making up members of the committee"

Illustrates how women are routinely assigned nurturing and supportive roles within professional settings, even in informal contexts such as organizing social events. Similarly, the statement by a male civil servant;

"Naturally, leadership requires a strong hand, a man's touch. Women can be good managers, but sometimes they are too emotional for tough decisions."

Reflects the persistence of agentic bias, where leadership is associated with masculinity and emotional restraint, while women are perceived as less suited for decisive roles. These qualitative insights explain the mechanisms underlying the statistical trends, confirming that stereotypes are embedded in both attitudes and institutional practices.

The findings are consistent with existing literature on gender stereotypes and occupational inequality. The strong association between leadership and masculinity aligns with studies that identify role incongruity as a key barrier to women's advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Similarly, the perception that women belong in care-oriented roles reflects patterns of occupational segregation widely documented in Nigerian and global contexts (Okafor, 2024; Ogunyemi & Ajayi, 2023). The notion that ambitious women face social penalties also supports prior findings on the "double bind," where women are judged negatively for deviating from traditional gender norms (Heilman et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strongly support Gender Role Theory (GRT). The high levels of agreement across multiple stereotype indicators suggest that gender roles are deeply internalized through socialization processes. Both male and female respondents reproduce these beliefs, indicating that stereotypes are not externally imposed alone but are socially learned and normalized within the community. The internalization of expectations—such as women prioritizing family roles or avoiding leadership ambition—illustrates GRT's central argument that behaviour and attitudes are shaped by culturally defined gender norms.

At the same time, the findings also validate Feminist Theory (FT) by demonstrating how these internalized beliefs translate into structural inequality. The qualitative evidence shows that stereotypes influence workplace practices, such as task allocation, leadership selection, and informal role expectations. These patterns indicate that gender inequality is not only attitudinal but also institutional, as organizational cultures and practices reinforce male dominance in leadership roles. The persistence of such practices, even in the presence of qualified women, reflects the structural barriers emphasized in feminist scholarship.

Importantly, the findings provide insight into why gender stereotypes persist in Bida Metropolis. First, strong cultural and traditional norms reinforce clearly defined gender roles, particularly emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities. Second, these norms are continuously reproduced through everyday social

interactions and institutional practices, as seen in workplace role assignments and leadership perceptions. Third, the widespread agreement among respondents, including women, indicates a high level of internalization, which sustains these stereotypes across generations. Finally, limited institutional interventions, such as weak enforcement of gender equality policies and lack of awareness programs, allow these beliefs to remain largely unchallenged.

The implications of these findings are significant. The high prevalence of gender stereotypes suggests that efforts to improve women's career progression in Bida must go beyond increasing participation rates to addressing deeply rooted cultural and institutional norms. Organizations need to implement gender-sensitive policies, including transparent promotion criteria, leadership development programs for women, and awareness initiatives to challenge stereotypical beliefs. Without such structural and cultural interventions, gender stereotypes will continue to limit women's access to leadership and professional advancement.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that gender stereotypes in Bida Metropolis are systemic, internalized, and institutionally reinforced, shaping not only perceptions but also real career outcomes. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender inequality operates in semi-urban contexts and highlight the need for multi-level strategies to address both social norms and organizational practices.

