

From Gown to Town: University Gender Centres, SGBV Response and Gender Equality in Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in higher education across sub-Saharan Africa, where entrenched patriarchal norms, resource constraints, and socio-cultural practices continue to shape institutional cultures, governance and opportunities. In response, Nigerian universities have increasingly established Gender Centres as institutional mechanisms to advance gender equality, prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and mainstream gender perspectives into governance, policies and practice. This study examines the roles, achievements, and challenges of Gender Centres in five Nigerian universities; Federal University Lafia, Moses Orshio Adasu University Makurdi, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Bayero University Kano, and the University of Calabar, supported through the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) Voices from the Halls project. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed, drawing on key informant interviews, focus group discussions with Gender Centre staff, students, and stakeholders, alongside a review of institutional gender policies. Data were analysed thematically to examine institutional development, leadership support, policy influence, resource allocation, empowerment initiatives, community engagement, and SGBV prevention and response. The findings demonstrate that Gender Centres have strengthened institutional responses to SGBV, influenced the development and implementation of gender-responsive policies, and expanded empowerment initiatives for students and staff. Their effectiveness, however, varies according to institutional maturity, leadership commitment, governance arrangements, and the availability of sustainable financing. Common challenges include a culture of silence around SGBV, persistent patriarchal norms, limited institutional autonomy and chronic underfunding, yet Centres have made measurable progress in shifting institutional cultures and extending “Gown to Town” engagement into surrounding communities. The study highlights implications for sustainable financing, survivor-centred programming and stronger institutional accountability and policy enforcement to enhance their long-term effectiveness and sustainability across Nigeria’s higher education landscape.

Keywords: empowerment programming; gender mainstreaming; institutional policy; sexual and gender-based violence; survivor-centred support