

Gendered Experience in Rivers State Higher Institutions: Challenges and Prospects for Equitable Higher Education

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Abstract: The gendered experience of female students in Rivers state higher institutions is investigated in this research together with the difficulties they encounter and the support networks they have access to. Using a mixed-methods research approach, the study gathered information from 1,200 female students in higher institutions in Rivers State using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The results show that female students suffer from major problems including discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence that impairment their academic performance and mental health. According to the study, female students' experiences are also shaped by society's expectations and norms, many of which are under pressure to fit within conventional gender roles. Understanding the experiences of female students requires a framework provided by the feminist theory and social constructivism theory, which also emphasizes the need for universities to apply policies and programs encouraging gender equality and inclusion. According to the study, universities should create and apply gender-sensitive policies, offer training and awareness campaigns, set up support networks, and encourage female leadership in command positions. The results of the study point to the necessity of a cultural change towards valuing and respecting women's rights and encouraging gender equality, which has effects for policy makers, educational administrators, and government. This study adds to the current body of knowledge on the experiences of female students in institutions in Rivers state and emphasizes the need of more research and action to solve the problems encountered by female students. The results of the study guides policies and practices intended to advance inclusion and gender equality in institutions in Rivers State and Nigerian at large.

Keywords: Challenges, Gender, Female Students, Higher Education, Rivers State.



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Introduction

Any society's promotion of social justice and economic growth depends on the search of fair higher education, which is therefore essential. Still, even with the advancements in worldwide higher education availability, gender gaps remain especially in underdeveloped nations such as Nigeria. Like many other institutions of higher education in Africa, Nigerian universities are struggling to provide an inclusive atmosphere that advances equal opportunities for male and female students. The performance and advancement of female students in Nigerian universities including higher institutions in Rivers State depends on a complicated interaction of socio-cultural, financial, and institutional elements that define their experience. Studies have revealed that women make less of a mark in higher education especially in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) (Adeyemi, 2020; Okebukola, 2019). The National Universities Commission (NUC, 2020) reports that Nigerian university female students' enrolment rate is lower than that of their male counterparts. Moreover, female students sometimes encounter special difficulties including sexual harassment, stereotyping, and marginalization that can impact their grades and general health (Afolabi, 2018; Okonkwo, 2020). Societal expectations and cultural norms that reinforce patriarchal ideals and stereotypes further influence the gendered experience in institutions in Rivers state. Women often face expectations to give household duties more attention than scholarly ones, which can restrict their involvement in higher education (Adeyemi, 2020). Moreover, the absence of female role models and mentors in universities can dissuade women pupils from seeking jobs in fields dominated by men (Okebukola, 2019). Notwithstanding these difficulties, Rivers state has opportunities to advance fair higher education. Through programs like the National Policy on Education, which stresses the need of equal access to education for all (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013), the Nigerian government has adopted laws aimed at advancing gender equality in education. Moreover, several higher institutions in Rivers state have created gender units or women's centres to raise awareness of gender issues and assist female students. This research seeks to investigate the gendered experience in higher institutions in Rivers state, particularly the difficulties and prospects for equal higher education. The research aims particularly to:

- i. examines the factors that influence the participation and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state.
- ii. investigate the experiences of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state, including the challenges they face and the support systems available to them.
- iii. identify strategies for promoting gender equality and inclusion in higher institutions in Rivers state.

This study seeks to help with the creation of policies and programs that support the academic success of female students and advance fair higher education by investigating the gendered experience in higher institutions in Rivers state.

Theoretical Literature Review

Two foundational ideas for this study are the Social Constructivism Theory and the Feminist Theory. Lev Vygotsky (1978) argues that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and experiences, hence This theory is pertinent to this research because it emphasizes how cultural standards and expectations shape the gendered experience of Nigerian university female students (Adeyemi, 2020). Knowledge, according to this hypothesis, is built through social interactions and experiences rather than being objective. Emphasizing the significance of social context in influencing personal experiences (Woods & Henderson, 2002), other academics have developed upon Vygotsky's work.