Objective 2: Impact of Gender Stereotype on women Career Opportunities

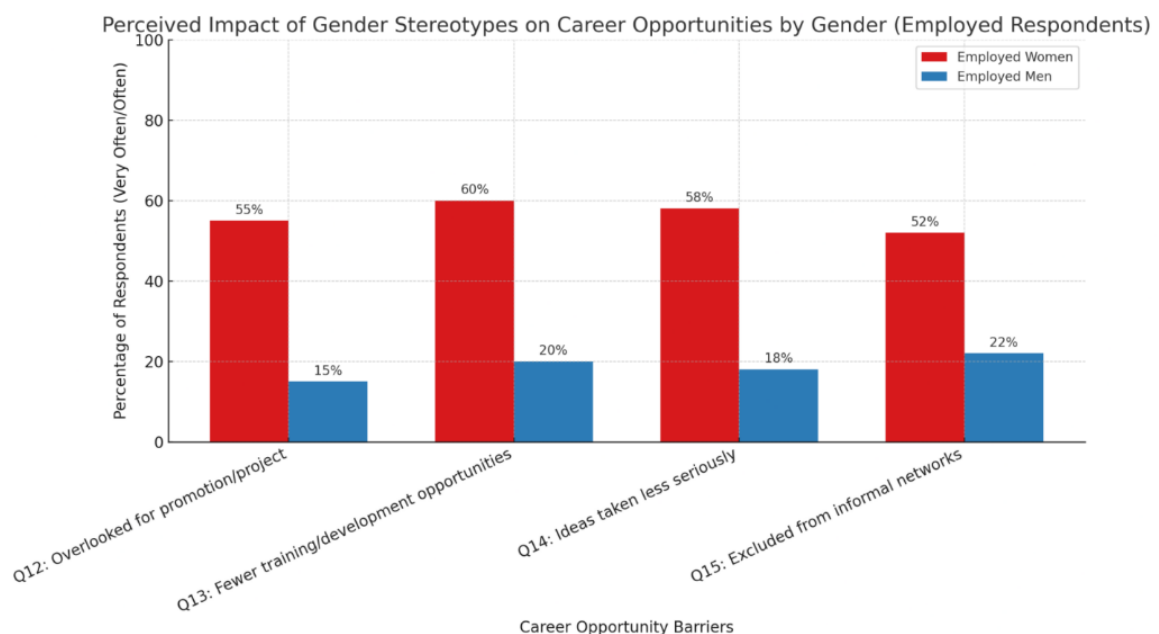


Figure 2. Stacked bar chart comparing "Very Often" / "Often" responses for employed women vs. men across Q12-15

The data presented in Figure 2 provide compelling evidence that gender stereotypes translate into systematic and measurable barriers to women's career progression in Bida Metropolis. The quantitative findings reveal significant gender disparities across multiple indicators of professional advancement. Notably, 55% of female respondents reported being frequently overlooked for promotions or key

projects, compared to only 15% of male respondents, indicating a substantial and statistically meaningful gender gap in access to advancement opportunities. This disparity suggests the presence of promotion bias, where decision-making processes favour male employees despite comparable qualifications.

Similarly, the finding that over 60% of women reported limited access to professional training and development opportunities highlights a critical structural constraint. Since training and skill development are essential prerequisites for promotion, this exclusion represents an indirect but powerful mechanism of career stagnation. The data therefore suggest that gender inequality operates not only at the point of promotion but also at earlier stages of career development, effectively restricting women's progression pipeline.

Further evidence of workplace inequality is reflected in the finding that 58% of women felt their ideas were undervalued in meetings, indicating a deficit in professional recognition and voice. In addition, 52% of women reported exclusion from informal networks, which are widely recognized as critical channels for mentorship, sponsorship, and access to organizational information. Taken together, these results demonstrate that gender stereotypes shape both formal organizational processes (promotion and training) and informal structures (networks and influence), reinforcing a multi-layered system of disadvantage.

The qualitative findings strongly reinforce and deepen the interpretation of these statistical patterns, demonstrating clear triangulation. The account of a senior bank employee illustrates how gender stereotypes intersect with assumptions about family roles, where women's commitment is questioned based on caregiving responsibilities, while men are not subjected to similar scrutiny:

"When it's time for leadership roles, they always bring up your family status. 'How will she manage late hours with young children?' they ask, but never ask a man about his family responsibilities".

This reflects a prescriptive stereotype that prioritizes women's domestic roles over professional ambitions.

Similarly, the narrative from a female academic highlights exclusion from informal decision-making spaces, confirming that access to networks is gendered and contributes to unequal career outcomes.

"Men make decisions over informal lunches or at events women aren't expected to attend. We miss out on that critical intel and sponsorship".

The "backlash effect" described by another respondent further illustrates how women are penalized for displaying leadership traits, reinforcing the double bind identified in gender research.

