



BREAKING BARRIERS: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to discuss women's leadership in education, specifically at the University of Calabar, Nigeria (UNICAL). The role of women in education, previously considered a barrier, was later successfully overcome. This study examined educational institutions in Nigeria from 1975 to 2025. It highlights the barriers women have confronted over time, the milestones they have achieved, and the promise the future holds for female leadership and scholarship. UNICAL is a pioneer institution in Nigeria, which has succeeded in catalyzing gender dynamics and growth. It is little wonder, therefore, that it has produced notable females who have achieved tremendous feats in academia both nationally and internationally. Through a historical and qualitative lens, this research examines the impact of scholars such as Professor Florence Banku, the first female and 11th Vice Chancellor of the University of Calabar, Professor Aniebiet Inyang Ntui, the University Librarian; Professor Stella Ikhesor Ekpe, Dr. Bernadine Nse Ekpenyong, and a host of other notable females. The results of this study's investigation reveal the challenges women have faced in securing education, leadership roles, and influencing the overall academic culture at UNICAL. By documenting this narrative of excellence and analyzing the pattern of inclusion, this work will contribute to the broader discussion on gender equity in the Nigerian and African Higher Institutions. It offers recommendations for strengthening female academic participation in the years to come.

Keywords: Women; University of Calabar; Breaking Barriers; Historical Perspective; Gender

ABSTRAK

Studi ini bertujuan untuk membahas kepemimpinan perempuan dalam pendidikan, khususnya di Universitas Calabar, Nigeria (UNICAL). Peran perempuan dalam pendidikan, yang sebelumnya dianggap sebagai hambatan, kemudian berhasil diatasi. Studi ini mengkaji lembaga-lembaga pendidikan di Nigeria dari tahun 1975 hingga 2025. Studi ini menyoroti hambatan yang dihadapi perempuan dari waktu ke waktu, tonggak-tonggak yang telah mereka capai, dan janji masa depan bagi kepemimpinan dan keilmuan perempuan. UNICAL adalah lembaga pelopor di Nigeria, yang telah berhasil mengkatalisasi dinamika dan pertumbuhan gender. Oleh karena itu, tidak mengherankan bahwa UNICAL telah menghasilkan perempuan-perempuan terkemuka yang telah mencapai prestasi luar biasa di bidang akademik, baik secara nasional maupun internasional. Melalui lensa historis dan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengkaji dampak dari para akademisi seperti Profesor Florence Banku, perempuan pertama dan Wakil Rektor ke-11 Universitas Calabar, Profesor Aniebiet Inyang Ntui, Pustakawan Universitas; Profesor Stella Ikhesor Ekpe, Dr. Bernadine Nse Ekmenyong, dan sejumlah perempuan terkemuka lainnya. Hasil investigasi studi ini mengungkap tantangan yang dihadapi perempuan dalam mengamankan pendidikan, peran kepemimpinan, dan memengaruhi budaya akademik secara keseluruhan di UNICAL. Dengan mendokumentasikan narasi keunggulan ini dan menganalisis pola inklusi, penelitian ini akan berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas tentang kesetaraan gender di Perguruan Tinggi Nigeria dan Afrika. Penelitian ini menawarkan rekomendasi untuk memperkuat partisipasi akademik perempuan di tahun-tahun mendatang.

Kata Kunci: Perempuan; Universitas Calabar; Mendobrak Hambatan; Perspektif Historis; Gender

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is defined as the ability of an individual or a group to influence and guide followers within a team or organization (Barney, Pratt: 2023). It is often attributed to a person's title or ranking in a workspace. This means that it is an attribute that anyone can have. Leadership is not a birthright of any gender, but a responsibility that calls for management skills, vision, and

creative and innovative thinking, resilience, perseverance, level-headedness, empathy, and transformation. It is a skill that anyone can develop. Leadership skills are vital because they play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of an organization or team. Successful organizations depend on the skills of their leaders to succeed. According to Barney & Pratt (2023), hard decision-making is vital for the growth and sustenance of the business or organization.

