Exploring the Methodological Plurality of Feminist Institutionalism for Institutional Gender Analysis

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Abstract: This position paper highlights a new methodological orientation for institutional gender analysis. Drawing on Feminist Institutionalism and relevant feminist approaches, this research proposes a Feminist Institutionalism-Integrated Methodology (FIIM), which can be utilised as a 'two-level' analytical framework: a first-level analysis to analyse formal institutions and a second-level analysis to analyse informal institutions. This research note discusses the value of FIIM for understanding the role of formal and informal institutional arrangements in women's progression to academic leadership and the institutionalisation of gender equity in Nigerian Universities. I argue that the combined insights from the FIIM analytical approach advance existing work on gender equity policies and institutional change. Utilising FIIM for this study revealed a great deal about how dynamics of unequal power relations and resistance to gender equity play out formally and informally within universities. FIIM, therefore, offers a valuable means to analytically assess the state of play of gender relations in formal and informal institutions.

Keywords: Feminist Institutionalism, Feminist Policy Analysis Framework, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Methodology

1. Introduction

The institutional turn has witnessed a growing consensus from feminist scholars on the need for new conceptual tools and methods to explore and understand gendered institutional dynamics (Adams and Smrek 2018; Chappell and Mackay 2020; MacRae and Weiner 2021). Scholars have argued that new approaches, conceptual tools, and methods are needed to provide deeper insights into the gendered modes of interaction and expose how seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are gendered (Kenny 2007, 2009; Lovenduski 2005). As Krook and Squires argued, there is 'no distinctive feminist methodology'; rather, a range of diverse perspectives or feminist positions are often incorporated together (2006, 45). As such, feminist researchers are open to combining traditional positivist tools and methods with interpretive methods (Childs and Krook 2006; Mazur 2004). They also draw on tools and methods from other disciplines (Kenny 2013; Tickner 2005). Given that various methods can be used to answer particular feminist inquiries, feminist research is characterised by methodological pluralism, which allows for a wide-ranging and open-minded approach to methodological issues (Ackerly and True 2013; Childs and Krook 2006: MacRae and Weiner 2021).

The Feminist Institutionalism (FI) approach provides the required theoretical base to take the study of institutions (formal and informal) forward. FI is 'decidedly pluralistic' (Haastrup and Kenny 2016), with scholars drawing on different tools to offer a gendered reading of the interactions and structures of institutions. For institutional gender analysis, the methodological plurality of FI is a real asset. For instance, Ahrens and van der Vleuten (2020) demonstrated how FI could be modified to offer insights into questions specific to the European Union. The authors acknowledged that FI is 'stretched by focusing on potential gendered outcomes' (2020, 294) without compromising the approach's internal integrity (O'Connor 2020). Like Kenny and Mackay (2009) and O'Connor (2020), I maintain that feminist research methods can be modified to emphasise the process and extent of gendering and re-gendering of institutions using the Feminist Institutionalism-Integrated Methodology (FIMM). The following section expands on what this approach involves and why it is an appropriate methodology to translate Feminist Institutionalism as a theoretical perspective into an empirically-oriented research design.

2. Feminist Institutionalism-Integrated Methodology (FIIM)

My idea of a FIIM is a form of methodological pluralism that draws on FI and other feminist approaches. For this study, I utilised the Feminist Policy Analysis Framework and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. On the one hand, I showed how FI is integrated with the Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (FI-FPAF) to analyse *formal* institutions, i.e. gender equity policies. On the other hand, I illustrated how FI is integrated with Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FI-FCDA) to analyse *informal* institutions (norms and practices).

As Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell posited, 'one of the central insights of Feminist Institutionalism is that formal and informal institutions are gendered' (2010, 580). In uncovering how institutions are gendered, FI offers a practical approach to 'understand how formal and informal institutions interact to influence attitudes and behaviour towards women's equality' and how this interaction then shapes the relational space for women (Memusi 2020, 28). By emphasising gender as a category of analysis, FI allows for a better analysis of the gendered nature of formal and informal institutions and the power relations within and across these institutions (Krook 2010). Notwithstanding the significant contributions made by FI, some feminist researchers have found it incapable of providing in-depth insight into inequality, power, and change in a specific context or socio-environments (Findlay 2015). Findlay pointed out that FI exhibits three weaknesses— 'its analysis of power, its conceptualisation of change and agency, and its insular point of reference' (2012, 3). In this study, I did not focus on these weaknesses; instead, I incorporated the FPAF and FCDA perspectives to FI to understand the institutional (formal and informal) gendering process more deeply.