"I was told I needed to be 'softer' in my approach, yet a male colleague acting similarly was praised for being 'decisive'"

These findings are consistent with existing literature on gender inequality in career progression. The observed disparities in promotion and leadership opportunities align with studies on the glass ceiling, which describe invisible but

persistent barriers preventing women from reaching senior positions (Shrestha et al., 2023). The exclusion from mentorship and informal networks reflects patterns identified by Barkhuizen et al. (2022), who emphasize the role of “old boys’ networks” in shaping career advancement. Additionally, the undervaluation of women’s contributions supports prior research demonstrating bias in performance evaluation and workplace recognition (Heilman, 2012).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings strongly support both Gender Role Theory (GRT) and Feminist Theory (FT). GRT explains the persistence of these patterns through the internalization of gender norms that associate leadership with masculinity and caregiving with femininity. The perception that women are less committed due to family responsibilities reflects socially constructed expectations that influence both self-perception and organizational judgments. At the same time, FT provides a structural explanation by highlighting how these stereotypes are embedded in institutional practices. The unequal distribution of opportunities, exclusion from networks, and biased promotion systems demonstrate that gender inequality is maintained through organizational structures rather than individual capability differences.

Importantly, the findings highlight how gender stereotypes in Bida Metropolis operate through interconnected mechanisms. Promotion bias, limited access to training, undervaluation of contributions, and exclusion from networks collectively create a reinforcing system that restricts women’s upward mobility. This interconnectedness explains the persistence of the glass ceiling, where barriers accumulate across different stages of career progression rather than occurring at a single point.

The persistence of these barriers can be attributed to several contextual factors. Cultural norms that prioritize women’s domestic roles continue to influence organizational expectations, leading to biased assumptions about commitment and availability. Additionally, the reliance on informal networks for decision-making reinforces exclusion, as these networks are often male-dominated. Institutional weaknesses, including the absence of transparent promotion criteria and limited accountability mechanisms, further enable these practices to persist.

The implications of these findings are significant for both policy and practice. Addressing gender inequality in Bida requires interventions that target both structural and cultural dimensions. Organizations should implement transparent and merit-based promotion systems, expand access to training and mentorship programs, and institutionalize inclusive networking opportunities. Furthermore, awareness initiatives are needed to challenge stereotypical beliefs about gender roles and leadership. Without such reforms, the combined effects of formal and informal barriers will continue to limit women’s career progression.

The findings demonstrate that gender stereotypes in Bida Metropolis are not merely attitudinal but are actively reproduced through organizational processes and social norms. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how stereotypes translate into tangible

career barriers, reinforcing the need for systemic interventions to promote gender equity.

Objective 3: Coping Strategies

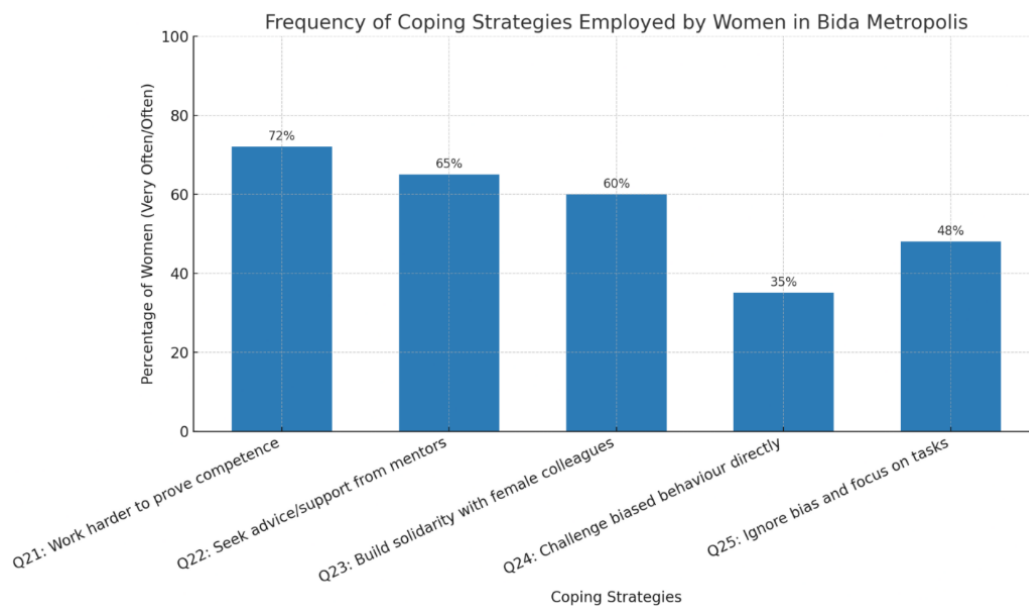


Figure 3. Bar chart showing Frequency of different Coping Strategies (Q21-25) as "Very Often/Often" percentages

The results presented in Figure 3 indicate that women in Bida Metropolis adopt a range of coping strategies to navigate gender-based workplace constraints, with clear variation in the frequency and type of strategies employed. The bar chart shows that 72% of respondents reported “working harder to prove competence” as a frequent strategy, making it the most dominant coping mechanism. This high proportion suggests that women respond to perceived bias through performance intensification, attempting to counter stereotypes by exceeding expectations. While this strategy reflects resilience and determination, it also signals the presence of a workplace environment in which women feel compelled to continuously justify their competence, indicating structural inequality rather than merit-based evaluation.

