

# WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY IN AFRICA



*Addressing gender disparity and fostering equity in higher education*

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## **GENDER FOCUSED RESEARCH STRATEGY 2026-2027**

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## ACRONYMS

ACET	African Centre for Economic Transformation
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AGI	Africa Gender Index
AI	Artificial Intelligence
GBV	Gender based violence
GDC	Gender and Diversity Centre
GEWE	Gender equality and women empowerment
GRP	Gender Responsive Pedagogy
HEI	Higher education Institution
MSGIA	Minimum Set of Gender Indicators for Africa
NDS	National Development Strategy
POTRAZ	Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe
RIPGC	Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Centre
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRGBV	School related gender based violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
TFGBV	Technology facilitated gender based violence
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WUA	Women's University in Africa

## 1. Introduction

This document outlines the proposed research agenda on gender focused and women centred research by the Women's University in Africa (WUA). WUA is a multi-disciplinary institution, focusing on fostering gender equality and reducing gender disparity in higher education. The University seeks to reposition itself as the leading innovative research hub for critical gender issues in Zimbabwe, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and beyond, with intention to influence gender informed policy making and practice. This is achieved by mainstreaming gender in university research. Of importance is prioritising research in areas of vital concern to women in Africa. While Africa's scientific output has grown in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in research. Recent analyses estimate that women comprise around one-third of researchers globally and in Africa, and that Africa contributes under 5% of global publications, with persistent authorship and leadership gaps for women in academia. Furthermore, external funding often shapes agendas with limited African ownership. In addition, Africa's share of global publications and gender focused research funding remains disproportionately low.

Rural industrialisation—including value addition, agro-processing, and the growth of inclusive agribusiness ecosystems—is central to Africa's structural transformation. Yet women, who form a large share of the agrifood labour force, face barriers across value chains (land, finance, technology, market access, norms). Evidence consistently shows that closing gender gaps in agrifood systems raises productivity, incomes, and food security. Women and girls remain under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and innovation ecosystems, and gender mainstreaming in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) systems is uneven. These gaps underscore the need for an institutionally anchored, gender-responsive research agenda led from Africa. WUA will prioritise applied, gender-responsive research on women's participation, and benefit-sharing in rural industrialisation pathways, and incubating solutions that address women's needs in health, education, and sustainable agriculture.

Gender equality is a critical milestone to realising progress across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This intersectional and interdisciplinary gender research strategy aims to contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with special focus on Goal 5 (gender equality) and its interaction with Goals 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), and 10 (reduced inequalities) related targets. Additionally, the gender research strategy is also aligned to the Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 6 on people-driven development and women's empowerment), the National Development Strategy (NDS) 2 and Education 5.0 priorities, as well as the WUA Transformational Strategy. Internationalisation and intersectionality shall be cross-cutting issues in the implementation of this strategy.

## 2. Goal and Objectives

This gender focused research strategy aims to generate high-quality, gender-responsive evidence and innovations that inform policy and practice and catalyse inclusive industrialisation and innovation ecosystems in line with Education 5.0, Agenda 2063, and SDGs:

Specifically, the strategy seeks to:

- a) Place gender at the heart of WUA's strategic research direction
- b) Increase gender focused research and innovations output, visibility and impact
- c) Promote an inclusive research agenda



- d) Provide opportunities for research and development in areas of vital concern to women in Africa
- e) Strengthen early career women researchers' capacity in conducting gender focused research
- f) Strengthen women's participation in research, innovation, and industrialization

### 3. Reference Policy Documents

This strategy is subordinate to the University Strategic Plan, and is also guided by the following research-related institutional policies:

- Research Integrity Policy
- Grant Management Policy
- Intellectual Property Policy
- Gender and Diversity Policy

### 4. Key Thematic Research Areas

WUA identified **three** priority gender thematic areas for research outlined below. Some of these are drawn from the domains of the Minimum Set of Gender Indicators for Africa (MSGIA) framework which include: Economic structures, participation in productive activities and access to resources; Health and related services; and Education. The identified themes are broad to accommodate research from all the 3 WUA faculties.

