

Systematic document review of gender policies in higher education: Analysis on policy formulation, adoption and implementation practice

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Abstract

Formulating sound gender policies is vital to dismantling systemic barriers that women face and transforming academic institutions into equitable environments. While previous studies have focused on the barriers to women's leadership in higher education, little research has been devoted to gender policies in South African public universities. This study aims to explore the existing gender policy formulation, adoption, and implementation practices at South African academia. To this end, the study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach. The review documents were screened using the PRISMA flow chart, and a total of (n=24) documents were included, comprising (n=16) gender policy documents and (n=8) past studies. The findings indicate that the absence of a comprehensive, supportive, and clear gender policy is evident in South African academia. The majority of the existing formulated gender policies do not refer to international, continental, and regional legal instruments. The study further uncovered that the presence of poor implementation of the formulated gender policy is another key challenge that obstructs gender equality in South African public universities. This study contributes to South African higher education and gender policy literature by revealing a critical gender policy-practice gap.

Keywords: *gender policy, declarations, policy adoption, legal instruments, conventions*

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1. Introduction

One of the major goals of higher education institutions (HEIs) is to be agents of social justice and economic growth (Boulton & Lucas, 2008). Although HEIs are agents of social justice, gender inequity remains a pressing global agenda across all sectors (Burkinshaw et al., 2018). In South African HEIs, the introduction of gender policies had improved gender associated issues as compared with previous regimes (Khumalo & Zhou, 2019). However, many recent past studies observed that gender bias and stereotypes, discrimination, unfair recruitment and selection procedures, and gendered organizational culture are still apparent in South African academia (Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Sokani, 2025). It is a fact that creating inclusive gender policies is a crucial means to ensure gender equity in HEIs.

In the existing literature, little research attention has been given to gender policies in South African HEIs. Most recent prior studies have focused heavily on the barriers that limit women's access to leadership positions (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Kela et al., 2024; Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Oliso & Simelane-Mnisi, 2026; Pillay, 2025; Sokani, 2025). Other comparable studies investigated the lived experiences of women in leadership positions in South African HEIs (Kele & Pietersen, 2015; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Ramohai, 2019). A few other studies examined gender equity and policies in leadership of South African higher education (Loots & Walker, 2015; Sebola, 2015). None of the earlier studies thoroughly studied gender policies in South African HEIs.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate gender policy formulations, adoptions, and implementation practices within South African HEIs. Studying the gap between policy on paper and implementation practice on the ground is essential to address both the structural details of gender policies and the complex reality of institutional change. If the gender policy issue is not effectively researched and solved, achieving gender equity in upper leadership positions will be remarkably difficult.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge by advancing the understanding of gender policy formulation, adoption, and implementation practices in HEIs. The study also has several practical implications. First, the findings can assist universities in reviewing and strengthening their existing gender policies to ensure they effectively address emerging gender-related issues. Second, the review provides valuable insights for women academics by identifying policy alternatives and best practices that promote gender equity and inclusion in higher education. Finally, the findings offer evidence-

based recommendations for education policymakers and institutional decision-makers by identifying gaps in gender policies across South African public universities to develop responsive policies and targeted interventions.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What gender policies are formulated at the institutional level to ensure gender equity in South African HEIs?
2. How do the developed gender-related policies align with the domestic, regional, continental, and international legal instruments?
3. What are the major challenges that affect the implementation of the existing gender policies at South African HEIs?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Affairs in South Africa

After the downfall of the Apartheid regime, the government of South Africa established a democratic system aimed at addressing the diverse needs of its citizens. Among the key reforms introduced was the promotion of gender equality and equity in the country's public and private sectors (Singh et al., 2024). Gender equality was formally rooted in policy through the 1996 Constitution. The South African government has since demonstrated a strong commitment to advancing gender equality and equity, including ratifying numerous international and regional conventions and declarations, and formulating various domestic legal frameworks to meet the ratified international and regional declarations and conventions. Nevertheless, there are several persisting challenges affecting women's access to leadership positions within South African academia (Oliso & Simelane-Mnisi, 2026).

2.2. Gender Policies in South African HEIs

Despite South African public universities working to improve gender related issues in the academic environment, studies discovered several gaps associated with gender policies and their implementation practices within the academic environment. For example, Moodly (2022) argued that though policies are in place, those policies fail to ensure effective reporting. Gender policies also lack accountability as they focus on procedural compliance rather than survivor-centered justice (Gwiza & Hendricks, 2025). Furthermore, gender policies lack transparent

leadership policies, allowing gender stereotypes or Patriarchal norms to persist in defining roles and management styles within the academic environment (Moodly, 2025). The government reports also acknowledge the implementation challenges of gender policies within various sectors. The major implementation challenges of gender policies across sectors include the failure of government departments to adequately mainstream gender issues into their policies and programs, as well as gaps in adopting and institutionalizing gender-responsive planning, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation, and auditing processes (Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), 2019). Another challenge is the lack of ethical leadership within academia. As argued in the CGE (2025) report, effective implementation of gender policies depends on ethical leadership; without it, sound policies remain paper-based.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The study employed an integrated gender policy analysis framework to thoroughly examine how gender policies are created, adopted, and implemented in South African HEIs. Using feminist institutionalism theory, the study thoroughly examined the nature of gender policy formulation in South African universities (Mackay & Waylen, 2009), including how gender policies are framed and how sensitive gender-related issues are comprehensively addressed and incorporated into institutional policies (Lowndes, 2020).

