Lancaster University Management School

# Lancaster University Management School:
## Author Accepted Manuscript

This is an 'accepted manuscript' as required by HEFCE's Open Access policy for REF2021.

Please cite this paper as:

Afua Owusu-Kwarteng, Cynthia Forson, Olufunmilola (Lola) Dada, Sarah Jack (2024) A symbolic violence approach to gender inequality in academia. Gender, Work and Organization, Accepted, forthcoming.

ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION | March 21, 2024

ORCID NUMBER: 0000-0002-4271-8331

[Olufunmilola (Lola) Dada]
[Professor]
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster, LA1 4YX

TRIPLE-ACCREDITED, WORLD-RANKED

# A symbolic violence approach to gender inequality in academia

**Abstract**

Feminist scholars have long recognised the gender-based challenges that women in academia face relative to men. Although numerous strategies have been designed and implemented to tackle this problem, the attainment of gender equality in academia has proved futile globally. Integrating Acker's notion of the ideal worker with Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and capital, we undertake a qualitative study of how women in African universities navigate the masculinised ideal academic norm, and how their efforts to break free from this symbolic image reproduces and legitimises gender inequality. Drawing on the narratives of 36 women researchers in Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya, Botswana, and Zambia, our analysis reveals how the perpetual struggle for power, positions, and resources in academia influences women researchers within these contexts to enact three strategies for legitimacy – (1) 'Engage the patriarchal order,' (2) 'Contest normative femininity,' and (3) 'Appropriate normative femininity.' In contributing to the ongoing efforts to achieve SDGs 5 and 8, we develop a theoretical framework that illuminates the subtle and sophisticated mechanisms that (re)produce, sustain, and legitimise the gendered structures and cultures in academia that serve to disadvantage women. The implications of these findings for theory and practice are outlined.

**Keywords:** ideal worker, gender inequality, women academics, Sub-Saharan Africa, symbolic violence

# 1 INTRODUCTION

> We readily admit that academic women are not the wretched of the earth; in contrast, they are in extremely privileged positions. Yet if these women experience their lives as threaded with misery, what hope is there for other women who have not had their advantages? And why is it that academe still seems unable to adjust to its two-gendered population? (Acker and Armenti 2004, 18).

As the opening quote suggests, feminist scholars have long been concerned about the gender-based challenges that women in academe face relative to men (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016; van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Despite the claim that academia promotes objectivity and fairness, extant research has convincingly shown that academic careers are gendered and "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action, and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between 'male' and 'female', 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (Acker 1990, 146). Academia is a heavily male-dominated environment, and men tend to represent the norm against which women's performances are measured (Brescoll 2016; Dashper 2019). The implication for women is that to be recruited, retained, and promoted in academia, they must learn to successfully embody the normative masculinist standard of the 'ideal academic' (Fagan and Teasdale 2021; França et al. 2023).

While past research offers valuable insights on the gendered nature and character of academia, it provides a limited understanding of how women academics survive the masculinised ideal academic norm in countries where the socio-cultural and institutional factors shaping careers are different from those in North America and Europe (Cohen, Duberley, and Bustos Torres 2023; Liani et al. 2020). In other words, the extant literature primarily describes the frustrations, challenges, and success of Western women academics in navigating the male success model in academia (Gander 2019; van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Meanwhile, several scholars (e.g., Forson et al. 2017; Idahosa 2020; Mabokela and Mlambo 2015) have

started to acknowledge the important role of context in advancing our knowledge of the generalisability of career concepts and policies from Western to non-Western contexts, especially those targeted at achieving the United Nations (2015) sustainable development goals on gender equality (SDG5) and decent work and economic growth (SDG8). Highlighting the benefit of contextualising career studies, Ituma and Simpson (2009), for example, showed how because of high levels of unemployment and a more 'collective' orientation in Nigeria, the 'free actor model' was less applicable to the inter-firm mobility experiences of workers in the ICT industry, as compared to their counterparts in individualistic, Western-based liberal democratic contexts (e.g., UK and US) that have relatively stable economic conditions.

Such key contextual nuances form the raison d'être for our paper that seeks to add to the literature on gender differences in academic careers. Our aim is to offer a deeper understanding of the different capacities and strategies of women in tackling the gender-based challenges they face in academia by addressing the research question: *How do African women in higher education within Africa navigate the masculinised ideal academic norm to accomplish their careers?* We bring together two theoretical perspectives to qualitatively analyse how women academics and research scientists (hereafter referred to as African women researchers) in six Sub-Saharan African countries (i.e., Malawi, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, and Botswana) enact strategies to manage the gender-based challenges they face in a seemingly meritocratic and democratic, yet gendered and patriarchal, context. First, we draw on Acker's (1990) conceptualisation of the 'ideal worker' to capture the demographic characteristics of the ideal academic in the African context. We then consider Bourdieu's (1990, 2001) conceptualisation of symbolic capital and symbolic violence to show the disadvantages that originate from the *ideal African researcher* for African women, and how their efforts to break free from this symbolic image reproduces and legitimises gender inequality.

We offer contributions that promote the development of more inclusive frameworks for looking at gender, work, and organisations. First, we extend Acker's (2006) concept of the ideal worker through our conceptualisation of the *ideal African researcher*, which uncovers the specific form of masculinity and patriarchal hegemony within the African context that tends to establish gendered barriers for African women researchers. Second, we extend Bourdieu's (1990, 2001) conceptualisation of symbolic capital and symbolic violence by showing how African women researchers shift their femininity in importance, value, and effects, in order to overcome the gendered barriers impeding their career development. In this regard, we contribute to the limited research examining how gender operates as a form of symbolic capital (Huppatz 2009; Yamak et al. 2016). Third, we broaden extant understanding of the social reproduction of gender inequality in academia by presenting a theoretical model that highlights the subtle and overt mechanisms underlying this process. Specifically, we show how the single pursuit of legitimacy by African women researchers via engaging the patriarchal order, contesting normative femininity, and appropriating normative femininity, interconnect to reinforce gender inequality in African academia. Taking these contributions together, we heed and echo calls to better contextualise the gendered experiences of women in academia specifically (Forson et al., 2017; Idahosa 2020), and the "grand challenge of inequality" in organisations more broadly (Benschop 2021, 4).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section provides a brief review of the wide-ranging literature on the subordinate position of women in African higher education, and the impact of this positioning on them. The section also sets out the rationale for proposing the ideal worker and symbolic violence approach to investigating gender inequality in African academia. Next, we explain our methodology and present our findings. We then discuss and conclude our study with some thoughts for future research and practice.

# 2 WOMEN IN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Acker's (2006, 448) seminal study on gendered organisations highlighted that many jobs are designed to marginalise women because "eight hours of continuous work away from the living space, arrival on time, total attention to the work and long hours, if requested, are all expectations that incorporate the image of the unencumbered ideal worker, implicitly a man." Traditional gender roles require women to contend with greater family responsibilities, thereby making it difficult for them to fulfil the arrangements and assumptions in the ideal worker norm (Dashper 2019; O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016). Given this obstacle that women face, how do they navigate the masculine expectations inherent in the ideal worker and emphasise their competence within organisations? Do organisations end up adapting to women, or do women adapt to the masculine expectations the ideal worker embodies? In the context of African academia, past research suggests the latter rather than the former.

One poignant finding that has emerged from the corpus of literature on education in Africa is that "female academics…still occupy a problematic status in higher education as subordinately positioned 'others' whose presence could be tolerated, but not totally embraced" (Okeke-Ihejirika 2017, 4). African women's marginal position in higher education relates to their late entrance into these institutions, which were originally designed and delineated as spaces for men to inherit the masculine mantle of colonial leadership (Forson et al. 2017; Liani et al. 2020). Colonialism, it is argued, reconfigured gender power relations in Africa by allocating the domain of power, politics, and decision-making to men, while enforcing Western patriarchal notions of what it meant to be a 'good' wife on women (Mabokela and Mlambo 2015; Otuo et al. 2022). As Hungwe (2006, 39) explains, "the shepherding of young girls into mission schools was not only a means of trying to preserve purity, but also an effort to resubordinate young African women into new forms of domesticity and femininity that marked them as racially inferior."

Various studies have demonstrated the negative impact of colonialism on African women's lives and careers in different contexts. For example, Ituma and Simpson (2009) have shown how women in the Nigerian ICT industry were less mobile than men because of cognitive institutional pressures that not only suggest that women are the 'weaker sex', but also orientate them towards domesticity. Otuo et al. (2022) also found that while Africa is the only continent in which female entrepreneurs outnumber men, the intersection of culture, religion, class, and ethnicity, tends to position women at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Specifically, the authors noted that African women's legitimacy as entrepreneurs is typically based on family logics rather than on their entrepreneurial logics. Narrating the *microstorias* of Zimbabwean women entrepreneurs, Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo (2023) further identified patriarchy as an oppressive practice that originated from pre-colonial times but has been fostered by colonial institutions like the church and local government to help suppress African women's voices.