- a) Transformative Education
- b) Improved Health
- c) Sustainable Agriculture

#### THEME 1: TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

It remains critical for research to examine multiple issues at the intersection of education and gender equality including analysing progress toward and persistent challenges to gender equality in and through education. The following sub-themes shall be prioritised:

- i. **Women and Girls' Education Access, Retention, Transition, and Completion:** Despite notable gains, *many women and girls still face the reality of interrupted education*. WUA should invest in research that *maps the stories behind the statistics* - identifying what pushes women and girls out of school and what brings them back. This includes investigating the effects of early marriage, caregiving responsibilities, menstrual health management, and School-related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) **among others**. Special attention can be given to the experiences of women and girls with disabilities, girls in rural areas, refugees, and those living in fragile contexts.
- ii. **Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Inclusive Curricula:** WUA aims to explore how lecturers and teachers are applying Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) in lecture rooms and classrooms, what support they need, and how curricula can do more to reflect the realities of African women and girls and challenge harmful norms. *We will ask: are female students seeing themselves in their learning materials? Are lecture rooms and school environments truly safe and empowering?*
- iii. **Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and School Re-Entry for Young Mothers:** Teen pregnancy remains one of the most cited reasons for school dropout across the continent. WUA can investigate how re-entry policies (e.g. Zimbabwe's Education Amendment Act) are functioning in practice, and what conditions are necessary for young mothers not only to return to school, but to thrive. The aim is to

understand: what makes a school environment genuinely welcoming and supportive for a young mother? Comparative studies can be conducted to explore diverse re-entry frameworks across countries to generate insights for policy and programme reform.

- iv. **Prevention and Response to Higher Education Institution Gender Based Violence, (HEI GBV), SRGBV, and Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV):** SRGBV continues to be a silent barrier to learning. WUA's research aims to prioritise the voices of survivors, map how schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) are addressing violence including online violence, and test innovations such as *student-led safety audits or anonymous reporting tools*. *Rather than focusing solely on what is broken, we can also highlight what is working.*
- v. **Girls' Education in Emergencies and Climate Change Contexts:** From pandemics to droughts and floods, crises are increasingly part of the school experience for many African girls. WUA can explore how these shocks affect women and girls' learning, *what keeps them resilient*, and how education systems can prepare and adapt. Our research can also look at gendered impacts of climate change on education.
- vi. **Gender Budgeting and Education Financing:** *Even the best policies need budgets to come to life.* WUA can also invest in analysing how education resources are allocated and whether they truly reach women and girls most in need. This includes tracking commitments to gender budgeting, exploring alternative financing models, and documenting promising practices in public-private partnerships.
- vii. **Gender equality in Education in Africa scorecards:** There are several scorecards and indices to track progress in gender equality in African education, including the United Nations (UN)'s Africa Gender Index (AGI), the African Centre for Economic Transformation (ACET)'s Women's Inclusion Index, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Data Companion. WUA will be interested in evaluating how Zimbabwe and other countries in the region fare in terms of these scorecards to assess progress as well as challenges that still exist.
- viii. **Girls in STEM, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and School-to-Work Transitions:** WUA's research will seek to understand what it takes to move beyond access to meaningful inclusion in STEM and technical fields. This includes examining gender bias in guidance and counselling, the role of mentors, and industry partnerships that can smooth the school-to-work journey. This may include tracer studies of women and girls' journeys, through education and beyond it.
- ix. **Digital Skills and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Adaptation:** Findings from the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ)'s National Digital Skills audit revealed that there are digital skills gaps especially in advanced digital competences exacerbated by gender, age, and locality (rural/urban). Research can focus on the approaches being undertaken to address these gaps to assess their effectiveness. As HEIs are increasingly using digital tools/platforms and AI, other research can also focus on how these institutions are strengthening capacity or upgrading digital literacy skills and confidence among women and older staff. This will be analysed using the Leave-No-one Behind approach.
- x. **Male engagement for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (GEWE) in Higher Education:** Studies have shown that men should be involved in GEWE initiatives. There are critical gaps in research on GEWE interventions targeting boys and men especially in HEIs. Research can investigate why some men resist changing restrictive gender relationships. Other researches can focus on the different strategies and measures used



in the GEWE interventions targeting men in educational institutions to evaluate their efficiency and identify good practices for replication. Focus can also be on the men's benefits of gender equality progress and the negative consequences of maintaining the status quo for their physical and mental health.

## THEME 2: IMPROVED HEALTH

Under this theme, the following research areas shall be prioritised:

- i. **Gender Responsive Mental Health Prevention and Response:** In recent times there have been increasing cases of suicide cases among school going children as well as university students. Drug and substance abuse, GBV, and school pressures are said to be among contributing factors. It is critical to interrogate, from a gender perspective, how education systems and institutions are supporting or can better support students and staff deal with mental health issues within and beyond the learning environment.
- ii. **Digital Health Interventions:** Digital health interventions including using artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly recognised as vital tools for enhancing health information and services. Research can focus on digital health or AI innovations on women and children's health to explore their accessibility and effectiveness in the Zimbabwean and African context.
- iii. **Reproductive Health:** In recent years, there has been a surge in cases of uterine fibroids in within and beyond Zimbabwe. However, despite affecting millions of women, uterine fibroids remain severely under-researched. Research can focus on the factors behind this surge as well as the efficacy of medical and indigenous responses to this.