The study also applied the policy implementation staircase to track how policies are communicated and adopted across different institutional levels (Saunders, 2006). It allowed the study to identify the gaps that arise as policies transition from national mandates, such as those from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), to university councils, and how institutions re-translate and develop their own policies. This framework further assisted the study in examining whether institutional gender policies are aligned with national, international, and regional legal frameworks.

Finally, the study employed Lipsky's (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy framework to investigate the discretionary power of front-line actors, such as Deans and Human Resource (HR) officers, in implementing the policies. This theoretical lens mainly helped the study closely review the implementation practices of gender policy documents, including whether policy documents explicitly indicate budget lines for gender offices and full-time transformation officers, standard operating procedures (SOPs) that tell managers exactly what to do, and clear reporting cycles, performance reviews, and grievance mechanisms.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Review Paradigm and Approach

We utilized an interpretivist research paradigm to thoroughly investigate the processes of gender policy formulation, adoption, and execution practice in South African HEIs. Since the interpretivist paradigm emphasizes qualitative research methods (Hatch, 2023), this study adopted a qualitative approach to present detailed findings and reports from various gender-related policy documents and past studies. The qualitative research approach enabled us to thoroughly explore how gender related policy issues formulated in South African higher education align with international, continental, regional, and national gender-related legal frameworks, and ultimately to examine the execution practices of these policies within academic settings.

3.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

We thoroughly reviewed gender policy documents formulated by South African public universities. In addition, we reviewed previous studies on gender policy-related issues in the country's higher education sector to provide further insight into the topic. Gender policy documents were accessed through the official websites of the respective universities, with documents from only 11 public universities representing three categories: traditional, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities. The gender policy documents of the remaining 15 public universities could not be accessed due to access restrictions.

We also reviewed empirical studies related to gender equality and equity policies using well-known electronic databases, including ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ERIC. To identify relevant documents aligned with the study objectives, we first developed a search strategy based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This transparent approach enhances the reliability of the systematic review process (Randles & Finnegan, 2023).

To ensure a comprehensive search, we employed the Population, Exposure, and Outcome (PEO) framework to break down the research topic into three core concepts: P (Population): South African higher education (HE) institutions; E (Exposure/Process): policy formulation, adoption, and implementation practices; and O (Outcome): gender equality, equity, or mainstreaming. We then developed keywords and subject headings to enhance the sensitivity (recall) and specificity (precision) of the search strategy (Lefebvre et al., 2019).

These search terms were organized into three main concepts: gender, policy process, and context/settings, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of keywords and subject-headings

Concepts	Keywords (free-texts)	Subject headings
Concept one: Gender	gender, sex, women, female, "gender equality", "gender equity", "gender mainstreaming", "gender transformation"	Gender Equity, Women, Sexism
Concept two: Policy process	"policy, framework, legislation, "formulation", "adoption", "implementation", "practice"	Policy Making, Government Regulation
Concept three: context/setting	"South Africa", "South African", "RSA", "higher education", "university", "tertiary education"	South Africa, Universities, Education, Higher

Table 2

Summary of search strategy adaptation for each database

Database	Search strategy adaptation
ERIC (Ovid/ProQuest)	-We used Thesaurus Descriptors , e.g., (gender OR women OR "gender equality") AND (policy OR formulation OR implementation) -We applied advanced multi-box searching to handle complex Boolean logic.
EBSCOhost	Box 1 (Gender): "gender equality" OR "gender mainstreaming"; Box 2 (Policy): policy OR formulation; Box 3 (Setting): "South Africa" AND ("higher education" OR university)
ScienceDirect	-Due to the Boolean operator limit, a simplified string was used: ("gender equality" OR "gender policy") AND ("higher education" OR university) -We used a non-nested, simplified string to accommodate the engine's lack of support for complex brackets: "gender policy" "higher education" "South Africa" formulation
Google Scholar	
Grey Literature/gender policy documents	Manual searches of the following South African institutional repositories

Once keywords and subject headings have been completed, we developed a search string and used **OR** group synonyms within a concept and **AND** to join the different concepts together (Rethlefsen et al., 2021), as shown in Table 2. For example, "gender equality" OR "gender mainstreaming" AND "policy" OR "framework". Finally, we refined the search strategy as we have employed different electronic databases to search for past studies. Thus, we followed search strategy adaptation or translation to fit the specific syntax of each platform while maintaining the keywords the same (Barends et al., 2018). Regarding policy documents

or grey literature, we conducted a targeted search for information to mitigate publication bias, which involved manual searches via institutional repositories (Mahood et al., 2014).

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 3 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 3

Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria for policy documents and past studies

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Policy topic/issue	Only focused on gender related issues	Not focused on gender related issues
Approval status	Approved by the university council	Not approved by the university council
Date of policy formulation, implementation, and revision	Clearly indicated	Not clearly indicated
The education level for which the gender-related policy is formulated	Gender related policies formulated for South African HEIs only	Gender related policies have not been formulated for South African HEIs
Language	English only	Not formulated in the English language
Criteria	Included	Excluded
Year of Publication	Publications between 2017 and 2026	Publications prior to 2017
Area of focus	Studies focused on gender policies	Studies not focused on gender policies
Country/geography	Studies conducted in South African HEIs	Studies not conducted in South African HEIs
Language	Studies published in the English language only	Studies not published in the English language

During the search for relevant gender policy documents and empirical studies, we screened the literature based on the year of publication, area of focus, language of publication, and study location. We primarily included studies that focused on the formulation and implementation of gender policies in South African higher education. In addition, we considered studies published between 2017 and 2026 to focus on recent research and findings.