Conversely, several feminist academics such as bell hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argued in *The Feminist Theory* about the need of appreciating the experiences of women in society and how power relations and patriarchy define their lives. Since this theory offers a framework for comprehending how power dynamics and society expectations affect the experiences of female students in Nigerian universities (Okonkwo, 2020), it is pertinent to this research. Other academics have used feminist theory to the analysis of education, stressing how schools might reinforce or resist patriarchal values (Lather, 1991). Taken together, these ideas offer a structure for grasping the intricate interaction of elements influencing the gendered experience of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state.

Empirical Literature Review

Eze (2024) sought to uncover elements influencing the participation of Nigerian universities female students by examine the effect of gender stereotypes on their academic decisions. Using a survey research approach, the study gathered information from 1200 pupils. Results of the study analysed that gender stereotypes impacting academic choices, lack of female role models, insufficient support systems, and limited career opportunities. The research finds that ladies' academic decisions are greatly affected by gender stereotypes. The research suggests encouraging female role models and establishing support networks for girls.

Seeking to understand the difficulties Nigerian college women with disabilities encounter, Ogundele (2024) investigated their experiences. Using a qualitative research approach, the study carried in-depth interviews with twenty disabled female students. The experiences of female students with impairments in Nigerian colleges include marginalization, lack of support systems, subpar infrastructure, and society expectations limiting academic pursuits. The research finds that disabled female students have great difficulties. The study advises enacting regulations tackling marginalization and advancing support systems for disabled female pupils.

Investigating gender-based violence in Nigerian colleges, Adeyemo (2023) sought to better understand female students' encounters. The research utilized a qualitative methodology and conducted focus group conversations with 40 female students. According to the research, female students at Nigerian colleges encounter gender-based violence including physical and emotional abuse, lack of support systems, insufficient rules, stereotype of transactional sex, and fear of reporting events. The research finds that Nigerian colleges face a major obstacle in gender-based violence. According to the research, policies should be put in place to handle gender-based violence and encourage support networks for female students.

Afolabi (2023) sought to pinpoint elements affecting the involvement of female students in Nigerian colleges by looking at the influence of society expectations on their academic goals. Using a survey research design, the study gathered information from 800 students. Among the results include societal expectations prioritizing domestic roles, lack of female role models, insufficient support systems, and limited career chances are the impact of societal expectations on female students' academic pursues in Nigerian universities. The research finds that girls' academic interests are greatly shaped by social expectations. The research advises encouraging female role models and establishing support networks for girls.

Seeking to highlight obstacles and opportunities, Nwankwo (2023) looked at female representation in leadership roles in Nigerian colleges. Using a mixed-methods research approach, the study gathered information from 500 administrators and 1000 students. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, lack of mentorship, insufficient support systems, and social expectations limiting leadership ambitions are among the issues Nigerian female students face in colleges. The research finds that a major obstacle is female representation in leadership roles. The authors of the study suggest encouraging female mentoring and offering support networks for women in management.

Aiming to highlight obstacles and opportunities, Okebukola (2023) looked at the application of policies supporting gender equality in Nigerian colleges. With 1,000 pupils and 50 administrators, the study used a mixed-methods research design. The study's results include insufficient policy implementation, lack of awareness, inadequate financing, and opposition to change. The research finds that one major difficulty in advancing gender equality is policy execution. The research advises enhancing policy execution and raising awareness of gender equality.

Investigating gender gaps in STEM education in Nigerian colleges, Adeyemi (2022) sought to pinpoint elements affecting female students' enrolment. Using a survey research approach, the study gathered information from 500 students. The research revealed that Nigerian women's participation in STEM education is influenced by low enrolment rates of female students in STEM fields, lack of female role models, insufficient support systems, and societal expectations prioritizing domestic roles. The research finds that in Nigerian universities, gender differences in STEM education prove to be a major difficulty. The research suggests boosting women's numbers in STEM sectors and establishing support networks for female scholars.