## THEME 3: SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Agriculture faces formidable challenges; from increased food demand to climate change impacts. Closing these gender gaps is beneficial not only for women and men, but also agriculture. Some of the research in the field of agriculture can look at the following:

- i. **Innovation and Indigenous agricultural knowledge systems:** There is realization of the importance of indigenous agricultural knowledge systems in enhancing food security. Research can examine the role of women in innovative indigenous agricultural knowledge systems and skills development for improved economic, health, social outcomes, as well as sustainable livelihoods.
- ii. **Participation of women in Agribusiness value chains:** Gender inequalities in value chains remain significant though they vary by value chain type. While research and practice have shifted to include a focus on restrictive gender norms and gender transformative approaches that engage with both men and women, data on gender relations beyond the primary agricultural sector is scarce, which hinders the tracking of changes in gender relations and in value chains over time and across contexts as well as on intersecting forms of inequalities and their impacts on value chain performance. WUA could look at this area as well as interrogate the gendered patterns of participation and benefits in different value chains and different nodes such as processing, trade, and transport. Through participatory action research, focus could also be on the Milk Goat Pass on research project aimed at increasing rural women and youth's participation in innovation an industrialisation through converting excess goat milk into value-added products.
- iii. **Technology Adoption:** Current literature confirms well-documented gender disparities in technology adoption across African agriculture, yet critical knowledge gaps remain. Technologies such as AI-enabled decision tools are increasingly being promoted in African agriculture, yet often without gender analysis. While research suggests that men and

women adopt agricultural technologies differently, there is still insufficient context-specific evidence explaining why these differences occur especially from an intersectionality perspective. Research can also focus on gender-responsive design of digital agriculture platforms, especially how women actually interact with mobile apps, AI systems, and extension tools. Research can further evaluate how women engage with advanced technologies, or how AI tools can be co-designed to enhance women's adoption and trust. Longitudinal studies can also be done to assess policy outcomes and identify which policy levers produce measurable improvements in women's technology adoption.

- iv. **Gender and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA):** Women dominate informal cross-border trade, yet they remain largely excluded from decision-making spaces, trade governance structures, and formal mechanisms shaping AfCFTA implementation. Lack of awareness of AfCFTA provisions, market opportunities, and compliance procedures, limits their participation. Potential research areas at the intersection of gender, the AfCFTA, and sustainable agriculture may include examining how trade liberalisation affects women's access to agricultural markets, finance, and cross-border value chains; exploring how women farmers and agripreneurs can leverage AfCFTA-driven regional value chains for increased competitiveness. Other research can focus on assessing the impact of non-tariff barriers and informal trade policies on women's participation in cross-border agricultural trade; or evaluating the role of women's cooperatives in scaling sustainable agricultural production in the region.
- v. **Gender and food safety:** Research in Africa shows limited gender-disaggregated data on food safety risks along value chains, making it difficult to understand how hazards differently affect women, men, and youth. Often, studies tend to focus on household food security rather than food safety, leaving an opportunity to explore how gender roles in production, processing, vending, and caregiving shape exposure to contaminants and unsafe environments. In addition, research may seek to address the intersectional vulnerabilities of rural women, female informal traders, and small-scale processors, who experience disproportionate risk to negative food safety outcomes but remain understudied.