For the universities' gender policy documents, we did not apply a publication-year filter because such policies are generally intended to remain in effect for extended periods, subject to periodic revision. However, we carefully reviewed the accessed policy documents based on their policy issue or topic, date of formulation, implementation date, revision date, educational level for which the policy was formulated, and approval status by the university council. We

included only policy documents that focused on gender-related issues relevant to the objectives of the study. We also included only documents with a clear approval status, as evidenced by the signature and seal of the university's authorized official, as well as a documented date of formulation, implementation, and/or revision, to ensure that only official policy documents were included.

Both policy documents and empirical studies were limited to those published in English and originating from South African higher education institutions (HEIs).

3.4. Data Screening and Extraction

We conducted document screening and data extraction using the PRISMA flow diagram, which promotes the transparency, completeness, and accuracy of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Page et al., 2021). The initial search yielded a total of 240 documents, which comprises 92 policy documents and 148 empirical studies on gender-related issues in South African higher education. All gender-related policy documents were accessed through the official websites of South African public universities. The empirical studies were retrieved from four well-known electronic databases: Google Scholar ($n = 68$), ERIC ($n = 22$), EBSCO ($n = 25$), and ScienceDirect ($n = 33$).

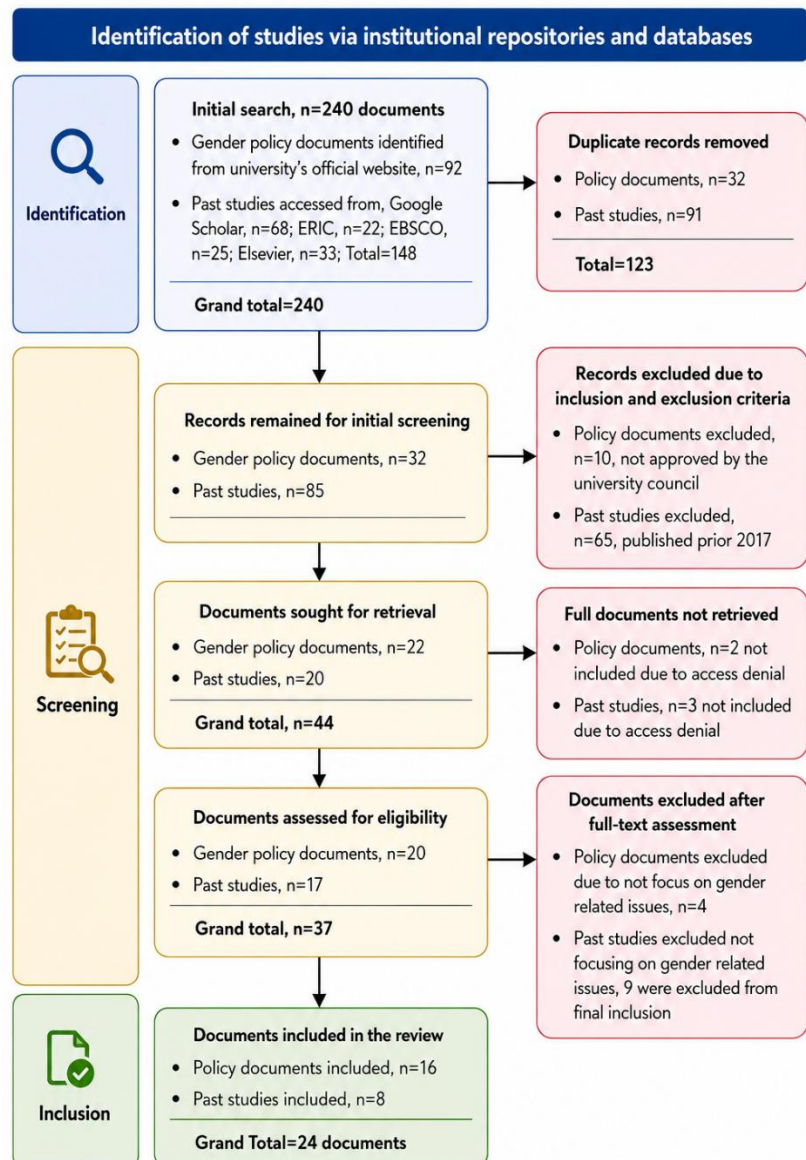
After removing 123 duplicate records ($n = 32$ policy documents and $n = 91$ empirical studies), 117 records remained for screening, comprising 32 policy documents and 85 empirical studies. During the initial screening, 10 policy documents that had not been approved by the respective university councils and 65 empirical studies, primarily those published before 2017, were excluded. This left 42 records (22 policy documents and 20 empirical studies) for retrieval. Of these, full-text access was denied for two policy documents and three empirical studies. Consequently, 37 records (20 policy documents and 17 empirical studies) were assessed for eligibility based on their alignment with the research focus.

Following the eligibility assessment, four policy documents that did not focus on gender-related policies and nine empirical studies that did not align with the objectives of the study were excluded. Finally, a total of 24 documents, comprising 16 gender-related policy documents and eight empirical studies, were included in the final review.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram summarizing the screening and selection process used to identify and include the relevant policy documents and empirical studies in the final review.

Figure 1

Summary of document screening process using PRISMA flow chart



Source: Page et al. (2021)

3.5. Critical Quality Appraisal

A critical appraisal was conducted for the included gender policy documents and empirical studies to assess their internal validity and methodological quality, reduce reviewer bias, and minimize potential discrepancies in interpretation (Booth et al., 2016). Given the anticipated variation in the research designs of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), Version 2018, was used to assess the methodological quality of the empirical studies (Hong et al., 2018). The eight included studies were classified into three categories based on their research approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

Each study was then assessed for methodological appropriateness using the MMAT criteria and rated as Yes, No, or Cannot tell, with a detailed justification provided for each rating.