Social coping strategies also feature prominently. The findings show that 65% of women rely on mentorship or guidance from senior colleagues, while 60% build strong relationships with other women, highlighting the importance of social capital and peer support systems. These patterns indicate that women compensate for institutional gaps—such as limited formal mentorship structures—by creating alternative networks of support. However, the reliance on informal support structures also suggests that access to formal career advancement pathways remains uneven.

In contrast, more confrontational strategies are significantly less common. Only 35% of respondents reported frequently challenging discriminatory behaviour, indicating a cautious approach to addressing bias directly. Similarly, 48% reported ignoring bias to focus on their work, reflecting a pragmatic but

potentially suppressive coping mechanism. These lower frequencies suggest that women strategically avoid confrontation due to the perceived risk of backlash or negative consequences, reinforcing the persistence of workplace inequality.

The qualitative findings strongly reinforce and contextualize these statistical patterns, demonstrating clear triangulation across data sources. Narratives from interview participants illustrate how hyper-competence operates as a deliberate strategy. For example, the account of a female lecturer who pursued advanced academic qualifications despite social pressure highlights how women seek to build undeniable professional legitimacy in response to stereotypical doubt;

"When they doubt your leadership, you just come with results they can't ignore. I pursued my PhD, even when the men around me; both colleagues and sibling questioned me and kept pressuring me by asking why I wasn't married, I simply ignored, because I knew achieving that feat would make me indispensable,"

Similarly, the emphasis on peer support among female colleagues confirms the importance of collective coping mechanisms in navigating gendered challenges.

"My female colleagues are my strongest allies. We share strategies, warn each other about pitfalls, and celebrate each other's small victories."

The qualitative data also provided insight into why direct confrontation is less common. Participants described the need for strategic adaptation, including the use of relational and collaborative approaches to influence outcomes subtly. The use of pragmatic disengagement ignoring bias to maintain productivity further illustrates the emotional and psychological calculations involved in navigating discriminatory environments. These findings suggest that women's coping strategies are not merely reactive but are carefully calibrated responses to structural constraints.

It was also revealed that mentorship from male and female colleagues also played a key role. Direct confrontation was less frequent, with some women employing strategic adaptation, leveraging communal traits like empathy and collaboration to achieve influence subtly. Others used pragmatic disengagement:

"I ignore the noise and focus on my tasks. It saves energy and helps me stay productive, illustrating selective engagement."

Importantly, perspectives from male respondents and institutional representatives further strengthen the triangulation of findings. Male participants acknowledged the existence of gender stereotypes, although their interpretations varied. Some normalized these beliefs as reflections of societal structure, reinforcing the persistence of stereotypical assumptions about competence and leadership. Others demonstrated critical awareness, recognizing that women are often overlooked despite qualifications. The institutional perspective from the Ministry of Women Affairs highlights the role of cultural and religious norms in sustaining these patterns, while also pointing to ongoing interventions such as awareness campaigns and advocacy for inclusive workplace policies. However, the acknowledgment that formal policies have limited practical impact underscores the gap between policy and implementation.

"It's just how society is structured; women are better with people skills, men with hard numbers. So naturally men are preferred to be placed in leadership positions than women, because they are expected to make sound judgment of situations more than women."

Another civil servant observed,

"I've started seeing that my female colleagues are often overlooked despite being more qualified. It's not always about merit, here, it is mostly about the patriarchy and in many cases ego."

The Niger State Ministry of Women Affairs representative emphasized that cultural and religious norms reinforce gender stereotypes. They highlighted interventions such as awareness campaigns, skill acquisition programs, and advocacy for family-friendly workplace policies, acknowledging the persistent challenge of translating formal equality policies into practice.