With a focus on understanding the difficulties Nigerian college female students' encounters, Okonkwo (2022) investigated their experiences. The research was qualitative and involved in-depth interviews with thirty female students. The research results indicate that Nigerian university female students face sexual harassment, stereotype of transactional sex, marginalization, absent support systems, and societal expectations limiting academic aspirations. The research finds that Nigerian university female students have major difficulties. The research suggests enacting measures to handle sexual harassment and encouraging support networks for female students.

The empirical literature examines the difficulties Nigerian universities female students face, including marginalization, gender inequities in STEM education, and incidents of sexual harassment. Still, in the Nigerian setting particularly in higher institutions in Rivers state more study is needed on the intersectionality of gender with other elements including disability, socioeconomic level, and ethnicity. Moreover, the majority of the research analysed were quantitative in form, stressing the need of more qualitative studies to investigate female students' experiences in higher institutions in Rivers state. Moreover, more research is needed on the effects of policy measures meant to foster gender equality in higher institutions in Rivers state.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the gendered experience of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state. The study's population consisted of female students in Rivers state higher institutions, with a sample size of 1,200 students selected through a stratified random sampling technique. The study's instruments included a questionnaire and an interview guide, with the questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and their experiences of gender-based challenges, while the interview guide was used to collect qualitative data on the lived experiences of female students. The questionnaire was distributed to all fully accredited higher institutions selected from each of the three senatorial district in Delta state as follow: [University of Port Harcourt/UNIPORT, Igantius Ajuru University of Education/IAUOE, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic/ELECHIPOLY, Rivers State University/RSU, Pamo University, Rivers State College of Health Science/RSCHS all in **Rivers Central senatorial district**, Federal College of technology Omoku/FEDCOTECH, Federal Polytechnic of Oil and Gas Bonny/FEDPOLY both in **Rivers West senatorial district**, Ken Sarowiwa Polytechnic/KENPOLY in **Rivers South East senatorial district**] and was validated through pilot testing and reliability was ensured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.80 level of coefficient, while the interview guide was validated through expert review. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics of 5 Likert scale of 3.0 mean criterion mean and thematic analysis, with the quantitative data analysed using SPSS software and the qualitative data

analysed through coding and theme identification. The study's procedures were approved by the relevant ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data presentation

The research objectives guided the presentation of the data. Stratified random sampling method was used to distribute questionnaire and examine primary data; particular demographic traits like age, marital status and all other demographic variables are computed using percentages.

Table 1. Senatorial and Institutional Distributions of the Questionnaires

Senatorial District	Institutions in the District	No. of Institutions in the District	Names of Selected Institutions	No. of Questionnaires Distributed	No. of Questionnaires Returned
Central Senatorial District	UNIPORT	6	UNIPORT	200	133
	IAUOE		IAUOE	150	105
	RSU		RSU	120	94
	ELECHIPOLY		ELECHIPOLY	100	75
	PAMO		PAMO	50	36
	RSCHS		RSCHS	50	39
West Senatorial District	FEDCOTECH	2	FEDCOTECH	135	98
	FEDPOLY		FEDPOLY	150	108
South East Senatorial District	KENPOLY	1	KENPOLY	245	182
				1200	870

Source: author's compilation (2025)

Table 2. Respondents Socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Status		
Single	643	73.9
Married	227	26.1
Total	870	100
Age Range		
16-20 years	301	34.6
21-25 years	254	29.2
26-30 years	179	20.6
31 & above	136	15.6
Total	870	100
Highest Educational Qualification		
WAEC	649	74.6
NCE/ND	154	17.7
HND/BSC	67	7.7
Total	870	100
Total	870	100

Source: Authors Survey, 2025.