On the other hand, the included gender policy documents were evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal checklists, which provide a useful framework for assessing non-research textual materials (Zeng et al., 2015). Each policy document was reviewed separately using the relevant JBI criteria and rated according to the designated response categories: Yes (Y), No (N), Unclear (U), or Not Applicable (NA). Any discrepancies or conflicting quality ratings between the two reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus until an agreement was reached (Boutron et al., 2023).

3.6. Data Synthesis and Analysis

Once the relevant documents had been identified, a systematic analysis was conducted using the following procedures.

Content analysis: First, the identified gender policy documents and empirical studies were divided between the two researchers. The principal author thoroughly reviewed the 16 gender policy documents formulated by South African public universities, while the co-author reviewed the eight empirical studies. Second, each researcher reviewed their assigned documents multiple times while keeping the study objectives in mind. A one-column word-processing document was prepared on each researcher's personal computer, and relevant information extracted from the printed documents was systematically recorded. Third, each researcher summarized the findings and highlighted and labeled key ideas using different colors to facilitate the identification of recurring concepts. Fourth, the researchers critically examined the labeled concepts and categories to determine whether related ideas could be organized into major themes and subthemes.

Following the review and refinement of the identified categories and subcategories, the coding process was initiated. Initial codes were developed based on the study's main objectives. To ensure methodological rigor and minimize the potential for researcher bias, a hybrid coding approach combining inductive and deductive methods was employed during the thematic analysis. The principal author developed the initial codes and emerging themes, which were subsequently reviewed independently by the co-author to assess their accuracy and consistency. Any disagreements regarding the classification of data into themes were discussed and resolved through consensus until the establishment of the final thematic framework

(Boutron et al., 2023). This collaborative process served as a form of intercoder validation, thereby enhancing the credibility, consistency, and overall trustworthiness of the synthesized findings.

Thematic analysis: Subsequently, the codes were organized into broader descriptive themes that captured the focus areas, indicators of effectiveness, and major structural or institutional gaps identified in the existing gender-related policies. After completing the categorization process, theme validation was conducted through a two-stage review. First, the emerging themes were compared with the original data to ensure that they accurately represented the findings reported in the source documents. Second, the final thematic structure was evaluated against the study's main research objectives. This process helped establish the relevance, internal consistency, and validity of the synthesized themes. Finally, the validated data were described, interpreted, and synthesized using a thematic approach.

3.7. Research Ethics

Ethical considerations were carefully observed, although the study did not involve human participants as primary sources of data. The key ethical principles considered in the study included the responsible use of publicly available information, respect for intellectual property and proper citation, maintenance of research integrity and accuracy, sensitivity to institutional contexts, and transparency and accountability. These principles included anonymizing the names of the institutions from which the gender policy documents were accessed. All publicly accessible documents were obtained from legitimate institutional sources, and appropriate citations and references were provided to acknowledge the original sources and avoid plagiarism. The interpretations were firmly grounded in the materials analyzed, with care taken to avoid distortion, misrepresentation, or selective use of information. The findings were presented objectively and respectfully, while maintaining sensitivity to the institutional contexts in which the policies were developed and implemented.

4. Findings

This section presents a summary of the reviewed gender policy documents and empirical studies, together with the thematic analysis conducted to address the three review

questions. The reviewed gender policy documents and empirical studies are summarized in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Summary of reviewed gender policy documents

University Code	Policy issue	Effective Date	Next Review year	Scope and Application	Comprehensiveness
UoT-1	Policy on harassment, sexual harassment, and GBV	17/09/2021	2024	All staff and students	Comprehensive
CU-1	Promotion of Equality and the Prevention and Protection against Unfair Discrimination	Dec 3, 2020	-	All staff and students	Comprehensive
CU-2	Gender-Based Violence Policy	13 Nov., 2024	2027	All staff and students	Comprehensive
	Employment Equity Policy	20 June 2019	2023	All employees	Not comprehensive
TU-1	Sexual offences policy for students	2020	2022	All the university community	Comprehensive
	Equity policy	March 2001	2023	All staff and students	Not comprehensive
TU-2	Employment equity policy	2016/09/20	As needed	All staff	Not comprehensive
	Unfair discrimination and harassment	2016/09/26	2021	All staff and students	Not comprehensive
CU-3	Gender equity framework	25 November 2021	2026	All staff and students	Not comprehensive
CU-4	Policy on Employment Equity	27 November, 2009	2012	All staff	Not comprehensive
TU-3	Inclusivity policy for sexual orientation	December 2017	-	All the university community	Not comprehensive
TU-4	Anti-discrimination and harassment policy	26 November, 2024	2029	All staff and students	Comprehensive
CU-5	Code of Conduct Policy	December, 2022	2028	All staff and students	Not comprehensive
UoT-5	Policy and Disciplinary Procedure On Sexual and Gender-Related Misconduct	January 01, 2015	2021	Entire University community	Comprehensive
	Anti-Discrimination Policy and Procedures	January 01, 2013	2021	All staff and students	Comprehensive
	Policy on Sexual and Romantic Relationships between Staff and Undergraduate and Honors Students	January 01, 2017	2021	All staff and students	Not comprehensive

Legend: UoT = University of Technology, CU = Comprehensive University, TU = Traditional University

Table 5*Summary of reviewed past studies*

Author(s) and year	Sample Size/documents included in the study/review	Method adopted	Data collection tools	Key findings
Hlatshwayo, et al., 2022	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Poor implementation of policies
Singh et al., 2024	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Lack of policy intervention
Pillay, 2025	98 academic works	Systematic review	Document review	Inadequate enforcement of gender equity policies
Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026	12 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Lack of family-friendly policies
Moodly & Toni, 2017	3 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Lack of transformative policies
Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024	37 journal articles	Systematic review	Document review	Lack of promoting organizational change and policy agendas
Muleya & Mothoagae, 2025	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Lack of gender policies that promote work-life balance
Sokani, 2025	130 studies	Systematic review	Document review	Absence of supportive legislation on gender related issues

The major themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis were synthesized and analyzed. Table 6 shows a summary of the identified themes and sub-themes.

