

***Investigating the Relationship Between Gender Perception and Women's Representation  
in Higher Education Management and Leadership Positions***

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**Abstract**

Gender issues in management and leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to be a global phenomenon, as well as a significant one in post-Apartheid South Africa. Despite several measures to promote gender equality, women's proportion in management and leadership in HEIs remains low. This mixed methods paper formed part of the larger study which was conducted to understand the dynamic of gender on women's representation in management and leadership positions in HEIs. The research was conducted in two selected universities in South Africa. Self-developed Five-Point Likert Scale questionnaires were used to collect data from 151 of the 289 sampled academic and non-academic respondents. Additionally, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 selected participants from these universities. The qualitative data were analysed thematically, while the quantitative data were analysed using SPSS with Descriptive Statistics, a One-Way Analysis of Variance and a Pearson Correlation Coefficient. The study found a significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) relationship between gender identity and gender perception with a negative correlation ( $-0.180^*$ ). It revealed a significant relationship between gender perception and perception of women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions ( $p = 0.004$ ) with a positive correlation ( $0.360^{**}$ ). The study revealed how gender conceptualisation is embedded in society and determines how women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership is viewed. It found gender as a systematic phenomenon whereby cultural processes undermine the role of women. Notwithstanding, the various interventions from various stakeholders, the study suggested that competency and capability must play a critical role in addressing gender inequality in HEIs.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Perception, Women's Representation, Higher Education, Management and Leadership

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## Introduction and Background to the Study

This study aimed to understand the perspectives of higher education institutions (HEIs) staff members on gender and women's representation in management and leadership. This was to understand the dynamic of gender and gender perception on women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions. Women's representation in management and leadership at higher education remains a global phenomenon as it is embedded in achieving gender equality (Jackson, 2019; Tran & Nguyen, 2020; Aiston & Fo, 2021). Gender equality discourses encompass women's empowerment and have been well-documented among policymakers and academics recently (Pathania, 2017). This is further underpinned by the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 5, which seeks to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, 2020).

Despite the significant increases in the level of participation of women in HEIs, women's representation in management and leadership remains limited, even in more progressive regions globally (Azizi, Abdellatif, Nasrullah, Ali, Ding & Khosa, 2022; Meza-Mejia, Villareal-Garcia & Ortega-Barba, 2023; O'Connor, Carvalho, Vabø & Cardoso, 2015). O'Connor (2020) found that men made up 86% of the heads of universities and 76% of professorial level across Europe. Likewise, across Canadian HEIs, men continue to dominate management and leadership positions (Ornstein, Stewart & Drakich, 2007; Johnson & Howsam, 2020; Cukier, Adamu, Wall-Andrews & Elmi, 2021; Azizi *et al.*, 2022). Several scholars have assessed the influence of numerous demographic factors on representation in management and leadership positions. Cukier *et al.* (2021) explored the demographic composition of academic leaders at Canadian universities, particularly through the lens of race. The study found that despite gender parity being reached at almost half of Canada's universities, there was a limited representation of racial minorities in senior leadership positions (Cukier *et al.*, 2021:570). Additionally, among minorities present in senior leadership positions in HEIs, it was observed that men had more representation than women. It was further highlighted that white women across most Canadian universities were more represented in senior leadership positions than women of colour (Cukier *et al.*, 2021:571-574). This finding is consistent with Johnson and Howsam (2020) who argued that despite the overrepresentation of white men in senior administrative leadership positions at Canadian HEIs, white women seemingly faced fewer barriers in attaining such roles as compared to the minority groups. Across North America's top 50 universities, five of which are situated in Canada, it was found that despite evidence of gender parity in senior leadership positions, women lacked representation in presidency and chancellorship roles (Azizi *et al.*, 2022). Following Hunt (2022) Navas and Siriwato (2024) argued that Canada has the highest proportion of women in its senior civil service and has ensured gender parity in the civil service. While this is a huge achievement, it is not the same in higher education representation. Azizi *et al.* (2022) finding is further supported by Cukier *et al.* (2021) which showed that women only took up 30.7% of presidency positions across Canadian universities, compared to 69.3% representation of men. Islam, Hack-Polay, Rahman, Jantan, Mas and Kordowicz (2023) opined that the situation is the same in Asian universities where the positions of vice-chancellor, deputy chancellor treasurer and registrar are still male-dominated. Likewise, the study of Tran and Nguyen (2020) showed that men are preferred leaders in Vietnamese universities due to unconscious prejudices against women.