Thus, while colonialism has formally ended in Africa, it is perhaps unsurprising that African universities have remained patriarchal spaces where women are expected to relate to men by showing a mixture of modesty, conservatism, and timidity that characterises an inferior's behaviour (Liani et al. 2020; Schottman 1995). Gender and motherhood are not only used to mark African women as incompetent (Otuo et al. 2022), but domesticity, female respectability and deference are sometimes used as the criteria for recruiting and promoting them in the university (Mabokela and Mlambo 2015; Ukpokolo 2010). In the university space, African women are expected to conform to the Victorian middle-class stereotype of the home-bound woman who is submissive to male decision-making (Forson et al. 2017; Okeke-Ihejirika 2017). Ukpokolo (2010) argues that the violations against women in African universities have become the accepted norm, relatively because those who attempt to challenge these inequalities face severe criticisms for their impertinence and depravity.

In the eyes of society, African women who confine themselves to their ‘legitimate’ spaces are deemed ‘respectable’, while non-conformers are labelled as ‘unrespectable’ and sometimes even ineligible for marriage (Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo 2023; Otuo et al. 2022). Hungwe (2006, 45) mentions that the distinction between ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ women, causes many African women to “carry their burdens with strength.” Indeed, Morley's (2006) study on higher education institutions in South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, and Uganda, shows how both women faculty and female students resented and resisted the affirmative action programmes which had been instituted to redress gender inequity. Rather than contest the misogynist attitudes and practices that delineated their intellectual competence as inferior to that of men, Morley (2006) found that women deepened their belief in merit. Meritocracy implicitly suggests that “the most talented and hard-working people get ahead; those who are poor must try harder, and when they do, the inequality gap will be closed” (Scully 2002, 399). The extent to which women can succeed in academia through hard work alone however remains questionable, as merit is typically attributed to men (Fotaki 2013; O’Connor and O’Hagan 2016).

## 3 SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN THE AFRICAN ACADEME

While the women in Morley’s (2006) study appear to have self-sabotaged themselves, Bourdieu’s (1990) work suggests that we might better understand their actions by examining the process by which social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce themselves without generating a strong resistance from their underlings. The university, in Bourdieu’s (2001) view, is a field of struggle for status, control, and valued forms of capital. The field is “a kind of arena in which people play a game which has certain rules” (Bourdieu 1990, 215), with dominant groups seeking to achieve control over their subordinates by imposing their *doxa*, which encompasses the guiding beliefs on “how things should be” in

terms of the rules of the game, what counts as capital, and the limits of the field (Kloot 2009, 472). Crucial to understanding how to manoeuvre within the field is the concept of habitus, a system of enduring dispositions acquired by the individual through long-lasting exposure to the field (Bonnewitz 2002). Through socialisation, the dominated acquiesce to the doxa by having 'a feel for the game' (Burawoy 2019) to the extent that their engagement in institutionally ordered practices is seen as 'normal' and their individual habitus becomes invisible (Robinson and Kerr 2009).

Emirbayer and Johnson (2008, 28) note that through a habitus of meritocracy, a female researcher may generate a disposition of possible position-taking in African academia, although her "power to enforce her position-taking on others and therefore on the organisation as a whole depends in large part on the volume, composition, and relative value of her capital." In the struggle for money, status and power, masculine and male capitals prevail, while femininity and female capitals are de-legitimated by gendered power relations within the patriarchal habitus (Huppatz 2009). Implicitly, then, unless women can adopt a masculine subject position, their perspectives and contributions in academia will remain actively devalued and marginalised (Fotaki 2013). As all humans are game players who are seeking control of their environment (Burawoy 2019), we can theorise the disposition of Morley's (2006) participants towards meritocracy as partly a survival strategy that originates from women's recognition of their disadvantages in academia *and* the field rules necessary for achieving distinction. However, Bourdieu argues that by the very act of their appreciation and doxic submission to meritocracy, women have become subjected to the symbolic violence that

> operates inside organisations by virtue of the fact that the dominated in those contexts perceive and respond to the organisational structures and processes that dominate them through modes of thought (indeed, also of feeling) that are

> themselves the product of domination: the 'order of things' comes to seem to them natural, self-evident, and legitimate (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 31).

The success of symbolic violence rests on its ability to secure misrecognition, wherein the dominant culture is viewed by the dominated as legitimate (Burawoy 2019). For African women, Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo (2023) note that their invisibility from the coloniser compels them to keep finding creative ways to survive and gain legitimacy in the arenas where they were formally denied access and control. Yet, except for a few studies (e.g., Forson et al. 2017; Mabokela and Mlambo 2015; Morley 2006), we know relatively little about these survival strategies among women in African academia. The existing literature on education is either heavily focused on primary and secondary education in Africa, or grounded in the socio-cultural context of developed countries, which are inadequate in capturing the nuances of gender, culture, and higher education in African countries (Ahikire and Akihire 2022; Mabokela and Mlambo 2015). We thus address this lacuna by asking: *How do African women in higher education within Africa navigate the masculinised ideal academic norm to accomplish their careers?* In what follows, we explicate our research design.

# 4 METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Data and methods

The data for this study was drawn from a larger study of 36 African women academics and research scientists from six Sub-Saharan African countries: Ghana ($n$ = 9), Nigeria ($n$ = 8), Zambia ($n$ = 4), Kenya ($n$ = 7), Malawi ($n$ = 4), and Botswana ($n$ = 4). Our decision to focus on these countries was based on our participation in a Global Challenges Research Funded (GCRF) project that was designed to foster eco-innovation in Africa through capacity building and interdisciplinary collaboration. The project involved training and support on how African researchers could work with, in, and for, their local communities. The topics on which the

project participants were trained on, ranged from knowledge exchange to entrepreneurship and innovation, which are deemed relevant to academia-industry-government collaborations. The project primarily aimed to address the United Nations (2015) sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially Goals 5 (gender equality), 6 (clean water and sanitation), and 7 (affordable and clean energy) and 8 (decent work and economic growth).

Given the limited research on women in African academia, and the relative significance of SDGs 5 and 8, we focused this article on understanding how women in African universities navigate the masculinised ideal academic norm, and how their efforts to break free from this symbolic image reproduces and legitimises gender inequality. Ahikire and Akihire (2022, 13) argue that qualitative methods are "appropriate for the 'excavation' of women's voices as well as the reordering of knowledge for gender transformation" when studying gender relations in Africa. Qualitative methods are also drawn on by studies exploring gender differences in academia to build a contextualised understanding of women's career experiences as well as avoid assessing women's perspectives against a male template (Cohen, Duberley, and Bustos Torres 2023; Forson et al. 2017).

Against this backdrop, we considered a qualitative methodology as appropriate for accomplishing our research objective, and purposively selected our study participants based on the following two key criteria: (a) must be a female academic or research scientist, (b) who lives and works in a public university or research institution in Sub-Saharan Africa. The first set of 24 informants were identified and recruited through the GCRF project. An additional 12 informants were enrolled through participant referrals and snowballing, many of whom were primarily selected based on information deemed important by prior informants (Geddes, Parker, and Scott 2018). Together, the length of time the participants reported to have worked in academia ranged from 6 months to 38 years. Although our selected sample was diverse – in terms of ethnicity, age, religion, marital and motherhood status, professional ranking,

education, scientific disciplines, and work setting – we focused on capturing their shared experiences as African women researchers, as we understood that there is a "shared African culture that cuts across national boundaries" (Munene et al. 2000, 348).

The data collection process involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the informants between May 2021 and March 2022, via Zoom and Microsoft Teams digital communication platforms, which was helpful in mitigating health-related concerns imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews were audio-recorded, lasted on average 50 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim within 24 hours after each interview. Generic pseudonyms including "Academic (A)", and "Research Scientist (RS)" were used to represent each informant. Individual interviewees are distinguished by assigning them numerals; inter alia, A1 or RS8, followed by their country of origin (see Table 1.0). The interviews comprised pre-defined questions on topics ranging from the participants' background, organisation, work, to their family context. For example, some questions were framed as: *"What kind of obstacles do you face in performing your academic work?", "How conscious would you say you are of your gender in the workplace?", "How do you think being a woman affects your academic work?".* The purpose of these questions was to allow our participants to share stories about their careers, especially in terms of their challenges and experiences at work. Considering the personal nature of the interview questions and the socio-organisationally sensitive nature of the study, it was deemed important to build trust with the interviewees. This was achieved through the professional relationship that was established with interviewees through the GCRF project, as well as through the confidentiality assurances clause that was included in the research protocol. The rapport built with the participants allowed them to conveniently start off narrating their gendered experiences, while probes were employed during the interviews to gain further clarification on specific points as required.