Table 6*Summary of major themes and sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Source
Existing gender policy formulation	Lack of comprehensiveness	Reviewed gender related policy documents such as Employment Equity Policy, Equity policy, Employment Equity Policy, Unfair discrimination and harassment, Gender equity framework, Policy on employment equity, Inclusivity policy for sexual orientation, Code of conduct policy, Policy on sexual and romantic Relationships between staff and undergraduate and honours students
	Lack of adequate gender policies	Reviewed policy documents: Sensitive gender related issues that need policy interventions: -GBV and sexual orientation-associated issues, -Institutional transformation and staffing, -Supportive policies like student pregnancy, flextime, HIV/AIDS, maternity and parental leave, and on-campus childcare

Theme	Sub-Theme	Source
Policy adoption practice		Except for the gender equity framework policy, the remaining 15 reviewed gender policy documents do not refer to international, continental, and regional legal frameworks, namely the Policy on harassment, sexual harassment, and GBV
		Promotion of Equality and the Prevention and Protection against Unfair Discrimination, Gender-Based Violence Policy
Challenges in the policy implementation		Employment Equity Policy, Sexual offences policy for students, Equity policy, Employment equity policy
		Unfair discrimination and harassment, Policy on Employment Equity, Inclusivity policy for sexual orientation, Anti-discrimination and harassment policy, Code of Conduct Policy, Policy and Disciplinary Procedure On Sexual and Gender-Related Misconduct, Anti-Discrimination Policy and Procedures, Policy on Sexual and Romantic Relationships between Staff and Undergraduate and Honors Students
		Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Muleya & Mothoagae, 2025; Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Pillay, 2025; Singh et al., 2024; Sokani, 2025

Theme 1: Existing gender policies

Lack of comprehensiveness. We thoroughly reviewed each gender-related policy document to assess its comprehensiveness in terms of policy statements and purpose, definitions, guiding principles, roles and responsibilities, terms of reference (ToR), complaints and inequity panels, monitoring and evaluation, policy review procedures, budgeting and resourcing, consequence management, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and reporting cycles. The review revealed that the majority of the gender-related policies of the selected universities did not include these basic policy components. Of the 16 gender-related policy documents reviewed, nine were not sufficiently comprehensive and lacked one or more essential policy elements.

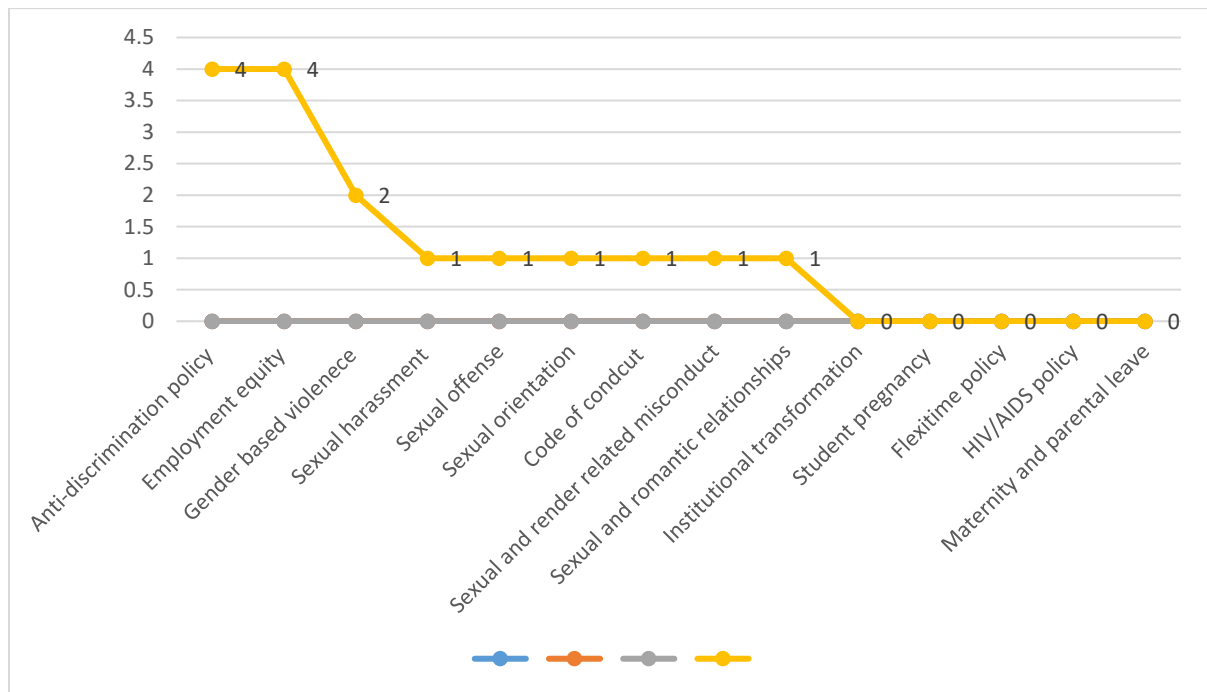
Another gap identified in gender policy formulation was the limited attention given to several important gender-related issues. The majority of the reviewed universities' gender-related policies primarily focused on anti-discrimination (n = 4) and the Employment Equity Act (n = 4), while comparatively little attention was given to gender-based violence (GBV) and issues related to sexual orientation. Furthermore, none of the 16 reviewed universities had

developed policies addressing other emerging or time-sensitive gender-related concerns, such as institutional transformation and staffing, student pregnancy, flextime, HIV/AIDS, maternity leave, parental leave, and on-campus childcare.