Studies have stressed the importance of gender equality in South Africa's HEIs, many of which are shaped by historical injustices which remain persistent (Dunn *et al.*, 2014; Akala &

Divala, 2016; Moodly & Toni, 2017). As far as examining gender (in)equality at HEIs in South Africa is concerned, scholars such as Phakeng (2015); Moodly and Toni (2017); Zulu (2017); Moodly (2021) and Mayekiso (2022) have noted the disproportionate of women in management and leadership positions in HEIs. Moodly (2021) reported the trend in HEIs' leadership in South Africa. Moodly's study reported a positive trend and achievement with 53 per cent of women leading as deputy vice-chancellors within South African educational leadership compared to only 26 per cent in 2013. It however established that despite all the changes in leadership at public universities over the last decade and the aspiration for 50/50 representation of women and men in leadership, only 23 per cent of twenty-six universities in South Africa have women vice-chancellors. The study also found that the percentage jumped from 15.1 per cent because of the two newly appointed vice-chancellors at the University of South Africa and Walter Sisulu University. It further reported a skew in the proportion of women's representation in positions such as operations, transformation, deans, and registrars with most of them being male. Likewise, Mayekiso (2022:10) noted the improvement in women's representation in leadership positions in HEIs but argued that "there are only six female vice-chancellors out of 26 universities." Accordingly, the Female Academics Leaders Fellowship (FALF, 2022) based at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) South Africa reported that less than 5% of Professors are black females. The current study investigated the dynamic of gender and women's representation in higher education management and leadership positions. This was to establish the relationship between gender perception and women's representation in higher education management and leadership. Gender perception is conceived as peoples' perceptions of gender roles and behaviours based on femininity and masculinity traits (Mergaert, van der Heyden, Rimkute & Duarte, 2013) as guided by gender norms. Gender norms are referred to as "informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour based on gender" (Marcus, Harper, Brodbeck & Page, 2015: 3). Gender norms are societal underpinning, as they are imbued in societal norms which determine roles and expectations. Although gender norms might vary from one society to the other, they dictate expected behaviours and roles based on gender within groups and societies. According to Butler (1999), people tend to act or perform gender based on expected behaviours. Likewise, Mutongi (2020) agreed that people are active agents who create and modify roles for themselves.

Marcus et al. (2015) believed that gender norms may not be harmful as they could help in developing life skills. However, it was thought that in practice, gender norms reflect inequality in the distribution of power and resources and thus disadvantage women and girls. In the context of management and leadership positions, gender norms sometimes determine who assumes these positions and therefore manifest gender inequality. Gender norms as supported by social and cultural norms are argued to constitute a major barrier to women's attainment of management and leadership positions (Hanna, Collins., Moyer, Azcona, Bhatt & Valero). It is thought in this present study that attainment of gender equality in HEIs' management and leadership might be impossible without a holistic understanding of how gender is perceived about women's representation in higher education management and leadership. As such, the following questions navigated the study (i) How is gender perceived in the context of management and leadership among HEIs' staff members? (ii) What is the relationship between gender identity and perception among HEIs' staff members? (iii) What is the relationship between gender perception and women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions?

The study aimed to understand the dynamic of gender and gender perception on women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions. The objectives were to:

understand how gender is perceived among HEIs' staff members; establish the relationship between gender identity and perception among HEIs' staff members and establish the relationship between gender perception and women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions. The following two sets of hypotheses guided the study:

- H0: Gender identity exerts no influence on gender perception among higher education staff members
- H1: Gender identity exerts influence on gender perception among higher education staff members
- H0: There is no relationship between gender perception and women's representation in higher education management and leadership
- H1: There is a relationship between gender perception and women's representation in higher education management and leadership

### ***Research Design and Methodology***

The quantitative and qualitative research design and methodology were used to collect data for the study. Survey questionnaires were used to generate quantitative data from the study's respondents. The study employed qualitative interviews to explore the experiences and realities of ten selected participants, this is epistemologically entrenched in seeking to understand participants' viewpoints based on interactions between researchers and participants (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017). The units of analysis in the study were academic and non-academic staff in higher education settings. Two higher education institutions were selected for the study. Emphasis was placed on inclusivity. Hence, women, men and non-binary people were included in the study to ensure that the unique perspectives and voices of people in HEIs were well represented. Two hundred and eighty-nine samples were randomly selected for the study. Five-point Likert Scale survey questionnaires containing seventeen items were developed to measure respondents' perceptions of gender and women's representation in higher education leadership.