A good leader must be able to make tough decisions. Several theories help explain the phenomenon better, but the “Great Man” theory does a better job at this. The Great Man theory is a philosophical and historical concept that implies that history is principally shaped by the activities of renowned individuals, rather than communal efforts. This theory was made popular by a Scottish writer named Thomas Carlyle in his book entitled “Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History.” Thomas is of the view that leaders possess certain unique qualities that enable them to perform above their equals, thereby achieving greatness and influencing the course of history. (Mark, 2024). This theory has however faced severe criticisms in the latter part of the 20th century. Thinkers like Herbert Spencer believe that other factors in society may explain the greatness of an individual and not just their genetics. Over time, this individualistic view has been adjusted to accommodate the activities of others in the system, culture, and relationships among the individuals. However, the importance of having a “great man” cannot be overemphasized. It remains a notable component of notes on leadership that have left a historical impact on society.

In the evolving landscape of higher education in Nigeria, where higher institutions are springing up in almost every part of the nation, bringing the number to a total of 272 (NUC, 2024). The University of Calabar (UNICAL) stands as a remarkable institution, not just for its academic excellence but also for its deliberate and dynamic embrace of inclusive leadership. This is particularly true with the rise and impact of women in leadership roles across the university. Over the years, UNICAL has transitioned from a relatively modest academic institution into a thriving hub of learning, research, and social progress. At the heart of this transformation is the active participation of women not merely as passive recipients of educational opportunities, but as

architects of institutional change, development, and innovation. This atmosphere has also impacted the students as the institution boast of a growing number of female students, worthy of mention is the emergence of a female student union president named Blessing Alims and some applaud able initiatives like the GADA's (Gender and Development Action) "1000 March" and Campus Square Initiative to combat gender-based violence (GADA, 2025).

The University of Calabar was founded in April 1975, under the National Higher Education Expansion Programmed, as one of the federal universities in Nigeria. The University of Calabar began in 1973 with 154 students as a campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, before gaining autonomy. With a vision rooted in the motto "Knowledge for Service," UNICAL's academic mandate was clear from the outset, which is to provide quality education that prepares graduates for both intellectual and societal contribution. Located in the ancient, serene, and culturally rich city of Calabar, Cross River State, the university quickly grew in both academic capacity, population, and infrastructural development. From a handful of faculties and departments in the early years, the university now boasts over fifteen faculties, multiple institutes, research centers, and a population of tens of thousands of students from all parts of Nigeria and beyond. As a Federal University, the School strives to bring about an atmosphere of patriotic interaction from all around the world. Including Nigerians from all states and language groups. (UNICAL Editors, 2024) From its nucleus in the Duke Town Campus, the university has grown into a bustling academic community. She boasts of a population of over 40,000 students spread across various faculties and disciplines.

Institutionally, UNICAL has taken steps to create an environment that fosters gender to the university's commitment to research, policy advocacy, and training on gender-related issues. The CGD in 2021 held a one-day lecture with the theme: Gender Strategies, Rights, Equity, and Diversity in Development Processes. This would be the research and activity-based outfit of the University of Calabar. Through seminars, publications, and partnerships with national and international organizations, the center is addressing critical issues such as gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and inclusive

governance. Additionally, the university has developed a draft gender policy aimed at institutionalizing gender responsiveness across academic, administrative, and student affairs. The then Vice Chancellor, Prof. Zana Akpagu, inaugurated the Board Members to oversee the activities of the centre. *Inside Campus Africa (2020)* though awaiting full implementation, the document reflects a clear roadmap toward a more just and equitable academic space.

Moreover, UNICAL's openness to partnerships with groups such as the 100 Women Lobby Group. A lobby and advocacy group has helped boost her openness to female gender inclusion and participation. It has been in existence for over 15 years. Its main goal is to advocate for women and girls in four states in Nigeria. The platform is under the Change Managers International Network today, the group has presence in over 36 states and the federal Capital Territory with over 3,000 members and has reached about 10 million women and girls (Feminist Hub, 2024). UN Women and other gender-focused organizations have enhanced their ability to tackle gender-specific challenges while also celebrating the achievements of women. These collaborations have helped to raise awareness, train staff and students, and create safe spaces for dialogue and action. The ripple effects of these efforts at collaboration are evident. Young female students are now more vocal, more active in campus politics, and more ambitious about their roles in society at large. Faculty and administrative staff, regardless of gender, are gradually moving toward a shared understanding of the value that diversity brings to institutional growth. And the broader academic community is watching as UNICAL models what inclusive leadership looks like in practice.