Figure 2 presents the reviewed gender-related policies, including their respective types and frequencies.

Figure 2

Summary of gender related policies in South African HEIs



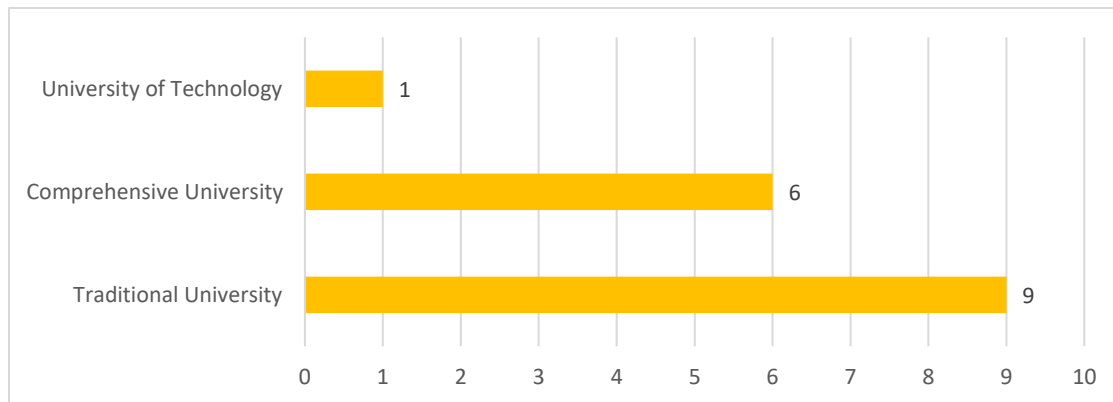
Source: Authors' own work

Lack of adequate gender policies. While reviewing various gender associated policy documents, we realized that there are differences across universities in formulating gender policies. Though we did not fully review all the South African 26 public universities' gender related policy documents, the total number of accessed policy documents of traditional and comprehensive universities outweighs those of the universities of technology. Among the reviewed (n=16) policy documents, the majority of (n=9) gender-associated policy documents were developed by traditional universities, followed by comprehensive universities (n=6), and only one (n=1) was formulated by a university of technologies.

Figure 3 portrays the number of policy documents in each category of South African public universities.

Figure 3

Summary of the number of universities' gender policy documents reviewed from each category



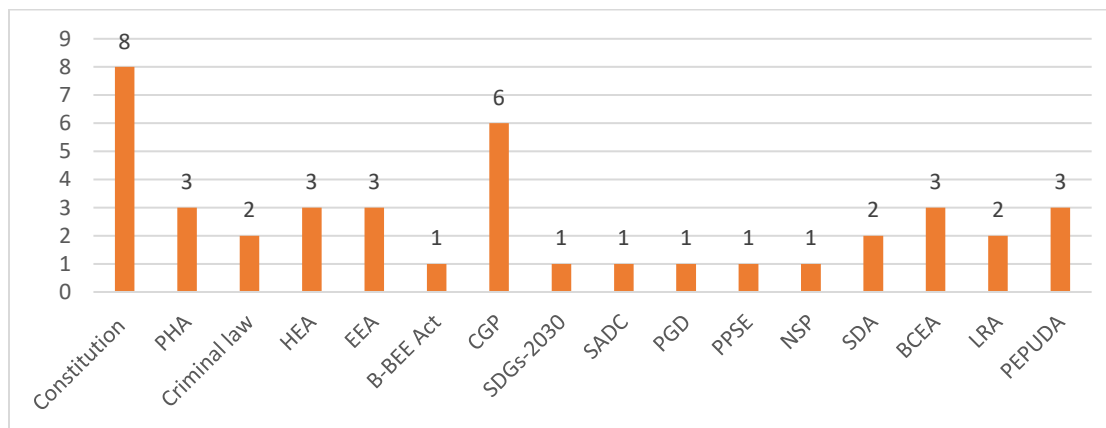
Source: Authors' own work

Theme 2: Policy adoption practice

Although several formulated gender policies are aligned with the country's domestic policies, the majority of the gender policies reviewed from the selected universities were not developed in accordance with international, continental, and regional conventions and declarations, with only a few exceptions.

Figure 4

Summary of referred legal frameworks by South African HEIs



Source: Authors' own work or creation Where; PHA=Protection from harassment act; HEA=Higher Education Act; EEA=Employment Equity Act; B-BEE Act=Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment; CGP=Code of Good Practice; SADC=Southern African Development Community; PGD=Policy on Gender Development; PPSE=Policy in the Post-School Education; NSP=National Strategic Policy; SDA=Skills Development Act; BCEA=Basic Conditions of Employment Act; LRA=Labour Relations Act; PEPUDA= Promotions of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act

As presented in Figure 4, the majority of the formulated gender policy documents ($n = 8$) are aligned with South Africa's 1996 Constitution, while six ($n = 6$) are aligned with domestic legal instruments such as the Code of Good Practice. The remaining policies, numbering no more than three, were adapted from other domestic legal instruments. Moreover, of the 16 gender-related policy documents reviewed, 15 were not developed in accordance with international, continental, or regional legal instruments, with only one policy document demonstrating such alignment. Furthermore, one of the reviewed gender policy documents does not refer to any domestic, regional, or international legal instruments.