Unlike most works on Feminist Institutionalism, this study advocates for the use of an *integrated* gender lens. This is a unique perspective from other studies that employ FI focusing on institutional change and academic leadership (Bencivenga 2019; Clavero & Galligan 2020; Verge, Ferrer-Fons, and González 2018; O'Connor 2017, 2020; among others). While FI has engaged with other perspectives such as feminist poststructuralist discourse, feminist political economy, and queer theory (Kenny 2007; Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009; Smith 2008; Findlay 2015; Spary 2019); an integrated *FI and FPAF* and *FI and FCDA* perspective employed within the realm of higher education is considered rare. Therefore, a FIIM widens the range of analytical influences for institutional analysis. In the next section, I briefly described the Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (FPAF) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). I illustrated how an integrated FI-FPAF and FI-FCDA approach is utilised in institutional gender analysis.

2.1 Feminist Policy Analysis Framework

Beverly A. McPhail, in her work, 'A feminist policy analysis framework: Through a gendered lens,' designed a model that looks at policies through a gendered lens by posing a series of viable questions to be asked in feminist analysis. The FPAF is grounded in both feminist thoughts and systematic policy research. Thus, it offers a guide— a series of questions- for systematically analysing a policy from a feminist viewpoint (McPhail 2003, 42). An intrinsic feature of FPAF is the assumption and fundamental belief that 'all policies affect women' (Vamos 2009), thus, offering a perfect tool for exploring how policies can serve as a constricting mechanism for women's career progression. McPhail (2003) argued that the framework's underlying objectives include identifying silences, exclusions, and stereotypical assumptions about women embedded in any policy that perpetuates traditional patriarchal oppression. She also emphasised that the focus should be on rectifying any discrimination and exposing its existence in current and future policies by providing examples of how men and women are treated differently; highlighting the implicit stereotypes and expectations of women embedded in policies; and recognising how women's lives and roles are controlled and constrained by policies. McPhail's FPAF presents examples of questions that are asked during policy analysis. This falls under ten constructs—equality, special treatment and protection, myths of gender neutrality, multiple identities, context, language, equality/care and rights/responsibilities question, symbolic vs material reforms, role equity vs role change and power (McPhail 2003, 47).

Scholars such as Kanenberg (2007), Vamos (2009), Royster (2017), and Dhewy (2017) have analysed policies utilising or adapting constructs or questions outlined in the framework. While the FPAF has been used as a single analytical framework, policy analyst and feminist scholars have also integrated it with other frameworks. For example, Nyori-Corbett and Moxley (2017) combined FPAF and the Transnational Feminist framework of policy analysis to assess the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and its re-authorisation, revealing the TVPA's

limitations in addressing the diminished status of poor women in the developing world. Drucza and Rodriguez (2018) integrated Krizsan and Lombardo's (2013) Frame of analysis to the McPhail (2003) FPAF by adapting Krizsan and Lombardo's quality criteria (which focus on both policy content and policy process) as analytical criteria, with selected questions from McPhail (2003) FPAF as research questions.

2.1.1 Utilising Feminist Institutionalism and Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (FI-FPAF) for formal institutional analysis

As described above, FPAF functions as an integrated framework with the FI framework for analytical purposes. Drawing on Drucza and Rodriguez (2018), I employed two essential FI concepts— institutional resistances and gendered power relations— as the analytical criteria and integrated each with appropriate questions from the FPAF. Since I was interested in investigating the persistent underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions, I adapted questions from FPAF that directly align with the FI analytical criteria. The questions from McPhail's (2003) framework that fit the FI analytical criteria were matched together and used to analyse gender policy documents from universities. As Kanenberg's (2007) assessment showed, the FPAF framework is lengthy and time-consuming. Including all of the constructs may not be feasible because some of the constructs often overlap; hence, I selected seven FPAF questions (See Table 1). The set of questions selected to guide the assessment implicates a feminist construction of inequality, silence, and male dominance.

Table 1: FI-FPAF Analytical Strategy for Formal Institutional Dimension

FI concepts	Questions from FPAF (analytical categories)
Institutional Resistance	● Where are the policy silences? What are the problems for women that are denied the status of the problem by others? ● Is the policy defined as 'gender-neutral'? Does the presumed gender neutrality hide the reality of the gendered nature of the problem or solution? ● Is the policy merely symbolic or dies it come with teeth? Are there provisions for funding, enforcement and evaluation?
Gendered Power Relations	● Does the policy defer to gender norms and social traditions that impair women's involvement in academic leadership positions? ● What is the strength of the authority of the agency administering the policy? ● Who has the power to define the problem? What are competing representations? ● How does this policy affect the balance of power? Are there winners and loser? Is a win-win solution a possibility?