But UNICAL's story is not just one of large student numbers and state-of-the-art infrastructure; it is a story of inclusion, a journey toward equity, and the amplification of marginalized voices. In a society where leadership has historically been male-dominated, the University of Calabar has become a forerunner in redefining that narrative by placing women in strategic positions of power. Perhaps, one of the most profound milestones in the university's history came in 2020, when Professor Florence Banku Obi shattered the proverbial glass ceiling by becoming the first ever female Vice-Chancellor of the institution after forty-five (45) years of its inception. (Emma, 2020) She

assumed the position as the 11th substantive Vice-Chancellor of the institution. According to Wodu (2020), Professor Florence Obi took over from Prof. Zana Akpagu, whose tenure ended on the 30th of November, 2020. Her appointment was not just a celebration of gender inclusivity but a validation of merit, academic excellence, and administrative capacity. A professor of special needs education, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academics), and a seasoned administrator, her ascension was a testament to hard work and determination over time. The election took place on the 10th of September, 2020. The results of the election were announced by Senator Nkechi Nwoagu, the then chairman of the Governing Council of the University. Professor Obi defeated eleven contestants to clinch the much-coveted post; she was the only female aspirant in the election. That was no mean feat. Professor Obi has brought to the office a unique combination of compassion, vision, and discipline that continues to leave a lasting imprint on the university.

Her emergence signaled several wins for all the women in the diaspora. This was a shift in institutional culture. Rather than token representation as we are used to, women at UNICAL and other Nigerian Institutions are now positioned at the helm of decision-making and strategic planning. Today, we find that other key administrative roles such as Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Directors of academic and non-academic units are being increasingly occupied by competent and visionary women. This strategic inclusion is not only reshaping policy and governance within the university but is also sending a powerful message to the wider Nigerian society about what is possible when women are trusted with leadership. Thankfully, the women who have been entrusted with these powers have not been implicated in any scandalous behaviours yet. Hopefully, this remains the narrative, as this will pave the way for more women who are desirous of the opportunity to prove themselves. It is worth mentioning that the impact of women's leadership at UNICAL goes beyond administration. It permeates academic excellence, student empowerment, and community engagement. Around the campus, we find that female faculty members are leading groundbreaking research in fields ranging from medical sciences to social policy and environmental sustainability. They are mentoring the next generation of scholars and leaders, especially young women who now see their aspirations

reflected in the strong women guiding the university. Some of these women will be discussed in detail in the succeeding paragraphs.

Over time, several women have played pivotal roles in establishing a strong female presence in UNICAL's academic community. Notably, one of these is Professor Ekanem Ikpi Braide, who is the 19th president of the Nigerian Academy of Science and the first ever female to hold that position. She is a renowned parasitologist/Epidemiologist. She contributed significantly to research on neglected tropical diseases. She was part of the wonderful team that achieved the tremendous feat of the eradication of guinea worm in Nigeria. Her work in disease control and public health has had a lasting impact on both the university and the broader scientific community. She has a rich professional experience as a researcher and an administrator. In 2010, the renowned professor was honoured by the President of Nigeria with the award of the Officer of the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR) (Parasitology and Public Health Society of Nigeria, 2022) for her immense contribution to disease control in Nigeria. She was also nominated by the Minister of Health to serve in the Ministerial Expert Advisory Committee on COVID-19 Health Sector Response. She served as the Vice-Chancellor, Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH), Calabar, Nigeria. (2004- 2009) and as the pioneer Vice Chancellor of Federal University, Lafia, Nasarawa State. (2011- 2016) Currently, she is the Pro-Chancellor of Arthur Jarvis University, Akpabuyo, Nigeria (Inter Academic Partnership, 2025). Another trailblazer, Professor Imelda Udoh, made substantial contributions to linguistics in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The articulation of women's history in Nigeria only began in the 1980s. History writing in Nigeria began in response to the Eurocentric view that Africa lacked history. Therefore, professional historians, starting in the 1950s, began writing history from an African perspective. These historians focused on creating a nationalist historiography. Nationalist history is similar to what Joan Scott describes as "general history," or political and national history. Women's empowerment, gender inequality, injustices related to resources and

rewards, and women's agency have become important themes in Nigerian women's history and historiography (Adesina, 2023).