In Table 1 we can see the details of the senatorial district and institutional distribution of the population. The population was distributed to all accredited institutions selected from each senatorial district in Rivers state. Among the 870 respondents, majority are single accounted for 643 (73.9.0%) of the total. In terms of age, most respondents are over 16-20years of age; Similarly, when asked about their educational status, the highest respondents have WAEC 649 (74.6%) and the lowest respondents have B.Sc. which constitute 67 (7.7%).

Data Analysis

In order to determine the appropriateness of the research questions, the data of this study are presented and analyzed below using mean, standard deviation, SPSS software and Cronbach Alpha correlation coefficient of 0.80.

Factors influencing the participation and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers State.

Table 3. Respondents' views on factors influencing the participation and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state.

S/N	Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Inadequate financial support is a significant constraint on female students' academic success, as monthly funding received by students has a positive impact on their academic performance.	4.42	4.11	Agreed
2	Unstable income status of parents and lack of role model is associated with great academic achievement of female students.	4.37	3.92	Agreed
3	Prioritizing domestic role over academic affects female students' participation in academic performance.	4.41	3.97	Agreed
4	Limited career opportunities for female students' influence their academic success in higher institutions in Rivers state.	4.11	3.81	Agreed
5	Availability of instructional materials, libraries and other resources enhance academic performance thereby affecting their participation.	4.16	3.73	Agreed
6	Low enrolment rate of female students in STEM affects their participation and academic performance.	4.13	3.67	Agreed
7	Stereotypes experience by female students tend to influence their performance and participation in higher institutions in Rivers state.	4.07	4.17	Agreed
8	Demographic factor such as family size impact female students' academic performance.	4.31	3.89	Agreed
9	Parents' academic level positively influence female students' academic performance and participation in higher institutions in Rivers state.	4.21 4.03	3.88 3.72	Agreed Agreed
10		3.48	3.32	Agreed

11	The farther female students travel to attend college, the poorer their participation and academic performance tends to be. Regular attendance to tutorials improve academic performance and participation of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state.			
	Aggregate Mean	3.80	3.84	Agreed

Source: Authors survey, 2025.

From table 3, item 1-11, the table aims to discuss the factors influencing the participation and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state. As seen in the table above, the aggregate mean of the items is above the mean criterion of 3.0. Also, based on all responses, the standard deviation is 3.84 and the total mean is 3.80. Based on the findings above, the respondents unanimously agreed that stereotype, lack of role model, limited career opportunities, prioritizing domestic role over academic, low enrolment of female students in STEM, distance to college, attending tutorials has significant negative influence on the participation and performance of female students in institutions in Rivers state.

Experience of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state that affect their academic and personal lives.

From the interview conducted with female students in higher institutions in Rivers state, they unanimously agreed that the following are the various experiences they faced that affect their academic and personal lives. This include:

1. Unwanted Attention and Harassment: Female students often encounter unwanted attention from male students, lecturers, or other higher institutions staff, ranging from catcalling to serious forms of harassment.
2. Verbal Abuse and Insults: Female students are verbally abused or insulted by peers or lecturers based on their appearance, gender or academic performance.
3. Sexual Propositions and Coercion: Female students most times are propositioned for sex or coerced into engaging in sexual activities in exchange for benefits like good grades, admission, or financial favours as this affects their academic.
4. Marginalization: Female students are often viewed as subordinate, with their roles in university politics and leadership positions being limited.
5. Strict Control: Female students in higher institutions in Rivers state are most times treated like children, with strict regulations on visiting periods, dress codes, and "loitering" around campus which affect their social lives and reduced their participation in school politics.
6. Sexual Harassment: This is a common experience for many female students as they are afraid of reporting such incident with devastating effects on the victims.
7. Stereotype of transactional Sex: There's a perception that female students engage in transactional sex, with some being accused of preferring "sugar daddies" as against their age grade.
8. Limited Representation: Female students are underrepresented in leadership positions, as their participation in student politics is often frowned upon.
9. Many female students experienced high expectation from the society thereby limiting their academic pursuit.