**Table 1: Biographical sketch of participants**

| Pseudonym | Years of work | Positions | Field of specialisation | Country | Age | (Non)Project* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A1** | 10-15 | Research Associate | Entrepreneurship | Ghana | 39 | Project |
| **A2** | > 20 | Professor | Environmental Health and Sanitation | Ghana | 67 | Project |
| **A3** | 10-15 | Senior Lecturer | Food Science | Kenya | 42 | Project |
| **A4** | 5-10 | Lecturer | Economics | Zambia | 33 | Project |
| **A5** | 5-10 | Lecturer | Business Management | Zambia | 64 | Project |
| **A6** | >20 | Lecturer | Biochemistry and Biotechnology | Kenya | 59 | Project |
| **A7** | 10-15 | Senior Lecturer | Agricultural Economics | Nigeria | 51 | Project |
| **A8** | >20 | Associate Professor | Gender and Development Studies | Kenya | 61 | Project |
| **A9** | <5 | Lecturer | Electrical and Electronic Engineering | Botswana | 42 | Project |
| **A10** | 10-15 | Lecturer | Development Economics | Zambia | 40 | Project |
| **A11** | >20 | Associate Professor | Chemistry | Nigeria | 54 | Project |
| **A12** | 10-15 | Senior Lecturer | Agricultural Communication | Nigeria | 40 | Project |
| **A13** | 10-15 | Tutorial Fellow | Mechanical Engineering | Kenya | 38 | Non-Project |
| **A14** | 10-15 | Senior Lecturer | Human Resource | Ghana | 40 | Non- Project |
| **A15** | <5 | Lecturer | Oral literature | Nigeria | 43 | Project |
| **A16** | <5 | Lecturer | Industrial Engineering | Zambia | 32 | Non-Project |
| **A17** | 10-15 | Lecturer | Mechatronic Engineering | Kenya | 38 | Non-Project |
| **A18** | 10-15 | Research Development Officer | Agricultural Economics | Malawi | 37 | Project |
| **A19** | 5-10 | Teaching Associate | Chemical Engineering | Botswana | 32 | Project |
| **A20** | 10-15 | Senior Lecturer | History | Nigeria | 41 | Non-Project |
| **A21** | 5-10 | Lecturer | Computer Science | Botswana | 39 | Project |
| **A22** | >20 | Professor | Chemistry | Kenya | 60 | Project |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A23** | >20 | Professor | Biotechnology | Nigeria | 62 | Non-Project |
| **A24** | 5-10 | Senior Lecturer | Industrial Engineering | Nigeria | 48 | Project |
| **A25** | >20 | Senior Lecturer | Immunology | Kenya | 55 | Non-Project |
| **RS1** | 5-10 | Director of Research & Partnerships | Psychology | Botswana | 44 | Project |
| **RS3** | >20 | Principal Research Scientist | Food Science | Ghana | 50 | Project |
| **RS4** | >5 | Principal Officer | Political Science | Malawi | 27 | Non-Project |
| **RS5** | 10-15 | Senior Research Scientist | Food Science | Ghana | 45 | Non-Project |
| **RS6** | >5 | Principal Technologist | Nutrition | Ghana | 31 | Non-Project |
| **RS7** | 10-15 | Chief Economist | Economics | Malawi | 37 | Non-Project |
| **RS8** | 15-20 | Senior Research Scientist | Food Science | Ghana | 43 | Non- Project |
| **RS9** | 5-10 | Research Scientist | Public Health | Nigeria | 40 | Project |
| **RS10** | 10-15 | Director of Research | Biology | Malawi | 49 | Project |
| **RS11** | 10-15 | Research Scientist | Architecture | Ghana | 37 | Project |
| **RS12** | 5-10 | Marketing Officer | Marketing | Ghana | 46 | Project |

* Project refers to the project participants while non-project participants are those who were accessed through informant referrals.

### 4.2 Data analysis

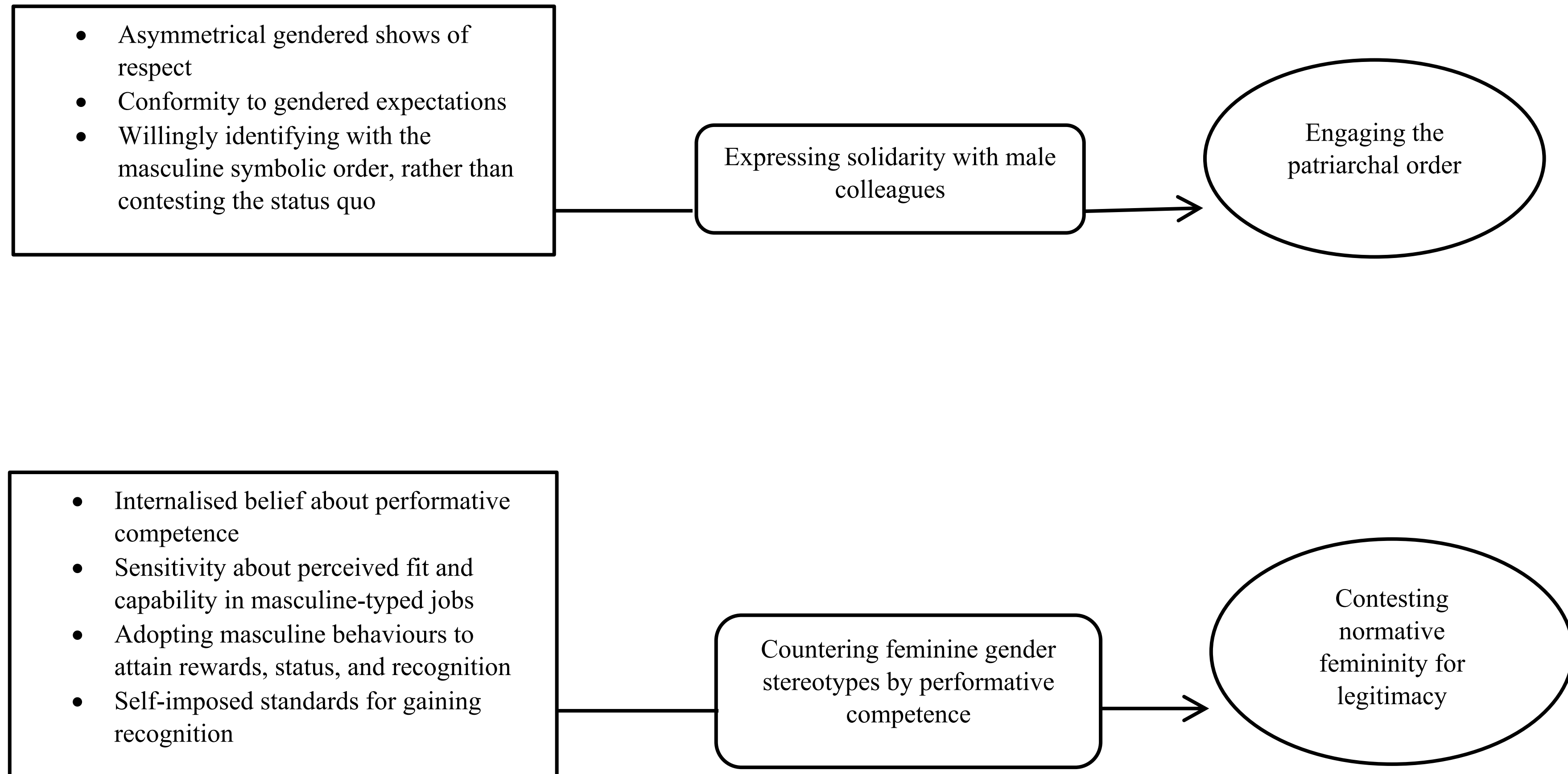
We adopted a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) to analyse the transcribed data, with NVivo 12 qualitative data software to facilitate the coding process. The thematic approach provides a systematic way to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data, guided by the literature, without imposing an overly restrictive a priori explanatory framework. In this vein, we first iteratively read the interview transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Through our continuous engagement with the data, we recognised a pattern of 'impression management' behaviours in the initial descriptive codes that we generated. However, as the analysis progressed and we discussed these descriptive codes, it became clearer that the pattern identified across the narratives was more reflective of Bourdieu's (1990) concept of symbolic violence: while the women resisted normative expectations about their behaviours, they also subjected themselves to these standards. Thus, we drew on Bourdieu's (1990) work to explore how our participants responded to the doxa in the field where they played their academic game. To effectively capture the gendered substructure of their work setting and the gender subtext of their practices, we drew on Acker's (1990) concept of the ideal worker. Together, Bourdieu's (1990) and Acker's (1990) emphasis on identity and cultural meanings in organisations provided a useful framework for conceptualising the subtle and sophisticated ways by which African women researchers embodied or contested the symbolic image of the *ideal African researcher*.