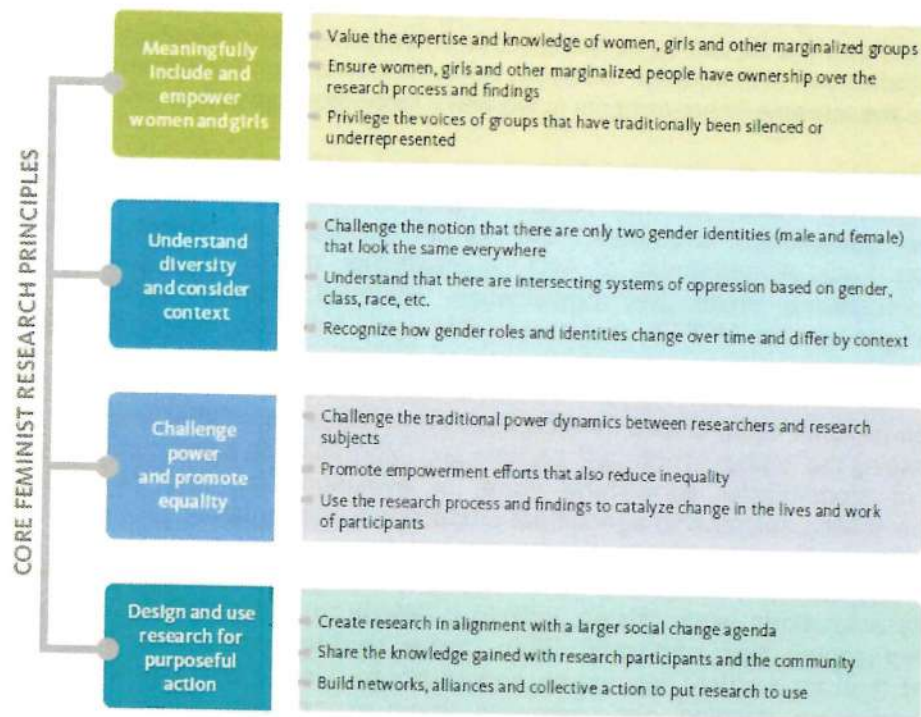
#### 5. Gender Research Fund

30% of the annual University Research Fund shall be allocated to facilitate implementation of this strategy as well as soliciting for additional funds through submitting research grant proposals to possible funders and partnerships.

#### 6. Capacity Building

WUA notes the need for accelerating the building of a critical mass of gender research capacity. Therefore, the university, through the Gender & Diversity Centre and the Research, Innovation & Postgraduate Centre, will facilitate regular training workshops to address this gap. This will include orienting researchers, especially early career women researchers, to participatory methodologies and core feminist research principles (see graphic below) that drive gender-transformative change. This research capacity strengthening efforts are also critical as they contribute to improved knowledge among researchers.





Source: [https://drc-crdi.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/using\\_research\\_for\\_gender-transformative\\_change.pdf](https://drc-crdi.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/using_research_for_gender-transformative_change.pdf)

## 7. Strategic/Collaborative Partnerships

This strategy promotes gender research collaborations with civil society organisations, regional and international gender scholars and institutes for knowledge generation and sharing.

## 8. Outputs

The following are the tangible knowledge products and platforms expected from implementing the strategy:

- Training workshops on gender-responsive and feminist research methodologies.
- Mentorship programmes supporting women researchers.
- Gender research seminars
- Peer reviewed publications uploaded to the institutional repository
- Conference papers and presentations (local, regional, international)
- Policy Briefs
- Research Bulletin including published and research in progress
- Policy dialogue and roundtable meetings
- Position papers on priority gender issues
- Commercialisable innovations (tools, models, solutions, etc)
- Models and frameworks for gender-responsive education, health, and agriculture research
- Prototypes addressing gendered needs in education, health and agriculture
- Research-based rural Industrialisation projects

## 9. Outcomes

This gender focused research strategy seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increased volume, quality, and influence of gender-focused research produced by WUA.
- Strengthened participation of women in research, innovation, and industrialisation aligned to Education 5.0.
- Expanded gender-responsive innovations (prototypes, pilots, policy models) addressing priority needs in education, health, and agriculture, with rural industrialisation pathways.
- Stronger partnerships and sustainable financing for gender research and innovation with African and global actors.
- Improved gender-responsive research capacity and data systems for evidence-based decision-making.
- Increased proportion of the WUA Research Fund dedicated to gender research.



### 10. MONITORING AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORK


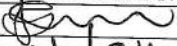
IMPACT	INDICATORS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY
<p>To be recognised as an institution that generates high-quality, gender-responsive evidence and innovations that inform policy and practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of gender focused research conducted</li> <li>• Number of gender focused research outputs in multiple formats</li> <li>• Availability and accessibility of gender focused research in different formats</li> <li>• Use of produced gender focused research in decision making by different audiences</li> <li>• Number of gender research training sessions conducted</li> <li>• Number of gender research workshops, seminars and conferences held or participated in</li> <li>• Number of gender research grants and consultancies applied for and won</li> <li>• Number of WUA female-led research &amp; innovations</li> <li>• Number of early career women researchers supported through mentorship and research grants</li> <li>• Number of regional and international research collaborations</li> <li>• Number of rural industrialisation pilots created with women</li> </ul>	<p>Faculties, RIPGC, GDC, and library's institutional repository</p>	<p>Bi-annual</p>



## 11. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
Management	Management holds overall accountability for this Strategy and its implementation including availing resources to support its implementation.
Research Board	The Research Board shall be responsible for reviewing and approving research proposals, ensuring they meet gender-focus or gender-responsiveness requirements.
Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Centre (RIPGC)	RIPGC shall ensure that research systems, training, and processes support the Gender-Focused Research Strategy.
Gender and Diversity Centre (GDC)	The GDC shall monitor and report on the implementation of the Strategy. They will also review research proposals for gender responsiveness, and facilitate training in gender focused research.

## 12. DOCUMENT VERSION MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Document Name	Gender Focused Research Strategy	
Version Reference	1.0	
Document Owner	Gender and Diversity Centre	
Approved by		
Date of Approval	21/04/26	
Review Date		