### ***Process of Conducting the Study***

The proposal for the study was submitted to the two selected universities for ethical clearance to ensure acceptable ethical research standards (Hasan, Rana, Chowdhury, Dola & Rony, 2021). Subsequently, consent to participate in the study was sought from the participants. Informed consent and the principles of anonymity, no harm, both psychological and social harm, and respect as noted by Ketefian (2015) were strictly followed during the study's implementation. The purpose of the study was highlighted in the consent form, this included how the data would be collected and used (Zong & Matias, 2022). Participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the study at any given time.

Self-developed survey questionnaires were administered to 151 of the 289 selected respondents from the selected universities. Five-point Likert scales were utilised to assess respondents' perceptions of gender and women's representation in HEIs management and leadership. Similarly, data were collected from ten purposefully selected participants in management and or leadership positions who participated in individual face-to-face interviews to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of the phenomenon. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews where participants were presented with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to express their thoughts and opinions (Albudaiwi & Allen, 2018). Interviews were conducted physically and virtually through the Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform. The qualitative data were analysed

using thematic analysis within the compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS with descriptive statistics and One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

## Findings and Discussion

The study sought to understand the relationship between the perception of gender and women’s representation in higher education management and leadership. The research questions that guided the study were answered quantitatively and qualitatively. The demographic information of the participants is shown in Figures 1-4.