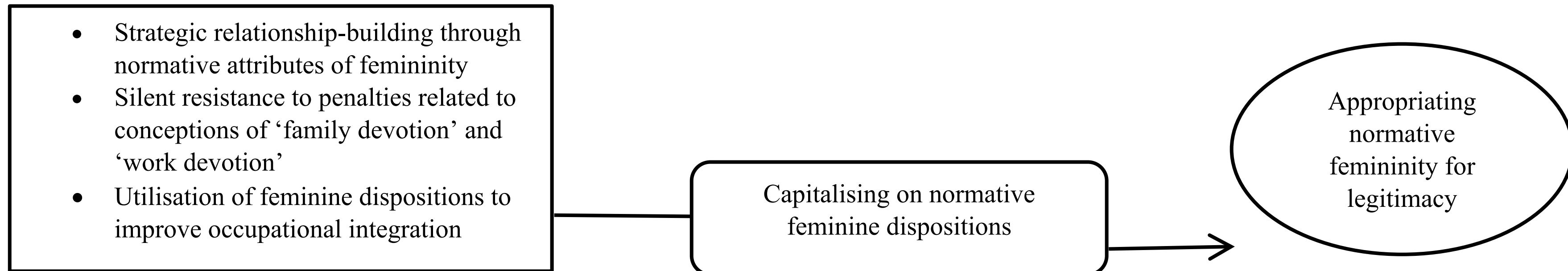
Having generated a long list of initial codes, our next step of the analytical process involved collapsing codes that overlapped into a common theme and discarding those that did not address our research objective (Braun and Clarke 2006). We also checked the themes for coherence vis-a-vis the patterns we detected, the relative separateness of each theme's content and the degree of match between the themes and data extracts (Braun and Clarke 2006). The final step of our analysis involved defining and labelling the emergent themes by clarifying

what each denoted, their interrelatedness and what particular dimensions of the data they captured (Braun and Clarke 2006). Here, our collective approach to discussing, revising, and assigning meanings and interpretation to the codes and themes that emerged from our data was particularly relevant in ensuring the reliability of our analysis.

It is worth emphasising that while the existing literature helped to guide our search for themes, we were on the lookout for new phenomena that had not been documented in existing literature. Thus, while our theme on ‘contesting normative femininity’ was more concept-driven, the themes on ‘engaging the patriarchal order’ and ‘appropriating normative femininity’, emerged more directly from the data. Figure 1 depicts the data structure of our research.

*Figure 1: Overview of data analysis*





Strategic relationship-building through normative attributes of femininity
Silent resistance to penalties related to conceptions of 'family devotion' and 'work devotion'
Utilisation of feminine dispositions to improve occupational integration
Capitalising on normative feminine dispositions
Appropriating normative femininity for legitimacy

## 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our findings demonstrate that women in African universities are cognisant of the gender-based challenges they face in developing an academic career within this work environment. In a context where men felt powerful, and normative femininity is contested and downgraded, our participants understood that legitimacy was not just critical to their career success in African academia, but acquiring this symbolic capital necessitated three key strategies: *engaging the patriarchal order, contesting normative femininity,* and *appropriating normative femininity.* Collectively, these strategies capture both the paradoxical nature of the social spaces created for African women researchers to work, and their practices for navigating an environment where masculinity is the norm.

### 5.1 Engaging the patriarchal order for legitimacy

Universities are generally viewed as meritocratic institutions that support and encourage diversity, despite being male-dominated spaces that are structured along masculine academic and professional cultures. The idea of academic freedom especially suggests that all members of this field are accepted alike. However, our data suggests that women researchers in African universities experience little of that freedom, as they undergo male hostility (A20, Nigeria), low recognition and devaluation of their intellectual competence (A4, Zambia), deliberate restrictions on their ascent to leadership positions (RS8, Ghana), and tokenism (A8, Kenya). An important finding that emerged about the workplace was the existence of asymmetrical gendered shows of 'respect' between men and women; whereby women were expected "to respect a man just because he is a man" and for many of our participants, "this is the attitude that calls out for caution" (A12, Nigeria). As A24 explains, women who are defiant of this patriarchal order could incur severe penalties:

> I am very conscious of my gender [identity] in the workplace because men do not like to be trampled upon. Men are egocentric; they have this ego so when you get into the office [and] you just walk past them, the next thing is they will start to gossip about you saying, 'this woman, e no even sabi greet' [translated as 'this woman does not even know how to greet']…and they might even say things like, 'how does her husband even cope, she's so nasty, she's so silly.' So, all you need to do is: 1) respect them, 2) do not trample on them and, 3) whenever it is time to show them that respect, show it to them. (A24, Nigeria)

Notwithstanding their professional qualification, African women are always believed to occupy an inferior position to men. Women are expected to observe this gendered hierarchical order in all aspects of social life including via the act of greeting, where "it is the inferior's duty to present a series of properly formulated greetings concerning the superior's health and well-being, or that of his family, to indicate the extent of their respect and submission" (Schottman 1995, 491). By greeting in this manner, African women confirm their adherence to the basic cultural values of their societies, as well as to the social structural aspects of gender roles. To avoid being viewed as a non-conformist, and suffering the stereotypical attitudes and prejudices associated with such labelling, we found participants tolerating the patriarchal structures of power that dominated them, including A24 who noted that:

> In my workplace, I am the second in command, by way of hierarchy or seniority. So, I am a senior to like 9 people, but those 9 people are my seniors in age…There is one that is about 60-something, he is quite older but the way I respect him disarms him, and so he hardly finds fault with me. Even when there is a fault, he just cleans up the fault and [moves on] because I will come in the morning and genuflect, 'good morning sir, how are the children, well done sir,' and when there is anything to be given to him, I genuflect and give it to him. (A24, Nigeria)

Exemplified in this narrative is how African women utilise their minds, words, and bodies to negotiate better outcomes in a gendered organisation that is hostile to them. Despite the

relevance of her survival strategy, the complicity of A24 in the dominant culture of ‘respect’ which is a form of acquiescence, becomes through the lens of symbolic violence, an example of misrecognition. By genuflecting while interacting with older male colleagues, A24 is not only “downgrading [her] symbolic value, worth, resources and skills” as a young female leader in the workplace (Yamak et al. 2016, 127), but she is also (re)producing the taken-for-granted cultural markers that underpin men and women’s subordinate and dominant statuses in the broader society. Nevertheless, our findings revealed that African women felt an urgent need to positively influence the thinking, perceptions, and behaviours of men in the workplace because of the costliness of disrespect. A8, for example, shares how she got dismissed from a leadership position for ‘disrespect’ towards her male subordinates:

> Last year, I was heading a very major project and…I was leading some men. It reached a point where they said no, no, no, this woman is becoming a very serious dictator; and this is just because you are telling them things must be done this way…It was so bad that it was taken to the highest office, and I had to leave that office…I didn’t resign, I was removed from that office just because of these men and for me that was blatant gender discrimination. (A8, Kenya)

The traumatic experience of A8 shows how seemingly ‘acting masculine' renders African women unlikeable, whether or not their actions are consistent with the requirements of managerial roles. An important observation in this narrative is how organisational politics perpetuates gender inequality in African universities, with men actively striving individually and collectively to preserve their valued patriarchal position within the gendered landscape.

Through socialisation, African women develop certain dispositions and practices that are significant to the fields in which they are embedded. Since ‘doing gender differently’ could generate negative impacts on women in African universities, many of our participants’ disposition was to ‘do gender well’ (Mavin and Grandy 2016). They seemed willing to identify

with, rather than challenge, the masculine symbolic order that prevails in African academia. As A4 articulates:

> In [institution name], most people are old men who have stayed there for a long time like 20-30 years. They have only known that environment. Then you come in as a female and you want to lead in an environment where there have been kings? It is difficult. So, I am very much aware of such pettiness, and therefore I don't really fight for those [leadership] positions. (A4, Zambia)

In embodying the various cultural scripts, African women not only accept the patriarchal power structures in their work environment, but also modify their appearances and behaviours, as well as comply without coercion. Intended or unintended, this desire to maintain the status quo and harmonious relationships in academia – through asymmetrical gendered shows of respect, conformity to gendered expectations, or a willingness to identify with, rather than challenge, masculine symbolic order – causes African women researchers to become complicit in legitimating male-domination in a way that generates oppressive effects on them.