These findings align with existing literature on coping strategies and women's agency. Studies have shown that women often adopt performance-based strategies, networking, and selective engagement to navigate gender bias (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Kinnear & Naidoo, 2024). However, consistent with prior research, these strategies tend to operate within existing structural constraints rather than transforming them. The limited use of confrontation also supports findings on the "backlash effect," where women who challenge bias risk being perceived negatively (Heilman et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings illustrate the interplay between Gender Role Theory (GRT) and Feminist Theory (FT). GRT helps explain why women adopt certain coping strategies, particularly those that align with socially acceptable feminine behaviours such as collaboration, empathy, and relational networking. The preference for indirect strategies over confrontation reflects the internalization of norms that discourage assertive behaviour in women. At the same time, FT provides a structural interpretation, showing that these coping mechanisms arise in response to institutional inequalities embedded in organizational systems. The reliance on hyper-competence and informal networks indicates that formal structures do not provide equal opportunities, necessitating adaptive strategies.

Cross Tabulation of Variables

Table 1. Gender Stereotypes × Promotion Bias

Stereotype	Not Overlooked	Overlooked	Total
Disagree	88	39	127
Agree	91	180	271
Total	179	219	398

Result

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	45.21	1	.000

Using the Chi-square test of independence:

$$\chi^2(1, N = 398) \approx 45.2$$

$$p < 0.001$$

Interpretation

There is a strong and statistically significant relationship between gender stereotypes and promotion bias.

Table 2. Gender Stereotypes × Training Access

Stereotype	Not Limited	Limited	Total
Disagree	78	49	127
Agree	81	190	271
Total	159	239	398

Result

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	39.58	1	.000

$$\chi^2(1, N = 398) \approx 39.6$$

$$p < 0.001$$

Interpretation

Gender stereotypes significantly influence access to training opportunities.

Table 3. Gender Stereotypes × Network Exclusion

Stereotype	Not Excluded	Excluded	Total
Disagree	80	47	127
Agree	111	160	271
Total	191	207	398

Result

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	18.73	1	.000

$$\chi^2(1, N = 398) \approx 18.7$$

$$p < 0.001$$

Interpretation

There is a significant relationship between gender stereotypes and exclusion from professional networks.

Table 4. Gender × Promotion Bias

Stereotype	Not Excluded	Excluded	Total
Male	39	39	78
Agree	140	180	320
Total	179	219	398

Result

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.52	1	.011

$$\chi^2(1, N = 398) \approx 6.5$$

$$p < 0.05$$

Interpretation

There is a statistically significant difference between male and female respondents in promotion experiences.

Gender Stereotypes and Promotion Bias

The analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between gender stereotypes and promotion bias ($\chi^2 = 45.21, p < .001$). This indicates that respondents who endorsed gender stereotypes were significantly more likely to report being overlooked for promotion.

This finding suggests that belief systems about gender roles are not merely attitudes but actively shape organizational decisions, particularly those related to career advancement. The strength of the Chi-square value indicates a robust association, implying that gender stereotypes are a major determinant of promotion outcomes.

This result aligns with the empirical work of Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, whose Role Congruity Theory posits that women are often perceived as less suitable for leadership roles due to a mismatch between feminine stereotypes and leadership expectations. Similarly, Madeline E. Heilman demonstrates that evaluators tend to underestimate women's competence in leadership contexts, leading to biased promotion decisions.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding strongly supports Gender Role Theory, which explains how socially constructed expectations about gender influence behavior and evaluation in the workplace. Women who deviate from traditional roles may face resistance, limiting their advancement.

Additionally, Feminist Theory provides a structural explanation, suggesting that organizational systems are inherently biased in ways that disadvantage women, thereby institutionalizing inequality in promotion practices.

Gender Stereotypes and Access to Training

The Chi-square test showed a significant relationship between gender stereotypes and access to training ($\chi^2 = 39.58, p < .001$). This implies that individuals who hold stereotypical beliefs about gender are more likely to experience or reinforce unequal access to professional development opportunities.

This finding highlights that inequality occurs not only at the level of promotion but also at earlier stages of career development. Limited access to training reduces the likelihood of skill acquisition and career readiness, thereby perpetuating long-term disparities.