### Participants’ Demographic Information

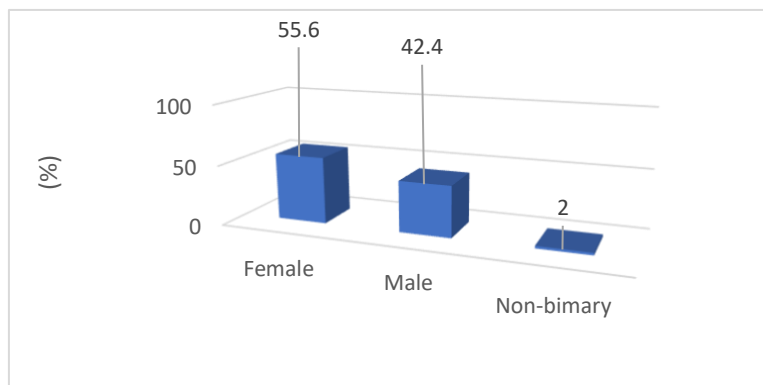


Figure 1: Respondents’ Gender Identity

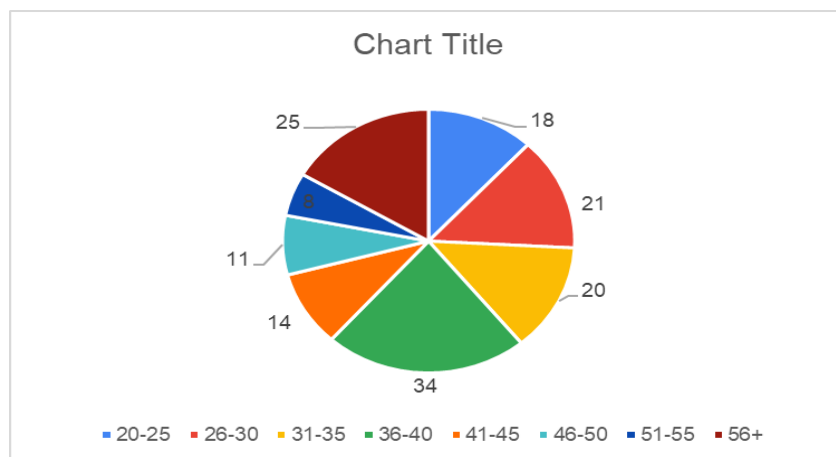


Figure 2: Respondents’ Age Range

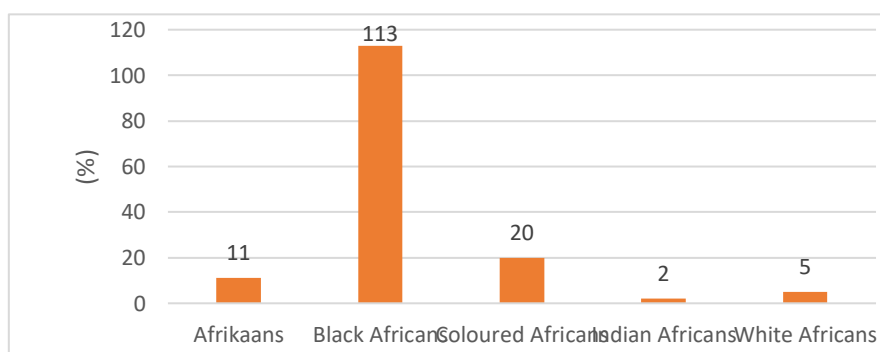


Figure 3: Respondents’ Cultural Background

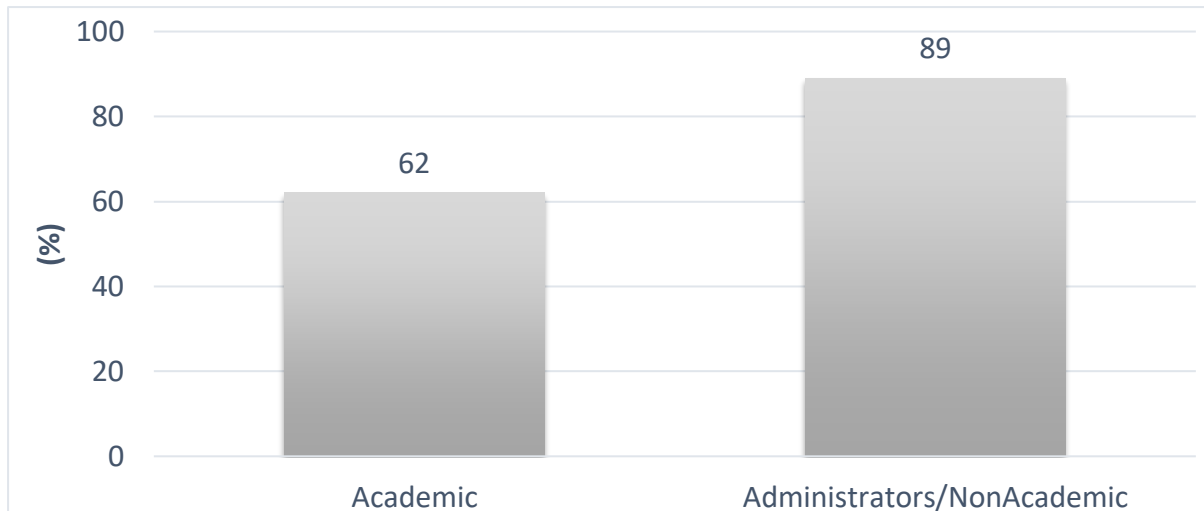


Figure 4: Respondents' Designation

The above figures show that females are the dominant respondents (56.6%) while gender binary is the least (2%). The prominent age group were ages 36-40 (34%) followed by ages 56+ (25%). Among the respondents, the black Africans were the dominant group followed by coloured Africans. The dominant respondents were non-academic/administrative staff members. Out of the respondents, 10 staff members who were in leadership positions were selected to participate in individual face-to-face interviews, four females and six males each. In the next tables (Tables 1-4), the findings of the study are depicted.