As the narratives in this section have shown, symbolic power involves subordinate group misrecognising and legitimating cultural systems, which then allows those in a major social position in the field to enforce a view that aligns with their interests, as legitimate. One of such imposed visions that continues to create a symbolic struggle between men and women in African academia is meritocracy – an ideology that we found as predisposing our participants to embody masculinity and resist femininity in order to attain legitimacy. We discuss this in detail in the subsequent section.

### 5.2 Contesting normative femininity for legitimacy

Our findings revealed that African women researchers are perceived through lenses tainted by their gender, as "there is still a tendency to feel that a woman might not be able to perform a

job as better than a man. It's silent" (A23, Nigeria). Indeed, these covert and subtle mechanisms of symbolic violence contribute to an environment that is invasive, all-pervasive, and career-threatening for African women in academe. As Bourdieu (1991) suggests, this organisational habitus is able to operate all kinds of symbolic power over these women, if the power of suggestion regarding their supposed incompetence, through things, people language and interactions, is effective. In response, our participants, in misrecognising the habitus as normal, attempt to contest normative femininity to gain legitimacy:

> [Men] will always doubt you…Are you competent…Are you even a professor? You are too young to be a professor and you are a woman…You go to county governments, they are older men than you, your father, and grandfathers, so they wonder, what are you going to tell them? But now, it is for you as a woman to do your thing, *show [men] what you got*, otherwise they would not listen to you. (A3, Kenya)

Above, A3 remarks that African women researchers always need to demonstrate their competence to men, especially when engaging with ageist and patriarchal organisations. According to A3, the *ideal African researcher* is "an older man, with a beard, and a big stomach", which makes all individuals who contradict this symbolic image, illegitimate. Forson et al. (2017, 16) assert that because African societies "revere age maturity and correlate this with seniority and respect, it is difficult for young people to find a voice." Thus, at the intersection of femininity and age, young African women researchers, for example, experience a double disadvantage: they must prove their intellectual competence by working twice as hard as their older male colleagues. Although African women researchers are not obliged to legitimise their professional qualifications through competence performativity, many also believed that it was important "to get involved in something out of merit so that [they] don't feel like a charity case or that [they] are just getting opportunities because [they] are women" (A21, Botswana).

This desire to be seen as competent, influences African women researchers to deepen their belief in merit, which they express through the attitude of "show [men] what you got" as the excerpt above captures – a gendered practice where the African women researchers in this study blended their search for legitimacy with performativity in order to be acknowledged as competent as men, or perhaps even better. However, this strategy to "show [men] what you got" is a form of symbolic violence in itself because it means that African women researchers have also implicitly accepted that the only legitimate way for them to be recognised as intellectually competent researchers is to embody stereotypic masculine behaviours such as control, power, independence, and assertiveness. As RS1 remarks:

> I think we have historically seen men at the forefront of leadership, and we have always assumed that men know it all. So, when men talk, whatever…they say passes; but for a woman, you have to prove yourself that you know what you got. You know what you are talking about, you are in control, and you have to assert yourself…So I will be honest; when I go for a presentation, I prepare like 10 times so that the first sentence that comes out of my mouth is so punchy that it will convince the audience that I got this because…people are able to pick quickly if a woman makes a mistake but if it is a man, they can just let it pass. So, you always have to go [to these presentations and meetings] with that extra effort and that extra confidence, and when you exhibit these, people will now be like, 'wow, she's powerful.' You know all these comments like that. (RS1, Botswana)

This experience of working hard to prove their competence was also expressed by RS7:

> If I am given a job, I execute it to the best of my abilities. If I go to a meeting and presenting, I have all the facts. If they ask me questions, I answer all the questions…because I don't want to be there and not know, then they will just say: 'oh, because it's a woman.' (RS7, Malawi)

Gender stereotypes about femininity often create misconceptions about women fitting masculine-type jobs. It is such prejudices that increase the sensitivity and disposition of African

women researchers to legitimise their abilities through competence performativity. However, because organisations are neither meritocratic nor are individuals' gender-neutral, African women researchers' search for legitimacy through competence performativity, becomes highly problematic. In this regard, African women researchers may struggle to comply with any evaluative criteria, and those who attempt compliance have to forego time with their children, develop feelings of inadequacy and guilt, and physically and emotionally overburden themselves, as was the case of A10:

> My days tend to be longer because even at night, I am usually waking up to exchange emails with my male boss. You can't just say, 'oh I'm at home, I am not going to respond' because that is proper work ethics. You really want to respond [promptly] when your male boss sends an email…and it [makes it] a bit challenging to balance out your time for work and that of your personal life because most of your time is devoted to your academic work. (A10, Botswana)

In our findings, we identified that competence performativity was being promoted as 'a good thing' and rationalised on the grounds of competitive advantage by senior women researchers, who often encouraged (junior) women researchers to demonstrate the complementarity between their 'bodies' and that of the *ideal African researcher*. As A23 shares:

> I think being in top management as a female has helped my female colleagues a lot. They might not know this but there are times I have had to speak up in those boardrooms when they are making appointments. We want to appoint 3 department heads and the names I am hearing are all men and I am like, 'excuse me, is there no lady that we can appoint?' and the men are like, 'oh yea, there is so and so.' Now, they start thinking very hard to identify a lady…I think when the men sit down to make those committee appointments, they just think 'men' in their minds because first the ladies are fewer. So even as you scan the environment in your mind, you just see the men; they are the ones who talk in meetings, they are the ones who are all over. So, the ladies are sometimes quieter, and although they can be very hardworking and very good in assignments that they are given, but because they are just not as outstanding in

> terms of being hard, literally being hard like men…the men tend to forget about them. (A23, Nigeria)

This example highlights how male-dominance in academia not only works to disadvantage women in terms of leadership positions and career opportunities, but it also creates a burden on them to increase their visibility by contesting their normative femininity for legitimacy. Although women appeared to have been deliberately overlooked by men for committee appointments, A23 still believed that women could counter this systemic inequality by showing excellence in their work delivery and commitment, as she went on to say:

> So sometimes it's not deliberate [that women are overlooked], it's just that the women need to step out more and that's what I have been doing with this group I have been mentoring. I am telling them, 'You must step out. If you are appointed to a committee, please prepare as you go for a meeting so that you can make intelligent contributions. Just don't talk for the sake of talking but make a contribution such that someone will look at you and say yea, that is a brilliant idea.' [In that way], you are seen as a professional, you are seen as someone who is competent, and when there is an opportunity, you will come to mind. (A23, Nigeria)

The foregoing is a telling statement that the *ideal African researcher* is male and, thus, as the 'other' in the African academy, women must adopt certain masculine styles of behaviour such as rationality and determination in order to be regarded, rewarded, and recognised. This example also shows how discourses on ambition are tied to hegemonic masculinity standards in a way that raises doubt about the performance and commitment of women in African academia (Dashper 2019). While the practice of "show men what you got" is a form of symbolic violence on women, A23 appeared to have misrecognised this problem as a form of 'meeting and maintaining standards' in African academia. The ethic of 'meeting and maintaining standards' particularly endorses an imagined notion of achievement via diligence,

and presents the career accomplishments of African women researchers like A23 as easily attainable if women researchers should adopt this career approach.

Paradoxically, A23's career success as a professor may legitimate her intrinsic cultural codes that women researchers must "prepare before a meeting" and should also not "talk for the sake of talking" but, instead, make competent contributions if they are to merit job opportunities. The point here is not whether enacting these behaviours facilitated A23's career advancement, but the fact that she felt a need to take such an approach, makes her attuned to supporting practices that may be deemed unfavourable to other African women researchers – in this case, her mentees. Clearly, the more an agent fully participates in a field, the more likely it is that they would be used to frequent changes that would have become unrecognisable and as such conform with the needs of the field. It is highly possible then that slowly and unconsciously, her mentees may substitute their cultural codes for hers, especially if they perceive that her career achievements rested on this strategy. Indeed, one junior researcher drew on her experience of mentoring to explain:

> I had a mentor [who] told me that [she] messed [her] life by ignoring [her] social life…and got divorced by [her] husband…So she told me one thing that I am learning right now…whenever I feel like I am so much concentrated on my professional life, I try to go two steps backwards, just to accommodate my social life because no man is an island. (RS4, Malawi)

Conveying the power of socialisation processes such as mentoring to imprint on our bodies gendered values and expectations, RS4's disposition to take "two steps backwards" underlines the authoritative positioning of female mentors and role models in (re)inscribing inequality through pedagogy. Instead of being trained to "step out more" as A23 does with her mentees, RS4 is taught to create a 'good' work-life balance which prioritises family over career, if she intends to evade the social disapprovals that her mentor is undergoing as a divorcee in the African setting. The participants' narratives confirmed that remaining unmarried, being

childless or getting divorced as a woman, are all stigmatised in African societies. Thus, many of our participants held a deep status consciousness in shouldering the burden of upholding their families together, often as a strategy to silence their critics and prove their worth as wives and mothers. The fact that most mentees almost instinctively follow much of their mentor's advice, as observed with RS4, is in itself a form of symbolic violence that is triggered by the appreciation and doxic submission to the legitimacy of the mentor's pedagogic authority.