Source: Adapted from Drucza and Rodriguez (2018).

Although the FI is useful in assessing specific aspects of women's underrepresentation, it does not fully account for the micro-processes/elements—identifying silence, exclusions, institutional resistance, and power relations in policy documents. FI-FPAF proved useful in explicitly uncovering implicit gendered assumptions, exclusions, and dynamics of unequal power relations embedded in policy documents. It helped expose hidden reflections on power, which act as an important leverage for men's access to power, and those subtle forms of gender biases and limitations for women in policy documents.

The relationship between policy and institutions is critical to understanding visible and invisible ways policies might reproduce or sustain institutional gender inequality, underpinned by policy contents. Crucially, there is a need to understand how, through policy content; women's underrepresentation in academic leadership positions is facilitated. The FPAF upholds many of FI's key themes, proceeding with feminist values of eliminating false dichotomies, the reconceptualisation of power, renaming or redefining reality consistent with women's experiences, and acknowledging that the personal is gendered. The FPAF framework further provides an in-depth examination of how policies affect women. Furthermore, one of the strengths of this framework is its flexibility,

as there is room for adaptation and modification of both the constructs and the specific questions that guide a policy examination (Kanenberg 2007; Vamos 2009).

Integrating both frameworks (FI-FPAF) helped uncover the underlying conceptualisations of power in policy documents and gendered assumptions that underpin gender inequalities interventions in Nigerian universities. The integrating framework assumes a synergistic relationship between the study of institutions and gender policy from FI and Feminist Policy perspectives. Together, these frameworks make gender inequality visible by identifying resisting mechanisms in policy content and contributing to diagnosing ineffective gender policies in Nigeria.

2.2 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Michelle M. Lazer's (2014) work, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Relevance for Current Gender and Language Research,* identified key principles of FCDA, which I integrated with FI. Lazar explained that the major principles of FCDA include: (1) feminist analytical activism; (2) gender as ideological structure and practice; (3) complexity of gender and power relations; (4) discourse in the (de)construction of gender; and (5) critical reflexivity as praxis (Lazar, 2014). A central concern for FCDA is the critical analysis of discourses that sustain a gendered social order where men are accorded male privileges systemically (Lazar 2014, 184).

Lazar (2007) argued that the FCDA advances rich and nuanced analyses of the complex functioning of power and ideology within discourses underpinning hierarchical social arrangements. FCDA examines the 'complex, subtle and not so subtle ways frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts' (Lazar 2014, 182). It stems from the recognition that the issues addressed (with a view to social change) have material and phenomenological implications for groups of women and men in specific communities. This is especially pertinent considering that the operations of gender ideologies and institutionalised power asymmetries between (and among) women and men are complex and intertwined with other social identities that are variable across cultures.

In terms of methodology, FCDA has been utilised increasingly by a diversity of feminist scholars to analyse a range of studies, including women's advancement in academic medicine (Cameron et al. 2020); gender language and STEM education (Parson 2016); sexual harassment in the Japanese political and media worlds (Dalton 2019); migration narratives of dual-career Zimbabwean migrants (Makoni 2013); and the representation of feminism in Estonian print media (Marling 2010). Lazar's collection also provides several examples (see Lazar 2005, 2007, 2014). Some FCDA studies collect and contextualise linguistic data using ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation. In contrast, others undertake close textual analysis of written and spoken discourse to interpret and explain societal structures (Besnier and Philips 2014). FCDA analysis includes meanings overtly expressed in communication and the nuanced, implicit meanings to get into the subtle and contradictory representations of ideological assumptions and power relations in contemporary societies (Lazar 2014).

2.2.1 Utilising Feminist Institutionalism and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FI-FCDA) for Informal institutional analysis

Drawing on Drucza and Rodriguez's (2018) model, I developed an analytical strategy for analysing the interview data. I drafted some sets of questions originating from Lazar's (2014) FCDA principles. These questions were carefully crafted to reflect the core focus of each FCDA principle—feminist analytical activism; gender as ideological structure and practice; the complexity of gender and power relations; discourse in the (de)construction of gender; and critical reflexivity as praxis. These questions unveiled how the 'taken-for-granted social assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, negotiated and contested' (Lazar 2014, 186) through the workings of informal institutions. I made sure the FCDA questions aligned with the FI concepts of institutional resistance, gendered power relations, gendered actors, and the goal the interview data aimed at answering. Table 2 shows specific questions constructed from each FCDA principle and how it aligns with the FI concepts.