Empirical studies support this outcome. Research by Stephanie G. Paustian-Underdahl indicates that women are often excluded from leadership development programs due to assumptions about their commitment or availability. Similarly, studies on workplace inequality emphasize that access to training is a critical determinant of career progression, and gender bias in this area reinforces systemic inequality.

Through the lens of Gender Role Theory, this result can be explained by societal expectations that prioritize men as long-term career investors while viewing women as less committed due to perceived domestic responsibilities.

From a Feminist Theory perspective, the unequal distribution of training opportunities reflects structural inequalities embedded within organizational practices, where access to resources is not equitably allocated.

Gender Stereotypes and Network Exclusion

The results further revealed a statistically significant relationship between gender stereotypes and exclusion from professional networks ($\chi^2 = 18.73, p < .001$). This indicates that individuals who agree with gender stereotypes are more likely to experience or perpetuate exclusion from informal workplace networks. Professional networks play a crucial role in career advancement by providing access to mentorship, information, and opportunities. Exclusion from these networks can therefore significantly hinder career progression.

This finding is consistent with empirical research highlighting the existence of “old boys’ networks,” where men dominate informal social and professional spaces. Scholars such as Madeline E. Heilman have emphasized that informal organizational practices often reinforce gender inequality, even in the absence of formal discrimination.

From a theoretical standpoint, Feminist Theory offers a strong explanation by emphasizing how power structures within organizations privilege male-dominated networks. These networks serve as gate keeping mechanisms that exclude women from critical opportunities.

At the same time, Gender Role Theory explains how stereotypes about appropriate social behavior for women may limit their participation in informal networking activities, further reinforcing exclusion.

Gender and Promotion Bias

The analysis also revealed a statistically significant relationship between gender and promotion bias ($\chi^2 = 6.52$, $p = .011$), indicating that female respondents are more likely to report being overlooked for promotion compared to their male counterparts.

Although the Chi-square value is smaller compared to other variables, it still indicates a meaningful difference, confirming the presence of gender-based disparities in workplace advancement.

This finding aligns with global empirical evidence. Studies by Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn show that gender disparities persist in labor markets due to structural and institutional factors. Similarly, reports from the World Economic Forum highlight the continued under-representation of women in leadership roles worldwide.

From the perspective of Gender Role Theory, this disparity reflects societal expectations that associate leadership with masculine traits, thereby disadvantaging women.

From a Feminist Theory standpoint, the finding underscores systemic inequality, where institutional practices and policies contribute to unequal outcomes for men and women.

Across all tests, a consistent pattern emerges:

Gender stereotypes are significantly associated with all key dimensions of career progression, including:

- Promotion,
- Training access,
- Network inclusion.

These findings demonstrate that gender inequality in the workplace operates through both cultural and structural mechanisms that reinforce one another. At the cultural level, deeply held beliefs about gender roles shape how individuals perceive men and women in professional settings. These beliefs give rise to stereotypes that influence judgments about competence, leadership ability, and suitability for certain roles, often disadvantaging women. As a result, perceptions formed at this level can subtly but powerfully affect decision-making processes within organizations.

At the structural level, these cultural beliefs become embedded in organizational practices and systems. Workplace policies, promotion criteria, and informal processes may reflect and reinforce existing biases, leading to unequal access to opportunities such as training, mentorship, and career advancement.

Consequently, structural mechanisms institutionalize inequality by limiting women's participation and progression within organizations, thereby sustaining long-term disparities in career outcomes. The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for both Gender Role Theory and Feminist Theory. The results demonstrate that gender stereotypes are not merely abstract beliefs but have tangible consequences for women's career progression. Addressing these disparities therefore requires both cultural reorientation and structural reforms within organizations to promote gender equality.

Conclusion

This study concludes that gender stereotypes significantly influence women's career progression in Bida Metropolis, operating through both cultural beliefs and institutional practices. The findings demonstrate that women are disproportionately affected by promotion bias, limited access to training, and exclusion from professional networks. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends Gender Role Theory by demonstrating its applicability within a semi-urban Nigerian context, where traditional norms strongly shape workplace behavior. It also reinforces Feminist Theory by highlighting how organizational structures systematically reproduce gender inequality. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace. These include the implementation of transparent promotion systems, equitable access to training opportunities, and the development of inclusive workplace cultures. Ultimately, addressing gender inequality requires both cultural transformation and institutional reform, as these factors are deeply interconnected in shaping women's career outcomes.

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