Through their pedagogic authority, senior women researchers not only reduce the risk of resistance against the gender-biased values in African academia but also facilitate the reproduction of collective recognition and congruence of habitus amongst other women, activating a vicious cycle of competence performativity for career opportunities. Eventually, while it is improbable that African women researchers may secure career opportunities by intensely preparing before engagement meetings, and/or overperforming to validate their competences in committees, they become complicit in believing that it is in their own self-interest to do so. We found evidence that contesting femininity for legitimacy does not always translate into equitable positions for African women academics and, thus, other strategies may be necessary. This is discussed in the following section.

### 5.3 Appropriating normative femininity for legitimacy

As highlighted in the earlier sections, patriarchy is profound in African societies and, thus, women can encounter a greater amount of dislike and rejection for being self-promoting, expressing disagreement, and showing dominance and assertiveness in the workplace. In our study, we observed a group of African women researchers who benefitted from displaying normative feminine dispositions. Rather than embodying and enacting masculine behaviours, these women capitalised on stereotypic feminine values and behaviours such as softness, sensitivity, empathy, and affection to gain legitimacy. RS10, for example, talked about how

she remained calm in an engagement meeting, even though she felt bullied and sexually harassed by a male industry partner during a visit to his office to request for conference funding:

> You are visiting a [male industry client] to ask for resources for a science and dissemination conference and then they try to take advantage of you and use some type of language which they cannot use on their fellow man. But because you are a woman and it's like you are in a vulnerable position because you want the resources…they start giving out languages or comments that are not professional at all, like them wanting to be your girlfriend. But you have to strike a balance. Don't give in, but at the same time, ensure that you are being professional…So that at least you are able to get what you went there for. So, you just laugh it off other than being angry because you know that when you are angry, that is the end of the game. (RS10, Malawi)

African women's expression of anger can often elicit negative reactions from men because "negative emotions that communicate dominance or one's own sense of power, such as anger, contempt, or pride are not prescribed for women" (Brescoll 2016, 419). Thus, RS10's disposition to "laugh off [her discomfort] other than being angry" is agentic because it increases her chances of securing the conference resources. However, the objective hardship of accomplishing this complex task and the subjective experience of managing her emotions through self-censorship until the "end of the game" as she articulates, is a form of symbolic violence. Actions such as these allow African men to dominate women and/or silence their voices. Nevertheless, in a society where men feel powerful, African women's ability to embody and practise normative femininity could enable them to gain legitimacy, including improving their occupational integration. RS12, for example, told us how she strategically built a 'good' working relationship with her male subordinates by conforming to gender stereotypes that reify traditional and essentialist views of African women as warm, welcoming, sensitive, and caring to everyone:

> I have a male deputy and I should say that if you are [a female departmental] head…the kind of attribute that you put forward will foster your working relationship [with your junior male colleagues] because some men are not comfortable that a woman is on top of them. So, I have the nature that everybody is my boss. I have a way of building rapport and I am open-minded to accept everyone's suggestions. (RS12, Ghana)

In the above, we see that by adopting leadership practices or gestures perceived as 'soft' and sociable, African women researchers can increase their chances of working with men and getting legitimation from men. In another powerful example, A13 recounts how showing vulnerability earned her male support, even when she could not comply with the demands of the masculinised ideal academic norm:

> Our male colleagues are very supportive in terms of where I am weak, they will always help me to improve in those areas. When we were working on a [name of organisation] project and we had to do some designs with some guys in industry and I wasn't very confident at that time, I got support from my male colleagues in our department to work on this design. So, they have always held our hands and they understand our [work-life] challenges and so even when I delay with work because of family issues, they are ready to step in. They will even call to find out if I have any issues at home when I am unable to attend a meeting on time (giggles). So, they have supported us through and through. Or rather I should say they support me through and through (laughs). (A13, Kenya)

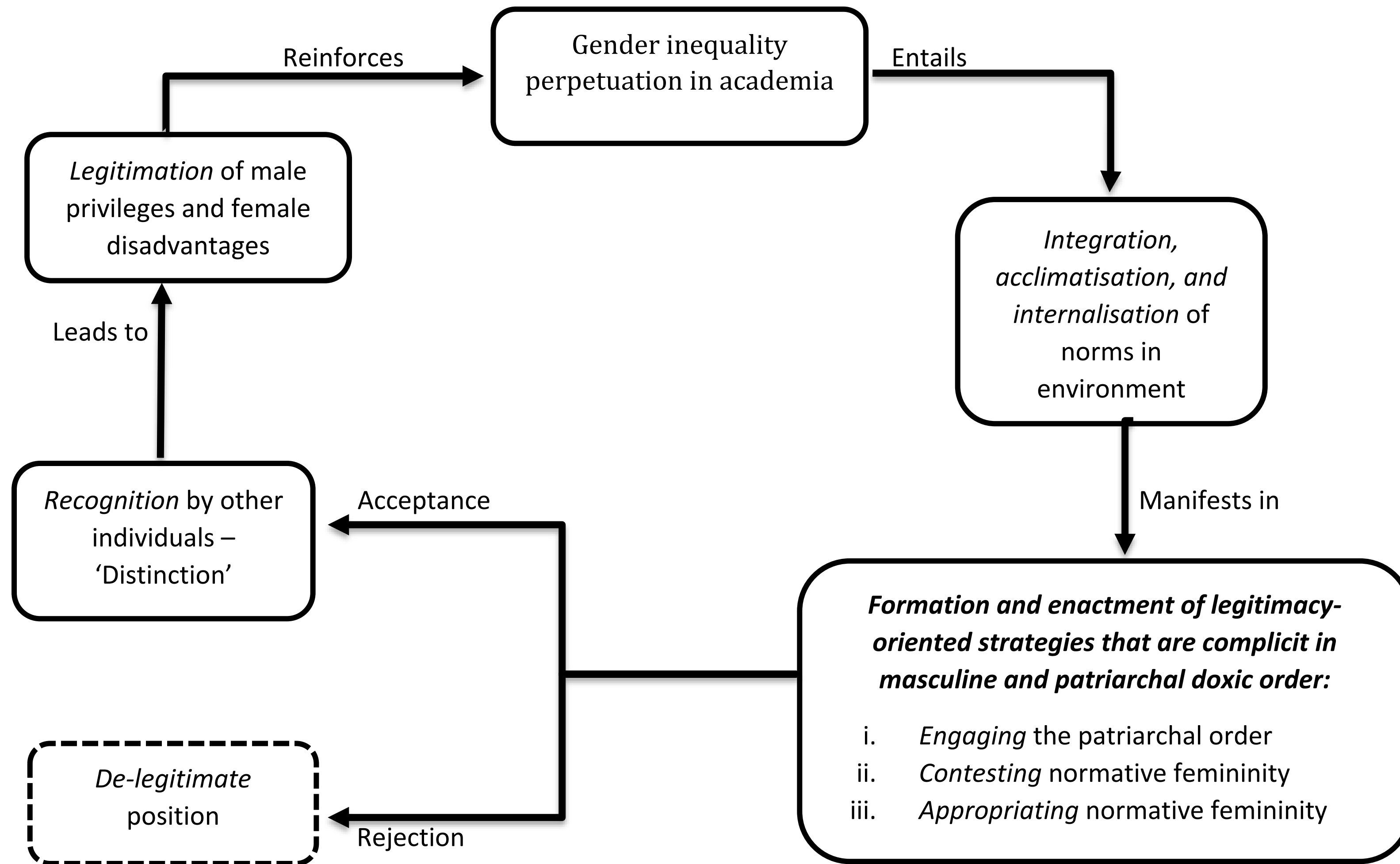
As this example highlights, African women researchers could utilise normative feminine attributes to silently resist the penalties generated from their inability to fully devote themselves to work and family. The behaviour displayed by A13's male colleagues clearly depict gender status beliefs that define African men as benefactors who are competent, strong, and in control of every situation. From this benevolent patriarchal position, her male colleagues can appreciate and support A13, as she portrays vulnerability, weakness, or powerlessness, which are stereotypical feminine behaviours that are viewed as appropriate for women. While we do

not have data to prove this assertion, we believe that gender stereotypes influenced the support A13 received from her male colleagues because as one participant mentioned, when "women…are confident and put their feet down on issues…that makes you tough, and the men want to avoid those tough women who will argue with you and who will never accept anything you say" (A23, Nigeria). In this vein, fulfilling gender stereotypic prescriptions on femininity becomes advantageous for A13. Yet, enacting this strategy also serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the stereotype that African women researchers and mothers, in particular, are less likely to meet the standards of *the ideal African researcher*.