**Table 1: Perception of Gender**

S/N	Variable statements	Frequency distribution and percentage in					Mean
		bracket					
1	Women and men are gendered	9 (6.0)	5 (3.3)	22 (14.6)	59 (39.1)	56 (37.0)	3.98
2	Gender is not about being female or male	40 (26.5)	25 (16.6)	22 (14.6)	34 (22.5)	20 (19.9)	2.93
3	Gender categorisation is based on social roles and power relations	25 (16.6)	17 (11.3)	20 (13.2)	50 (33.1)	39 (25.8)	3.40
4	There should be a distinction between what society expects of women and men	41 (27.2)	28 (18.5)	24 (15.9)	27 (17.9)	31 (20.5)	2.86
5	Gender is synonymous with sex	33 (21.9)	21 (13.9)	18 (11.9)	35 (23.2)	44 (29.1)	3.24
6	Gender is an identity and people conform to gender based on culture, norms, and belief systems	14 (9.3)	5 (3.3)	22 (14.6)	67 (44.4)	43 (28.4)	3.79
7	Differences between women and men are the same everywhere	34 (22.5)	45 (29.8)	31 (20.5)	22 (14.6)	19 (12.6)	2.65
8	Gender is created and influenced by society	19 (12.6)	12 (7.9)	18 (11.9)	53 (35.1)	49 (32.5)	3.67
9	Women and men should not be described based on their biological capacities	22 (14.6)	17 (11.3)	18 (11.9)	42 (27.8)	52 (34.4)	3.56

10	While we have people who can identify themselves as female/male, we have people who are different	13 (8.6)	4 (2.6)	17 (11.3)	59 (39.1)	58 (38.4)	3.96
	Overall Mean Total						3.40

Seven out of the ten statements used to measure perception of gender have a mean score of over 3, this means that respondents agreed with the statements. Respondents accordingly believed that:

*Women and men are gendered; gender is an identity and people conform to gender based on culture, norms, and belief systems; gender is created and influenced by society, while we have people who can identify themselves as female/male, we have people who are different.*

Likewise, respondents' scores of below 3.00 in three of the statements showed their disagreement. As such, they disagreed that:

*There should be a distinction between what society expects of women and men; Gender is not about being female or male and Differences between women and men are the same everywhere.*

However, the overall mean score of 3.40 showed that respondents are in the direction of agreeing with how gender is perceived in our society. Gender perception is underpinned by peoples' perceptions of gender roles and behaviours based on femininity and masculinity traits (Mergaert, et al., 2013). Gender perception is guided by gender norms as underpinned by social and cultural norms, although different from one society or group to the other.

**Table 2: Perception of Women's Representation in Management and Leadership**

S/N	Variable statements	Frequency distribution and percentage in bracket					Mean
1	Many women are enthusiastic to lead in higher education management and leadership	4 (2.6)	8 (5.3)	39 (25.8)	65 (43.1)	35 (23.2)	3.79
2	Both women and men still hold intrinsic biases against women's leadership in higher education	5 (3.3)	8 (5.3)	38 (25.2)	64 (42.4)	36 (23.8)	3.78
3	Regardless of their leadership styles, female leaders and managers often confront challenges in terms of public perception of the effectiveness of their leadership	8 (5.3)	11 (7.3)	44 (29.1)	63 (41.7)	25 (16.6)	3.57
4	Women tend to lead differently compared to men	11 (7.3)	13 (8.6)	28 (18.5)	70 (46.4)	29 (19.2)	3.62
5	Women are more accepted and respected in management/leadership positions	24 (25.9)	38 (25.2)	55 (36.4)	22 (14.6)	12 (7.9)	2.74

6	When women are promoted to management/leadership positions they are more likely to perform better than men	14 (9.3)	18 (11.9)	61 (40.4)	39 (25.8)	19 (12.6)	3.21
7	I prefer working under women's management/leadership	6 (4.0)	16 (10.6)	45 (29.8)	62 (41.1)	22 (14.6)	3.25
	Mean Overall Total						3.42

The overall means score of 3.42 in Table 2 showed that the respondents agreed with the statements used to measure the perception of women's representation in management and leadership positions. The response's mean scores showed that many women are enthusiastic to lead. However, despite their *leadership styles and performance while promoted to management and leadership positions, both women and men still hold intrinsic biases against them, and they are not likely to be accepted and respected in management/leadership positions*. The above further reiterated the role of gender norms as supported by social norms which Hanna et al. (2023) presented as the major barriers to women's attainment of management and leadership positions.