Nigeria's development landscape in any field would be incomplete without the contributions of women, including in education. The relationship between men and women, or matters specific to women, revolves around power dynamics and relational postures that result from what each can contribute to society. Events within the Nigerian government have reflected the need to recognize the rise of women as they occupy previously male-dominated areas and bridge the gender gap in various fields of endeavor. Consideration of women as achievers, not simply as the oppressed sex. It has been found that history books are replete with tales of the exploits of women and men of the past, often considered heroes, especially the latter category. The lack of contemporary documentation on women's contributions and achievements in various fields of endeavor limits the appreciation of their contributions and accomplishments (Mabel Evwierhoma and Abuja Nigeria, (2024).

In the African context, gender inequality remains rampant despite the adoption of gender-focused policies and international commitments. African countries, including Nigeria, have ratified landmark treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but progress has been hampered by sociocultural norms, patriarchal values, and weak policy implementation frameworks. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country, faces a unique set of challenges related to gender mainstreaming due to its complex sociocultural landscape and historical colonial legacy, both of which have influenced gender roles and shaped attitudes toward women's rights. Despite significant policy progress, including the adoption of a National Gender Policy in 2006, the impact of these efforts remains limited, largely due to a lack of political will, resource constraints, and resistance from traditional structures that perpetuate gender disparities (Uche and Udochukwu, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a historical and qualitative perspective with a case study approach to women's leadership at the University of Calabar, Nigeria.

This research examines the impact of scholars such as Professor Florence Banku, the first female and 11th Vice Chancellor of the University of Calabar, Professor Aniebiet Inyang Ntui, the University Librarian; Professor Stella Ikhesor Ekpe, Dr. Bernadine Nse Ekpenyong, and a host of other notable females.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

TRAILBLAZERS IN LEADERSHIP: FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS AND THEIR IMPACT

Professor Florence Banku Obi stands out as a transformative figure in UNICAL's history. A turning point in UNICAL's history occurred in September 2020 when Professor Florence Banku Obi, an education psychologist specialising in special needs education, became UNICAL's first female Vice-Chancellor 45 years after the university's founding. Her leadership exemplifies women's capacity to influence institutional research agendas. Before her appointment, she served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academics) and Dean of Education. Two roles in which she actively promoted research excellence, supervising numerous postgraduate theses and fostering international collaborations. After she was appointed the first female and 11th Vice-Chancellor in December 2020, she has brought over three decades of academic experience to the role (NSA, 2020). The Pro-Chancellor of the University, also a woman named Senator Justina Nkechi Nwoagu, and other dignitaries graced this epoch-making event. Under her leadership, the university has seen significant infrastructural development, academic reforms, and enhanced student welfare initiatives. Her administration has prioritised the renovation of student hostels, the establishment of a 10-megawatt solar power plant, and the implementation of digital platforms for academic processes.

In one of her notable speeches, during the grand finale of the 2022 Mothering Week held at UNICAL Chapel of Redemption, Calabar, she called on women to break the bias at home at an early stage. The issues of bias are inbuilt in children from their childhood (Agency Report, 2022). According to Imelda Ibor (2024), during one of her inspections of the numerous projects

she has embarked on, which includes the pharmacy Administrative Complex, Education Administrative Building, and Fire Station administrative Block. Prof. Obi stressed the importance of timely completion, emphasizing her administration's zero-tolerance policy for poor services. She is a recipient of many awards. She has also held the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academics) by the University Senate. Professor Florence Banku also served as the commissioner for the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and a member of the Cross River State executive councils in 2007.

Worth mentioning also is, Professor Angela Ekanem Oyo-Ita, serving as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academics), has been instrumental in academic staff development and curriculum enhancement. Her efforts have contributed to the university's commitment to academic excellence and innovation. She is a professor of community medicine and chief consultant of public health. A major feature of her work is the track record of excellence she leaves behind. She is particular about improving health care. This she achieves by delivering calculated and innovative approaches. She graduated from the University of Calabar in 1988 and holds a Master's in Public Health. Among her several achievements and awards is the fact that she is a fellow of the West African College of Physicians. She has rendered great services to the University of Calabar, the University Teaching Hospital, and Cross River State at large. It is on record that she has taught different students for an extended period of twenty (20) years. She has also carried out various research works that impact knowledge on the world at large. Her research interest covers, but are not limited to, epidemiology, maternal and child health, with a focus on immunization (University of Calabar Directory.) Her work has gathered extensive support from international organizations, namely the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Institutes of Health. This further underscores her influence in this field of medicine. She also boasts of a wide array of collaborative efforts between various nations, countries, and disciplines.