# 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As illustrated in our opening quote, gender inequality is prevalent in academia. Through our findings, we explored the subtle and sophisticated mechanisms that help to perpetuate gender inequality in academia by examining how African women researchers navigate the masculinised ideal academic norm. Utilising Acker's (1990) concept of the ideal worker to qualitatively analyse their narratives, we have shown that there is an apparent mismatch between African women researchers' gender identity and that of the *ideal African researcher* who is relatively an older male. To further demonstrate how African women attained legitimacy in academia, irrespective of the odds against them, we drew on Bourdieu's (1990) notion of symbolic violence. Specifically, in using Bourdieu's work (1990) we reveal how African women researchers develop game-playing strategies that are all too deep-rooted in a masculine and patriarchal doxa. Through analysing our findings, we see that this causes the women to reproduce gender inequality intentionally and unintentionally in the academic field. Figure 2 provides a succinct illustration of these findings.

*Figure 2: The cyclical process of gender inequality perpetuation in academia*



As shown in Figure 2, we found that our participants' experiences of gender inequality in African academia was typically ubiquitous because it entailed their integration, acclimatisation, and internalisation of the gendered norms in their local work context. Given the subtle nature of gender inequality in African academia, our participants' experiences become rather hard to recognise because its gradual unfolding appears immaterial, typically occurring through the construction and evaluation of an *ideal African researcher* whose identity and cultural markers are developed from a seemingly meritocratic and democratic, yet gendered and patriarchal context. Due to the universal myth of meritocratic impartiality in academia, our participants tended to recognise the difficulties that they faced in meeting the masculinised ideal academic norm as an outcome of their personal shortcomings. Eventually, our participants self-judged, self-blamed, and self-helped themselves by enacting three key strategies – engaging the patriarchal order, contesting normative femininity, or appropriating normative femininity – that legitimise the dominant cultural and structural systems of African academia, which are largely constructed around and sustained by a pattern of practices that accentuate patriarchy and masculinity.

In their single pursuit of legitimacy, our theoretical model highlights that our participants who received positive evaluations from their audience tended to work hard to maintain their rewards, while those whose strategies were rejected worked even harder to achieve recognition. This attainment of distinction particularly leads to the legitimation of male privileges and female disadvantages in African academia, as it reinforces the taken-for-granted belief that "the most talented and hard-working people get ahead; those who are poor must try harder, and when they do, the inequality gap will be closed" (Scully 2002, 399). Thus, although the gendered character and nature of academia are better aligned with men's lived reality, the women researchers we studied were pressured to single-handedly achieve legitimacy. Eventually, what simply starts as a desire to have others see them in a positive light, became

an entrenched and a natural way for our participants to behave, causing them to inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities that affect them, and which they sought to challenge. In our analysis of our findings, we offer the following theoretical contributions as well as policy and practical implications.

### 6.1 Theoretical contributions

Positioned at the intersection of different literatures – the ideal worker (França et al. 2023; van den Brink and Benschop 2012) and symbolic violence (Gander 2019; Idahosa 2020) – our study offers three contributions. First, we contribute to the ideal worker literature by "dismantling the perception of the ideal worker as a White, able-bodied, 40-year-old, heterosexual man whose patterns of achievement and legitimacy implicitly serve as the norm" (van den Brink and Benschop 2012, 508). Prior research has highlighted the importance of putting the concept of the ideal worker into context, especially as current frameworks do not sufficiently represent the lived experiences of women in non-Western organisational settings (Fagan and Teasdale 2021; França et al. 2023). We address this research gap by showing the heterogeneous image of the ideal worker, thus opening the door to the idea that this symbolic image is context-specific and further research is needed to conceptualise its manifestation in non-Western contexts where little remains known to-date.

Within the domain of the ideal worker literature, the main contribution of our study is the developed framework in Figure 2, which adds new knowledge to the perpetuation of gender inequality in academia through the masculinised ideal academic norm. The framework provides insights into how African academia promotes recruitment and promotion criteria that implicitly privilege men and marginalise women's bodies. We found that the symbolic image of the *ideal African researcher* particularly causes African women to be subjected to gender

stereotyping and negative judgments, thus explaining how the masculinised ideal academic norm, directly and indirectly, impacts women's position and status as academics.

Second, to emphasise the role of contextual factors in understanding the masculinised ideal academic norm, our findings support previous research (Liani et al. 2020; Okeke-Ihejirika 2017) on theorising the gender-based challenges that affect women in African academia. Extant studies have indeed demonstrated that African universities remain sites for the reproduction of modernist patriarchal and colonial relations (Forson et al. 2017; Mama and Barnes 2007). However, the lack of a holistic approach in documenting these gendered issues has made it quite difficult to appropriately inform action for change. Using Bourdieu's (1990) social theory, we teased out how gender inequality in African academia is underpinned by the gendered structures and cultures of this environment, as well as the individual choices and behaviours of African women researchers. By offering a more fine-grained analysis of the interplay between structure and agency in the (re)production of gender inequality in African academia, our research responds to Liani et al.'s (2020) call for an innovative and a comprehensive approach to understanding the functioning of African universities as gendered organisations.

Third, our article contributes to the theorising of gender inequality in academia using Bourdieu's ideas. Calling into question why equality and diversity policies have failed to tackle gender inequality in universities, an emerging stream of studies based on the work of Bourdieu (Gander 2019; Idahosa 2020) have started to unpack how power and status can explain this problem. These studies have called for the application of Bourdieu's (1990, 2001) ideas of field, habitus, and symbolic violence to understand how women and marginalised groups can be better empowered to enact their agency in academia without reproducing the oppressive structures and relations that affect them. Our paper adds nuance to this emerging literature

stream by showing that senior women academics are sometimes constrained in their ability to tackle gender inequality because of the systemic nature of this problem, as well as the restraints on their power to enact change in heavily male-dominated environments. Due to such limitations, senior women researchers tend to reproduce the very 'glass ceilings' they have cracked by continuing the discourse that women do not succeed because they "do not play the career game" and therefore are not as qualified as men (Gander 2019, 119). In this vein, our findings augment van den Brink and Benschop's (2012) caution about the strategy of using female mentors to address gender equality in academia, as many of these mentors still have a lot to learn about the inclusion and support of female talent.

### 6.2 Policy and practical implications

Our research also has some implications for policy and practice. First, based on our findings about the challenges that (junior) women faculty experience at the intersection of culture, gender, and age, we argue that without proper structural guidance, the design and implementation of superficial equality and diversity policies may only deepen existing inequalities in African universities. Many gender-inclusive policies relating to SDG5 (for example, affirmative action and quota systems) have conventionally focused on the more overt forms of inequalities and their effects on women academics in different work contexts and career stages (Dashper 2019; Morley 2006). However, as our findings highlight, employing equity policies like affirmative action to fight against the explicit forms of inequalities, could subvert them into forms of symbolic violence. We also assert that rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to tackle the "grand challenge of inequality" in organisations (Benschop 2021, 4), policymakers must recognise the contextual conditions of universities and the deep-

seated career-restrictive cultural norms and traditions within different societies that shape men and women's careers.

Further, we suggest that universities must provide favourable conditions for long-tenured women academics to appropriately act as agents of change and gender equality advocates. Beyond tick-box exercises such as creating quotas for senior women researchers to be on academic boards, universities should monitor and modify practices that silence the voices of these women. We suggest that the inclusion of women in leadership positions should be underpinned by systemic changes that empower senior women academics to be more vocal about gender inequality in academia without facing backlash. In the same way, we suggest that mentoring, coaching and support activities that aim to empower women must be intentional about developing and promoting gender-inclusive strategies that tackle structural and cultural inequalities, rather than those that position women as deficient and place the onus on them to change. This is particularly important, as "the masculine discourses of success and the rhetoric of gender neutrality are so ingrained that it is difficult to recognise and challenge continued inequality and discrimination" (Dashper 2019, 554).