10. Some female students experiencing sexist comments from lecturers who implied most of them was only in school because of a "mistake" in their admission.

11. Most female students experience propositioned by lecturer who offered to "protect" her in school in exchange for a romantic relationship.

From the interview conducted with the respondents, which sought to suit the experience of female students in higher institutions in River state that affect their academic and personal lives, the respondents all agreed that unwanted attention and harassment, verbal abuse and insults, sexual propositions and coercion, marginalization, strict control, sexual harassment, stereotype of transactional sex, limited representation, societal expectation limiting academic pursuit, sexist comments and propositioned by lecturer affect female students academic and personal lives.

Challenges faced by female students in higher institutions in Rivers State that affect their academic performance and the available support systems.

Table 4. Respondents' views on the challenges faced by female students in higher institutions in Rivers state that affect their academic performance and available support systems.

S/N	Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Married female students struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with domestic duties that impact their academic pursuits, thereby leading to stress and pressure during test and examination.	4.05	3.65	Agreed
2	Student that are mothers often face difficulties in managing their time, leading to poor academic performance.	3.66	3.65	Agreed
3	Female students in higher institutions in Rivers state often have limited access to resources and face challenges in pursuing careers in male-dominated fields like STEM, where they encounter stereotypes and biases.	4.19	3.76	Agreed
4	Female students are vulnerable to sexual harassment and coercion, which affect their mental health and academic performance in higher institutions in Rivers state.	4.24	3.87	Agreed
5	Female students are marginalized, underrepresented in leadership positions in higher institutions in Rivers state, which makes it difficult for them to influence policy decisions that affect them.	4.30	3.92	Agreed
6	Some institutions have established reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment or violence, allowing students to report incidents and seek help although these are not always effective.	4.00	3.67	Agreed
7	Some institutions offer counselling services to support students who have experienced trauma or harassment, providing a safe space for them to share their experiences and receive guidance.	4.05	3.63	Agreed
8	Most student organizations, such as feminist	3.94	3.66	Agreed

	groups or advocacy organizations, provide support and solidarity for female students who have experienced harassment or violence, creating a sense of community and promoting awareness about gender-based issues.			
	Aggregate Mean	4.03	3.73	Agreed

Source: Authors survey, 2025.

Also, again from table 4, item 1-8, the table aims to discuss the challenges faced by female students in higher institutions in Rivers state that affect their academic performance and the support systems available. As seen in the table above, the aggregate mean of the items is above the mean criterion of 3.0. Also, based on all responses, the standard deviation is 3.73 and the total mean is 4.03. Based on the findings above, the respondents anonymous agreed that domestic responsibilities, lack of time to study and complete assignments are faced by students that are mothers, limited access to resources and opportunities, sexual harassment and coercion, limited representation in leadership positions, marginalization are the challenges faced by female students in higher institutions in Rivers state that affect their academic performance and reporting mechanisms, counselling services, and student organizations are the support systems available to female students in other to tackle this identified challenges.

Discussion of Findings

The factors influencing the involvement and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state revealed response to the research item in table 3 above. The results of the study on stereotype, lack of role model, limited career opportunities, prioritizing domestic role over academic, low enrolment of female students in STEM, distance to college, attending tutorials are the factors influencing the participation and performance of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state which is in line with the findings of the empirical literature reviewed of Eze (2024), Afolabi (2023) and Adeyemi (2022) as shown in table 3 above which justified the first research objective of the study. Also once more, in the second research objective aiming to solve the problem of experiences encountered by female students impacting their academic and personal life. From the interview conducted with female students in higher institutions in Rivers state, the respondents unanimously agreed that unwanted attention and harassment, verbal abuse and insults, sexual propositions and coercion, marginalization, strict control, sexual harassment, stereotype of transactional sex, limited representation, societal expectation limiting academic pursuit are the experiences faced by female students that affect their academic and personal lives which support the empirical literature of the study of Adeyemo (2023) and Okonkwo (2022) that emotional abuse, marginalization, societal expectation limiting academic pursuit, fear, etc. among others are some of their experience in higher institutions in Rivers state.