**Table 3: Participants' perception of gender and women's representation/leadership**

<i>Perception of Gender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Differences that define men &amp; women, gender typing in expectations (P1M)</i></li> <li><i>Characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed (P5F)</i></li> <li><i>Gender is something which is decided by society (P2M)</i></li> </ul>
<i>Perception of Women's Representation</i> (Challenges and Successes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Men have more of a voice because they measure each other against their titles, so it's gender, title and position of authority (P4F)</i></li> <li><i>We have allowed people to think that when we see a woman, they are, oh, that's affirmative action but when they see incompetent men they don't say anything about that (P7M)</i></li> <li><i>With three women I have worked with, I could see the success, the conducive working environment (P9M)</i></li> </ul>

The statements in Table 3 align with the quantitative responses in Tables 1 and 2. Participants perceived gender *as differences that define men and women, gender typing in expectations (P1M)*. It is also thought that despite women's performance when acquiring management and leadership positions, they are often not accepted. For example, one participant alluded to women's competency and success story, saying: *With three women I have worked with, I could see the success, the conducive working environment (P9 M)*. Other participants echoed the issue of women's non-acceptance and the significance of men's voice and representation in management and leadership, she perceived that men *have more of a voice because they measure each other against their titles, so it's gender, title and position of authority (P4F)*. The above might incline the role of gender norms whereby women's role is undermined.



According to Marcus et al. (2015) gender norms practically reflect inequality in the distribution of power and resources and thus disadvantage women and girls. Next, Table 4 depicts the significance between the mean scores of the respondents using One-Way ANOVA.

**Table 4: Differences between gender perception and women’s representation in HE**

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
GCP1	Between Groups	999,783	2	499,891	13,583	<0.001
	Within Groups	5446,893	148	36,803		
	Total	6446,675	150			
WO-REP	Between Groups	212,098	2	106,049	5,493	<0.004
	Within Groups	2857,478	148	19,307		
	Total	3069,576	150			

Table 4 shows a significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) relationship between gender identity and gender perception. It reveals a significant relationship between gender perception and perception of women’s representation in HEIs’ management and leadership positions ( $p = < 0.004$ ). Consequently, Table 5 depicts the nature of the relationship between the variables using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

**Table 5: Nature of Relationship between the perceptions of gender and women’s representation/leadership**

CORRELATIONS				
		GID	GCP	W-REP
Gender Identity	Pearson Correlation (r) Sig. (2-tailed ) N		-0.180* 0.027 151	-0.195* 0.016 151
Gender Perception	Pearson Correlation (r) Sig. (2-tailed) N	-0.180* 0.027 151		0.360** <0.001 151
Women’s Representation	Pearson Correlation (r) Sig. (2-tailed) N	-0.195* 0.016 151	0.360** <0.001 151	
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)				
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)				

Table 5 shows that gender identity has a negative correlation with gender perception at  $r = -0.185^*$  and Sig. (2-tailed) of  $p = < 0.027$ ; and women’s representation in leadership at  $r = -0.195^*$  and Sig. (2-tailed) of  $p = 0.016$ ). As such, the null hypothesis  $H_0$ : *Gender identity exerts no influence on gender perception among higher education staff members* is accepted

while the alternative hypothesis - H1: *Gender identity exerts influence on gender perception among higher education staff members* is rejected. However, there is a high positive relationship between gender perception and women's representation at  $r = 0.360^{**}$  and Sig. (2-tailed) of  $p = <0.001$ . Subsequently, the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

## **Conclusion**

The study revealed how gender and women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership are perceived. It is thought that despite women's performance and success in management and leadership positions, they are often not accepted. The study revealed how gender conceptualisation is embedded in society and determines how women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership is viewed.

The study showed no direct relationship between gender identity and perception of women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership positions. This means that when one variable increases the other decreases, as such they go in different directions. This implies that being female, male or non-binary exerts no direct influence on how gender is perceived. It also implies that gender identity does not have any direct influence on how women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership is perceived. Whereas gender identity does not directly determine how one perceives women's representation in HEIs' management and leadership, how we perceive gender exerts a direct influence on women's representation. Accordingly, gender perception becomes very significant in ensuring women's representation in higher education management and leadership positions. Furthermore, the study revealed gender norms as a systematic phenomenon whereby cultural processes undermine the role of women. Notwithstanding, the various interventions from various stakeholders, the study suggested that competency and capability must play a critical role in addressing gender inequality in HEIs. It also suggested the reconstruction of gender to have a positive influence on women's representation in HEIs.

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