In addition, Professor Aniebiet Inyang Ntui, as the University Librarian, is described as the most widely read researcher in Nigeria. She was the 2022 UK Global Prize Winner (University of Calabar Staff Directory,

2025). She has modernised the university's library services, incorporating digital resources and promoting research accessibility. Recognised as the Most Read Researcher in Nigeria in 2022, her work exemplifies the growing influence of women in academic research. She holds a PhD in Library and Information Science from the prestigious University of UYO. A Master's degree in Library, Archival Information Science from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. A Diploma in Computer Techniques and Applications from the University of Ibadan and a Bachelor's Degree (Knowledge Commons Word mark, 2025). She possesses over 20 years' experience as a lecturer at the University of Calabar. She has published several scholarly articles and books in her field. She has also served as Consultant of Information Management to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. She is also a recipient of the Nigerian Library Association Cross River State Chapter 2020 Award of Excellence and the 2021 Award of Honour for her immense contributions to the development of "librarianship" in the country. Due to her lofty contributions and achievements, she was appointed as the substantive Librarian of the University of Calabar by the Governing Council of the Institution (African Scientist Directory, 2025).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: UNICAL'S FOUNDATION AND EARLY YEARS

UNICAL was founded during a period when women's participation in higher education in Nigeria was very limited. In the early 1970s. Due to societal norms and cultural expectations, there was a restriction on women's access to tertiary education. This made the number of women who acquired tertiary education very limited. Thus, reducing significantly reduced the number of women who were qualified for leadership roles. Despite these challenges, UNICAL remained a fertile ground for female education and gradually became a platform for women to pursue academic and professional aspirations. The early years saw a modest representation of female students and members of faculty staff, setting the stage for future advancements in gender inclusivity and representation.

ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR

Women's participation in academia has expanded significantly in Nigeria, yet their specific contributions to institutional development at the University of Calabar remain understudied. This paper aims to fill this gap by surveying the scholarly activities of women in key leadership roles, university executives, professors, and curriculum specialists and analysing their influence on research productivity, pedagogical innovation, and curriculum reform. Women at UNICAL have significantly contributed to research and curriculum development across various disciplines. A hallmark of UNICAL's recent development has been the adoption of more inclusive and context-sensitive curricula. One of such women is Professor Ekanem Ikpi Braide. Her research on disease control has informed public health policies in Nigeria. Similarly, Cecilia O. Ekwueme, from the Department of Science Education, investigates pedagogical technologies, such as including climate-change materials in mathematics instruction, an innovative fusion of environmental literacy and STEM teaching. Her research on tropical disease control, rapid assessment has had both national and global implications. These women have also significantly increased UNICAL's research reputation, securing international grants and publishing in high-impact journals across the health, environmental science, and education fields. Professors Obi and Ntui, in particular, have leveraged their leadership roles to build institutional research capacities. UNICAL's female scholars have been instrumental in pedagogical innovation and mentorship. Professors Obi and Ntui are known for supervising over 60 postgraduate projects comprising master's and doctoral theses, expanding both capacity and quality in graduate programs.

In line with that, there are three very important things: institutional impact, pedagogical innovation, and gender equality. Institutional impact means that female leaders at UNICAL have used administrative authority to initiate structural reforms in governance, research support, and academic programs, leveraging their roles to create sustainable institutional change. Then, pedagogical innovation, namely female lecturers have pioneered curriculum innovation, integrating local context into course design. The

projects they have worked on range from entrepreneurship education to climate change-initiated mathematics teaching and multilingual literacy, all contributing to a more contextual and future-oriented curriculum. Next, gender equality is the coursework, scholarships, and policy advocacy driven by female academics have transformed the university culture, raised awareness of sexual harassment, encouraged mentoring, and enabled women's involvement in governance.

FOSTERING GENDER EQUITY AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE, AND MENTORSHIP

UNICAL has implemented various policies to promote gender equality and protect women's rights within the academic environment. The establishment of the Centre for Gender Studies has facilitated research and advocacy on gender-related issues. Additionally, the university has introduced measures to address sexual harassment and discrimination, fostering a safer and more inclusive campus for all students and staff. The establishment of gender studies programs and the inclusion of women's perspectives in curricula reflect the university's commitment to academic inclusivity. Female faculty members have played key roles in developing courses that address gender issues, promoting awareness and critical thinking among students.