In line with the findings of Adeyemo (2022), Ogundele (2024), Eze (2024), the study also discovered that domestic duties, lack of time to study and complete assignments, limited access to resources and opportunities, sexual harassment and coercion, limited representation in leadership roles, marginalization are among the difficulties experienced by mothers that affect their academic performance in higher institutions in Rivers state. By demonstrating that reporting mechanisms, counselling services, and student groups are the support systems accessible to female students in other to address the noted issues, the research stands apart from others. The study has been able to explore the gendered experience of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state by means of the response of the respondents thereby fulfilling the research objectives set by the study.

Conclusion

The gendered experience of female students in higher institutions in Rivers state has been investigated in this study together with their difficulties and support structures. The results of this

study reinforce the current body of work of the paper, which argues that female students in higher institutions in Rivers state encounter major obstacles such as discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence. The results of the study also fit with the feminist theory, which holds that women are frequently side-lined and deprived of seats of authority in a patriarchal society. The theory of social constructivism also helps to explain how female in higher institutions experiences are influenced by expectations and norms. The results of the study emphasize the importance for colleges to adopt policies and programs that advance gender equality and offer support networks for female students damaged by violence or harassment. This study adds to the current knowledge base on the experiences of female students in higher institutions in Nigeria universities and emphasizes the urgent need for more research and action to solve the issues they face.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to higher institutions in Rivers state, educational administrators, policy makers, and government agencies to help with the gendered experience, difficulties and opportunities in higher institutions in Rivers state:

For Higher Institutions in Rivers State

- i. Higher institutions should create and put into practice policies on sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and equal opportunities that advance gender equality and inclusion.
- ii. Higher institutions ought to offer faculty, staff, and students awareness and training sessions on respect of diversity, inclusiveness, and gender equality.
- iii. Higher institutions should create counselling services, reporting systems, and advocacy groups to help female students who have suffered trauma or harassment.
- iv. Support of initiatives advocating for gender equality and inclusion depends on cooperation among universities, government, and other interested parties.
- v. Higher institutions ought to encourage female leadership representation in student government, administrative offices, and academic departments in higher institutions in Rivers state.

For Educational Administrators

- i. Policies encouraging gender equality and inclusion in higher institutions should be created and put into practice by educational leaders.
- ii. Educational administrators should give higher institutions tools and help they need to advance gender equality and inclusion.
- iii. Educational administrators should keep track of and assess how far inclusion and gender equality have been implemented in colleges.
- iv. Efforts to advance gender equality and inclusion in institutions should involve stakeholders such students, employees, instructors, and the general public.

For Policy Makers

- i. National policies encouraging gender equality and inclusion in higher education should be developed and executed by policy makers.
- ii. Policy makers should fund projects supporting gender equality and inclusion in higher institutions.
- iii. Promoting gender equality and inclusion in colleges requires accountability, therefore policy makers should make sure accountability is practice in higher institutions in Rivers state by setting good example by being accountable to the people they are representing in their various positions.

For Government

- i. The government has to create and carry out national policies encouraging gender equality and inclusion in higher education.
- ii. The government should finance programs and give tools to support projects encouraging gender equality and inclusiveness in higher institutions in the state.
- iii. The government has to make sure there is responsibility for advancing inclusion and gender equality in higher institutions in Rivers state.
- iv. Government should encourage a society change toward valuing and respecting women's rights and promoting gender equality.

Higher institutions in Rivers state, educators, policy makers, and government can encourage gender equality and inclusion by adopting these suggestions, therefore establishing a friendlier and inclusive environment for female students in higher institutions in Rivers state.

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