Table 2: FI-FCDA Analytical Strategy for Informal Institutional Dimension

FI concepts	Questions constructed from FCDA (analytical categories)	FCDA principles used in constructing questions
Gendered actors	• Presence of a patriarchal social order? • How are oppressive social structures sustained? • How are feminist strategies for resistance and change developed?	*Feminist analytical activism*
Institutional Resistance /stasis	• Presence of a hierarchical relation of domination or subordination? • Presence of hegemonic ideology • Are women subjected to forms of sexism?	*Gender as ideological structure and practice*
	• Is there an awareness of feminist concerns for inclusivity? • Are feminist values used towards non-feminist ends? • Does the opportunities for women participation results in positive institutional change?	*Reflexivity of institutions*
Gendered Power Relations	• Is there a recognised difference between men and women? • Are subtle discursive workings of modern power recognised and accepted? • Does the interest and oppression of women differ in different context? • How do women contend with or restrict social structures and strictures?	*Complexity of gender and power relations*
	• How are the gendered relations of power and gender ideology contested, negotiated, and reproduced implicitly or explicitly? • How is masculinity that restricts potentialities for women entrenched or challenged?	*Role of discourse in the construction and deconstruction of gender*

Source: Model adapted from Drucza and Rodriguez (2018).

According to Clavero and Galligan (2020, 655), 'identifying informal rules and evaluating their role in facilitating and constraining institutional change towards gender equality poses methodological challenges' because informal rules are (mostly) hidden. Carefully designed methodologies are then required to overcome the challenge (Chappell and Waylen 2013). In line with this, I employed FI-FCDA as an integrated approach for examining the workings of gender, power relations, and change in an informal institutional context within Nigerian universities. Using this approach, I make a case for putting the *informal* into broader institutional and discursive frameworks to understand women's continued underrepresentation in academic leadership positions. To improve *informal* institutions' analysis, I integrated gender and informal institutional discourse as a key dimension frequently missing from current institutional analyses. Understanding discursively enacted challenges and lapses in the status quo is a critical analytical concern for FCDA.

While FI enables the identification of informal norms and practices, FCDA helps us understand the workings of these informal norms and practices by creating discourses on institutional gender change. The synergy between discourse and institutions arises from the mutual understanding that routinised behaviour is embedded within institutions, which is a key concern of gender equity and is difficult to change (Spary 2019). It is therefore important to combine an analysis of FI and FCDA to understand informal institutional processes—why some informal institutional norms and practices become embedded in particular institutional contexts— as well as their effects.

Goetz explained that gender-sensitive institutional change is aimed at 'routinising gender-equitable forms of social interaction and challenging the legitimate forms of social organisation discriminating against women' (1997, 2). FI-FCDA not only focuses on institutional norms and cultures but also explores the discursive meanings underpinning informal norms and practices within the universities. Thus, integrating these two approaches (FI and FCDA) yields more significant insights. I found the FI-FCDA helpful in identifying and analysing discourses on informal norms and practices and also to problematise the discursive articulations of gender inequality to understand how institutional gender change is limited. Given that gender norms and informal institutions often remain unperceived as they are naturalised as part of the status quo, FI-FCDA offers a significant advantage in uncovering hidden power relations within informal institutions, which can be challenging to locate when only FI is used.

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a feminist institutionalism-integrated approach (i.e., FI-FPAF and FI-FCDA) could reveal a great deal about how particular gendered meanings and dichotomies play out formally and informally within the universities. In particular, FI-FPAF reveals the implicit construction of gender and dynamics of unequal power relations embedded in policy documents. It provides insights into how formal policies are gendered, highlighting the implicit gendered assumptions, micro-strategies of resistance, hidden reflections on power, and how male dominance is continually perpetuated in gender policy documents. FI-FCDA greatly enriches the informal institutional analysis by illuminating the limits to institutional gender change in different institutional contexts (universities with gender centres alone and universities having gender centres and gender policies in place). It provides an improved understanding of the workings of gender, power relations, and change within an informal institutional context. As highlighted above, the FI-FPAF and FI-FCDA offer a valuable means to analytically assess the state of play of gender relations in formal and informal institutions.

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