Women leaders at UNICAL have championed gender equity and structural reform. As Vice-Chancellor, Florence Obi spearheaded policies supporting female students and staff, urging active resistance to sexual harassment, launching scholarships for top-performing students (including through her office), and advocating for greater female representation in management. Her leadership at the maiden Association of Female Vice-Chancellors in Nigeria sought to mentor emerging women academics and challenge institutional gender bias. These efforts underscore the importance of representation and mentorship. The appointment of Obi, Ntui, and Braide to top positions at UNICAL and beyond highlights progress in diversifying leadership and embedding gender-conscious policies in Nigerian higher education.

STUDENT ACTIVISM AND LEADERSHIP: THE RISE OF FEMALE VOICES

The rise of female student leaders has marked a significant shift in UNICAL's student governance. Blessing Alim has been a vocal advocate for gender equality and student welfare. Her leadership has inspired increased female participation in student politics and activism. She is a student of Peace and Conflict Studies in the Department of Political Science with a first-class academic standing. She emerged and was sworn in as the first ever female President of the Students' Union Government (SUG) in the history of the university. Calitown News, (2024) She is said to have scored 87 points. Her victory was not just political; it was cultural. It challenged long-held assumptions about gender and leadership, and it demonstrated the power of preparation, excellence, and public trust. Alims, who had previously been involved in non-governmental organizations and a youth advocacy platform named the Young Women Leadership Training Program by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), used her position to champion issues that matter to students, particularly those concerning environmental safety, gender-based violence, and student welfare. She provided buses for students' transportation and awarded a million Naira in Prize money to the best Graduating Student, named Moses Udofia, a student of the Accounting Department, who scored a cumulative Grade Point Average of 4.92/5.00. Emem, (2024) She launched a scholarship program for university students. Female students have also excelled in academic competitions, such as the All-Nigerian Universities Debating Championship, where UNICAL secured second place. These achievements underscore the growing prominence of women in the university's academic and extracurricular activities.

Despite significant progress, women at UNICAL continue to face challenges, including balancing professional responsibilities with societal expectations, limited access to leadership opportunities, and instances of gender-based discrimination. Addressing these issues requires ongoing efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and promote a culture of inclusivity and respect. UNICAL has made notable strides in promoting gender equality, particularly with the appointment of its first female Vice-Chancellor. However, challenges persist nationwide, highlighting the need for continued advocacy and policy

reforms to support women's advancement in academia across the country. To sustain and enhance women's roles in academia, UNICAL should continue to implement mentorship programs, provide leadership training, and promote research opportunities for female scholars. Strengthening partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations can also support initiatives aimed at empowering women and fostering gender equality within the university and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This paper affirms that academic contributions by women extend far beyond classroom instruction; they have significantly shaped UNICAL's research profile, curricular relevance, and institutional inclusivity. Their approach has cultivated cohorts of research-oriented scholars, several of whom now occupy academic and administrative positions. Over the past five decades, women have played a transformative role in shaping the academic landscape of the University of Calabar. Through leadership, research, and activism, they have broken barriers and paved the way for future generations. The continued commitment to gender equality and inclusivity will ensure that UNICAL remains a beacon of progress and empowerment in Nigerian higher education. In retrospect, it is with pleasure that we observe that the University of Calabar has evolved not only as an academic powerhouse but also as a progressive institution where women's contributions are recognized, respected, and celebrated. The current trajectory points to an even brighter future, one where women's leadership is not exceptional but normalized; one where gender equality is not an aspiration but a living reality. The story of women in leadership at UNICAL is a story of transformation. It is a narrative of breaking barriers, of bold vision, and of the enduring belief that when women lead, societies grow stronger. As the university continues to nurture future leaders, it remains a fertile ground for excellence and equality, where both men and women are equipped and empowered to shape the future not only of academia but of the nation at large. In the final analysis, UNICAL's progress in female leadership and inclusivity is not merely a feather in its cap; it is a cornerstone of its legacy. It is an affirmation that true development, be it academic, social, or national, can only be achieved when the talents, voices,

and leadership of women are recognized as essential and irreplaceable. As Nigeria and the world navigate the complexities of the 21st century, UNICAL's example stands tall as a reminder: gender equality in leadership is not a concession; it is a necessity.

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