### 6.3 Limitations and future research

While this study has offered some insights into the gendered experiences of women researchers operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are several limitations that in turn provide opportunities for future research. First, in analysing the narrative accounts of 36 women academics who live and work in English-speaking parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, we appear to have privileged the lived experiences of a particular group of women academics. In this regard, our findings may not be generalisable to the larger population of women researchers operating in a region as large and diverse as Sub-Saharan Africa, especially those in the French-speaking countries. This paper therefore makes no claim to have presented the views of all African women

researchers and suggests that future research use both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to broaden our study to other African countries and developing contexts, across different universities, to reveal more interesting nuances about gender inequality in academia.

Another limitation of our study is also the different country contexts studied. While there may be commonalities across the countries in terms of the gender-based challenges affecting the careers of African women researchers, the depth and degree of these challenges may differ according to the cultural and patriarchal values of each country. Thus, rather than examining the region of Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, future studies could provide more texture to our findings by studying the individual country contexts for the gender-based challenges that women academics encounter in building and advancing their careers.

Further, as academics are in an ongoing struggle for positions, prestige, capital, status, distinction, and symbolic violence remain a constant presence in academia. Our findings suggest that women can appropriate femininity to accrue capital and, at the same time, contest femininity for job opportunities. Thus, future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of the target audiences and social spaces that influence women's choice of strategy. For example, research could examine the type of organisations that women academics seek funding from, and how the masculinity and/or femininity of these organisations influence their behaviours. Our findings have also highlighted that gender inequality can be conveyed through visible actions such as promotion and recruitment, as well as in daily micro-level processes such as gossip. We, therefore, invite scholars who investigate gender issues in academia to consider a multidimensional perspective that offers a richer understanding of women and the different factors that influence their careers.

In conclusion, we emphasise that understanding the durability of gender inequality in academia requires analysing how, in specific contexts, different forms of inequalities can co-exist,

nurture, and sustain each other. As universities become prominent in the implementation and achievement of the SDGs (United Nations 2015), we believe that the impediments to the career advancement of women in academia are worthy of further investigation and should "not be allowed to fall through the cracks" (Acker and Armenti 2004, 18). This is pertinent, as academics play a crucial role in the socialisation processes of present and future generations, shaping their belief systems and behaviours around gender equality.

## REFERENCES

Acker, Joan. 1990. "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations." Gender & Society 4 (2): 139-158.

Acker, Joan. 2006. "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations." *Gender and Society* 20 (4): 441–64.

Acker, Sandra, and Carmen Armenti. 2004. "Sleepless in Academia." *Gender and Education* 16 (1): 3-24.

Ahikire, Josephine, and Josephine Akihire. 2022. "Researching Gender Relations in Africa." *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 20 (1): 1-22.

Benschop, Yvonne. (2021). "Grand Challenges, Feminist Answers." *Organization Theory*, 12, 1–19.

Bonnewitz, P. 2002 "Pierre Bourdieu: vie, oeuvres, concepts." Paris: Ellipses.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990 "The Logic of Practice." Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. "Masculine Domination." Cambridge: Polity Press.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.

Brescoll, Victoria L. 2016. "Leading With their Hearts? How Gender Stereotypes of Emotion Lead to Biased Evaluations of Female Leaders." *The Leadership Quarterly* 27 (3): 415-428.

Brink, Marieke van den, and Yvonne Benschop. 2012. “Slaying the Seven-Headed Dragon: The Quest for Gender Change in Academia.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 19 (1): 71–92.

Burawoy, Michael. 2019. "*Symbolic Violence: Conversations with Bourdieu*." Durham: Duke University Press.

Cohen, Laurie, Joanne Duberley, and Beatriz Adriana Bustos Torres. 2023. "Experiencing Gender Regimes: Accounts of Women Professors in Mexico, the UK and Sweden." *Work, Employment and Society* 37 (2): 525-544.

Dashper, Katherine. 2019. “Challenging the Gendered Rhetoric of Success? The Limitations of Women-only Mentoring for Tackling Gender Inequality in the Workplace.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 26: 541–557.

Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Victoria Johnson. 2008. "Bourdieu and Organizational Analysis." *Theory and Society* 37 (2008): 1-44.

Fagan, Colette, and Nina Teasdale. 2021. "Women Professors Across STEMM and Non-STEMM Disciplines: Navigating Gendered Spaces and Playing the Academic Game." *Work, Employment and Society* 35 (4): 774-792.

Forson, Cynthia, Moira Calveley, Steven Shelley, Kaye Broadbent, and Glenda Strachan. 2017. “Academics at the Intersection of Age and Gender: A Ghanaian Experience.” In *Gender and Professions*, edited by Kaye Broadbent, Glenda Strachan, and Healy Geraldine, 85–103. New York: Routledge.

Fotaki, Marianna. 2013. “No Woman Is Like a Man (in Academia): The Masculine Symbolic Order and the Unwanted Female Body.” *Organization Studies* 34 (9): 1251–75.

França, Thais, Filipa Godinho, Beatriz Padilla, Mara Vicente, Lígia Amâncio, and Ana Fernandes. 2023. "“Having a Family is the New Normal”: Parenting in Neoliberal Academia During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, (1): 35-51.

Gander, Michelle. 2019. “Let the Right One in: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Gender Inequality in Universities’ Senior Management.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 26 (2): 107–23.

Geddes, Alistair, Charlie Parker, and Sam Scott. 2018. “When the Snowball Fails to Roll and

the Use of ‘Horizontal’ Networking in Qualitative Social Research.” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21 (3): 347–58.

Huppatz, Kate. 2009. "Reworking Bourdieu's Capital": Feminine and Female Capitals in the Field of Paid Caring Work." *Sociology* 43 (1): 45-66.

Hungwe, Chipo. 2006. "Putting Them in Their Place." *Feminist Africa* 6 (1): 33-47.

Idahosa, Grace Ese osa. 2020. “Dirty Body Politics: Habitus, Gendered Embodiment, and the Resistance to Women’s Agency in Transforming South African Higher Education.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 27 (6): 988–1003.

Imas, J. Miguel, and Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo. 2023. "A Postcolonial and Pan-African Feminist Reading of Zimbabwean Women Entrepreneurs." *Gender, Work & Organization* 30 (2): 391-411.

Ituma, Afam, and Ruth Simpson. 2009. "The boundaryless' career and career boundaries: Applying an institutionalist perspective to ICT workers in the context of Nigeria." *Human Relations* 62 (5): 727-761.

Kloot, Bruce. 2009. "Exploring the Value of Bourdieu's Framework in the Context of Institutional Change." *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (4): 469-481.

Mavin, Sharon, and Gina Grandy. 2016. "Women Elite Leaders Doing Respectable Business Femininity: How Privilege is Conferred, Contested and Defended Through the Body." *Gender, Work & Organization* 23 (4): 379-396.

Morley, Louise. 2006. “Hidden Transcripts: The Micropolitics of Gender in Commonwealth Universities.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29 (6): 543–51.

Munene, John C., Shalom H. Schwartz, and Peter B. Smith. 2000. "Development in sub-Saharan Africa: Cultural Influences and Managers' Decision Behaviour." *Public Administration and Development: The International Journal of Management Research and Practice* 20 (4): 339-351.

O’Connor, Pat, and Clare O’Hagan. 2016. “Excellence in University Academic Staff Evaluation: A Problematic Reality?” *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (11): 1943–57.

Okeke-Ihejirika, Philomina E. 2017. "Asserting Agency by Negotiating Patriarchy." *Journal of Global South Studies* 34 (1): 1-21.

Otuo, Priscilla, Cynthia Forson, Afua Owusu-Kwarteng, and Anthony N-Yelkabong. (2022). "Informal Institutional Structures and Legitimacy Perceptions of Female Innovation in sub-Saharan Africa: A Conceptual Framework. In G*ender, Diversity and Innovation: Concepts, Policies and Practice,* edited by Belinda Owalla, Tim Vorley, and Helen Lawton Smith, 202–222. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Robinson, Sarah, and Ron Kerr, (2009) "The Symbolic Violence of Leadership: A Critical Hermeneutic Study of Leadership and Succession in a British Organization in the Post-Soviet Context". *Human Relations* 62 (6): 875-903.

Schottman, Wendy. 1995. "The Daily Ritual of Greeting among the Baatombu of Benin." *Anthropological Linguistics* 37 (4): 487– 523.

Scully, Maureen A. 2002. "Confronting Errors in the Meritocracy." *Organization* 9 (3): 396-401.

Ukpokolo, Chinyere. 2010. "Academic freedom and Dual Career Academic Couples: The Complexities of Being a Woman Academic in the University Space." *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 8 (1): 49-71.

United Nations. 2015. "Sustainable Development Goals." https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

Yamak, Sibel, Ali Ergur, Mustafa F. Özbilgin, and Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar. 2016. "Gender as Symbolic Capital and Violence: The Case of Corporate Elites in Turkey." *Gender, Work and Organization* 23 (2): 125–46.