Theme 3: Challenges in the policy implementation practice

Although gender policies exist in South African public universities, a significant implementation gap remains evident. Hlatshwayo et al. (2022) found that formulated gender policies are poorly implemented across universities. Similarly, Pillay (2025) identified gaps in policy formulation, inadequate enforcement of gender equity policies, and poor implementation practices as some of the most prominent challenges hindering the achievement of gender equality and equity within South Africa's academic environment.

5. Discussion

The gender policies reviewed from South African universities appear significantly inadequate, lacking both the structural frameworks and thematic breadth required to support meaningful institutional reform. The majority of the existing policies function as partial frameworks that lack essential components such as budgeting, reporting cycles, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms. This finding corroborates the observation of Moodly and Toni (2017), who found that gender policies in South African HEIs lack comprehensiveness and are often embedded within gender-blind transformation agendas. Viewed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, the absence of clear and comprehensive institutional policies may result in gender policies serving primarily as mechanisms of superficial compliance with state requirements rather than as instruments for transforming existing internal power structures (Waylen, 2011). Gender-blind transformation agendas within South African HEIs should therefore not be viewed as a neutral administrative approach; rather, they may function as systemic mechanisms that obscure persistent patriarchal power dynamics. From a feminist institutionalist perspective, institutions are fundamentally gendered, with male-centred norms

often embedded within institutional practices and presented as ostensibly neutral arrangements (Waylen, 2011).

The findings further revealed that, by prioritizing anti-discrimination and compliance-oriented measures, the reviewed institutional gender policies failed to adequately address several contemporary and gender-sensitive issues, including gender-based violence (GBV), diverse sexual identities, parental and childcare support, on-campus childcare, student pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, maternity and parental leave, and flexible working arrangements. These omissions may directly or indirectly hinder meaningful institutional transformation. This finding supports Moodly and Toni's (2017) observation that most South African HEIs' gender policies do not adequately address sensitive gender-related issues and the lived experiences of women in South Africa. Studies by Ngonyama and Adewumi (2026), Muleya and Mothoagae (2025), and Sokani (2025) similarly found that many South African universities lack family-friendly policies that promote gender equality. Kaymakcioglu and Thomas (2024) further identified the challenges women face in balancing work and family responsibilities as one of the barriers to achieving gender equality in higher education. Moreover, Sokani (2025) and Moodly and Toni (2017) found that the absence of supportive and transformative gender policies, legislation, and practices remains a persistent challenge in South African HEIs and undermines institutional efforts to address gender-related concerns. Viewed through a feminist institutionalist lens, these findings demonstrate how deeply embedded gendered norms and patriarchal power structures within South African academia can constrain meaningful institutional change by reducing gender transformation to bureaucratic compliance rather than substantive structural reform (Mackay & Waylen, 2009).

Among the reviewed gender-related policies, none specifically addressed institutional transformation and staffing. This omission is particularly significant given that one of the priorities of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is to reduce gender disparities in higher education leadership positions. Although women constitute more than 60% of students and approximately 54% of university staff in South Africa, this representation is not reflected at the senior levels of university leadership (Pillay, 2025). Addressing gender disparities in South African academia therefore requires transformative policy interventions that extend beyond general anti-discrimination provisions and explicitly address institutional structures, staffing, recruitment, promotion, and leadership representation (Singh et al., 2024). Furthermore, the findings indicate notable differences in the extent to

which gender policies are developed and institutionalized across South African public universities, particularly according to institutional type. Traditional and comprehensive universities demonstrate a considerably greater degree of gender policy development than universities of technology, which have substantially less representation. This discrepancy suggests an uneven institutional commitment to gender transformation and highlights the need for universities of technology to prioritize the development, formalization, and implementation of comprehensive gender policy frameworks.

The study also identified gaps in gender policy adoption and alignment. Some of the gender policy documents formulated by South African HEIs do not adequately reference international, continental, and regional legal instruments that promote gender equality. This finding is consistent with Moodly and Toni's (2017) observation that transformative gender policies in South African universities are not sufficiently aligned with international and regional conventions and declarations. Interpreted through the Implementation Staircase Model, the formulation of gender policies without adequate reference to international, continental, and regional legal instruments may represent a structural break in the policy implementation process (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). By failing to integrate these broader legal and normative frameworks, institutional policymakers may inadvertently disconnect university-level gender policies from wider accountability mechanisms and commitments to gender equality. Consequently, global and regional gender-equity mandates may not be effectively translated into institutional policies and practices, thereby disrupting the downward flow of policy implementation envisioned by the Implementation Staircase Model (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987).

The study further found that poor implementation of gender policies remains evident within South African academia. This finding concurs with Hlatshwayo et al. (2022), who identified significant disparities between policy intent and actual practice in the implementation of gender policies within South African HEIs. Lipsky's (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) theory provides a useful explanation for this implementation gap. According to Lipsky (1980), public policies are not simply implemented as designed by senior policymakers; rather, they are continually interpreted and reconstructed by frontline implementers. Within universities, these actors may include Faculty Deans, Heads of Departments (HoDs), and line managers who exercise considerable discretion in translating institutional policies into everyday practices. From an SLB perspective, the implementation

challenges identified in South African gender policies may therefore reflect gaps between formal policy provisions and their interpretation and application at the operational level. Because frontline decision-makers exercise discretionary authority and may operate with limited direct oversight regarding gender-related matters, their day-to-day decisions, priorities, and interpretations can substantially influence the extent to which gender policies are translated into meaningful institutional practices (Lipsky, 1980). Thus, the existence of a formally articulated gender policy does not necessarily guarantee its effective implementation or its ability to produce substantive institutional transformation.

6. Conclusion and Implications

South African academia continues to face significant gaps in the formulation of comprehensive, clear, and family-friendly gender policies. Moreover, most of the formulated gender policies do not adequately reference international, continental, and regional legal instruments that promote gender equality and equity. The study further concludes that the implementation gap between gender policy intentions and institutional practices remains one of the pressing challenges hindering the achievement of gender equality and equity in South African academia. The findings contribute to the literature on gender policy and South African higher education by revealing a critical gap between institutional gender policy and practice. Institutional gender equality is affected not only by the poor implementation of existing gender policies but also by the failure to adequately align university gender policies with relevant international, continental, regional, and national legal frameworks.

The study recommends that South African universities formulate comprehensive gender policies with clearly defined objectives and all essential policy components, including implementation mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, monitoring and evaluation, reporting, budgeting, accountability, and consequence management. Universities should also develop family-friendly and supportive gender policies that are aligned with the country's Code of Good Practice on the Protection of Employees during Pregnancy and After the Birth of a Child (1998).

Since many South African HEIs do not make their gender policies readily accessible through their official websites, universities, particularly universities of technology, should ensure that current gender policies approved by their respective university councils are publicly

accessible on their official websites. This would improve transparency, facilitate stakeholder awareness, and support future research on gender policy in higher education.

Furthermore, universities should review and reform existing gender policies by systematically examining relevant international, continental, regional, and national legal frameworks. Such policies should not merely acknowledge these instruments but should translate their principles and commitments into clear institutional objectives, implementation mechanisms, and measurable actions. Effective implementation of gender-related policies is also necessary to ensure that policy commitments result in meaningful improvements in gender equality and equity across South African academia.

Various independent organizations and government bodies collaborate with and oversee aspects of South Africa's higher education sector, including the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and Universities South Africa (USAf). These institutions have important roles to play in strengthening gender policy development, implementation, monitoring, and accountability within South African higher education. The CGE and SAHRC, whose mandates include the protection and promotion of constitutional rights and gender equality, should regularly monitor and assess the development and implementation of gender policies within the higher education sector. Such monitoring should examine not only the existence of institutional policies but also their comprehensiveness, accessibility, alignment with relevant legal frameworks, and implementation in practice.

The CHE should strengthen its role in promoting gender equality and transformation within higher education by incorporating gender policy development and implementation into its relevant quality assurance, governance, and strategic advisory functions. As part of its mandate to provide independent strategic advice to the Minister of Higher Education concerning matters related to higher education, including funding, governance, and transformation, the CHE can contribute to ensuring that gender equality is meaningfully integrated into institutional transformation processes. Similarly, the DHET, as the national department responsible for higher education policy development and oversight, should strengthen its monitoring of how universities formulate, adopt, implement, and review gender policies. The DHET, in collaboration with the CGE and SAHRC, should assess the extent to which institutional gender policies comply with national legislation and are aligned with

relevant international, continental, and regional gender equality frameworks. Such collaborative monitoring could help identify implementation gaps and promote greater institutional accountability.

Finally, USAf, as the representative organization of South Africa's public universities, should play a more active role in supporting gender-responsive policy development across the higher education sector. Through strategic partnerships, capacity-building initiatives, knowledge sharing, and sector-wide coordination, USAf can support universities in developing and implementing comprehensive gender policies that promote meaningful institutional transformation. Collectively, these stakeholders can contribute to closing the gap between gender policy formulation and implementation and advancing gender equality and equity across South African higher education.

7. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, only gender-related policy documents and empirical studies published in English were included. This language restriction may have excluded valuable studies and policy documents published in other languages, thereby limiting the breadth of the evidence considered in the review. Second, as previously noted, the analysis of institutional gender policy documents was limited to 11 South African public universities because approved gender policies from the remaining 15 universities could not be located on their official websites. Consequently, the findings of this review should not be generalized to all South African public universities. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to examine the gender policies of all public universities in South Africa, including policies that may not be publicly accessible online. Third, the review focused exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles and excluded books, book chapters, conference papers, and other relevant scholarly publications. This exclusion may have resulted in the omission of valuable perspectives and evidence relevant to gender policy formulation, adoption, and implementation in South African higher education.

Another limitation concerns the selection of databases and the period covered by the review. The literature search was restricted to four electronic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and EBSCO. Consequently, relevant studies indexed in other academic databases may not have been identified. In addition, the review was limited to studies published

between 2017 and 2026 to maintain a manageable scope. This time restriction may have resulted in the exclusion of earlier studies containing important historical, theoretical, or empirical insights into gender policy development and implementation in South African higher education.

Despite these limitations, the review provides useful evidence regarding the formulation, adoption, and implementation of gender policies in South African public universities and identifies important areas for further research.

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AI Declaration

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to design, conduct, analyze, or interpret this study. Grammarly was used solely for language editing, including spelling, grammar correction, and the paraphrasing of some lengthy statements to improve clarity and readability.

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