

# International Women's Day 2025

## *Accelerate Action: Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education*

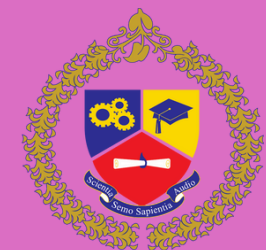


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**Keynote Address on the Occasion of 2025 International Women's Day Celebration**  
**The Women in Higher Education Network (WoHEN)**



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Science | Technology | Medicine



## International Women's Day



International Women's Day (IWD) is

**Celebrated annually on March 8th.**

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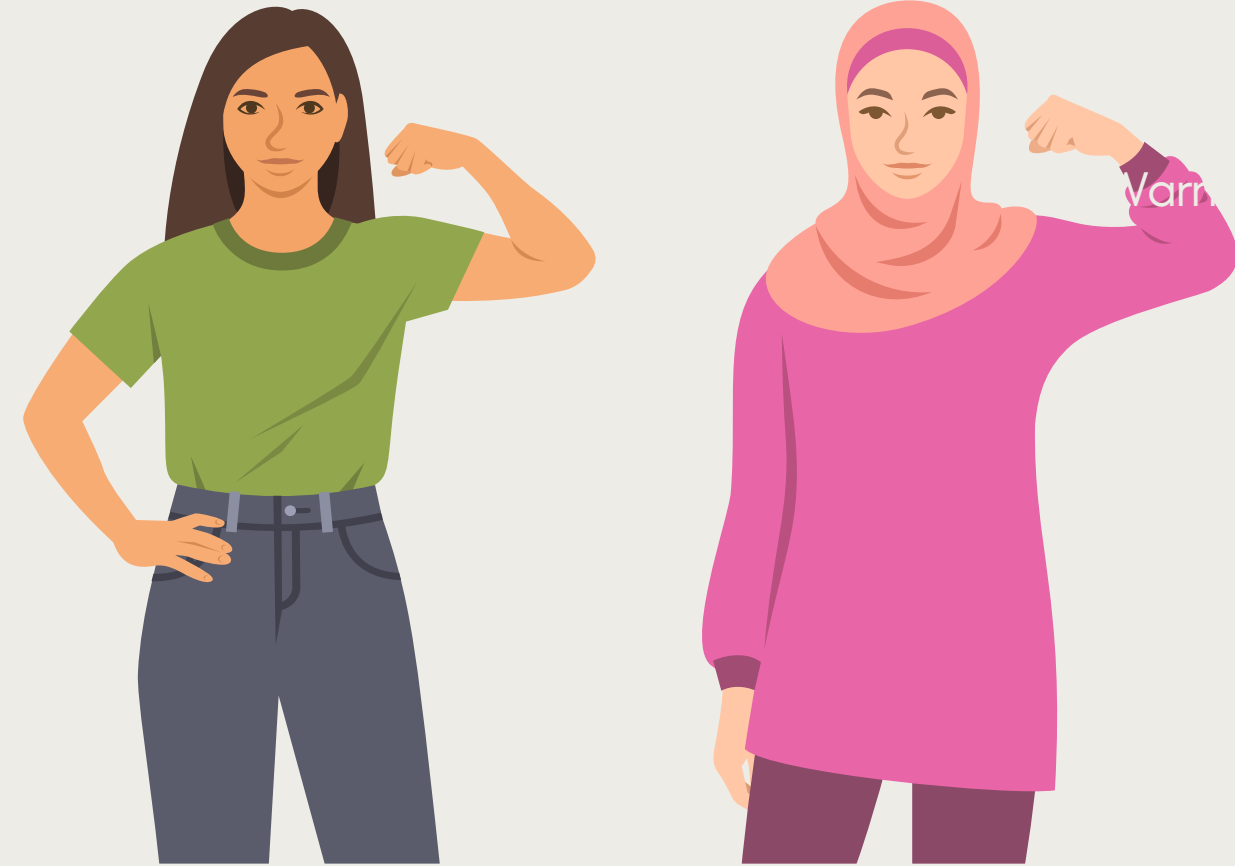
Originating from early 20th-century labor movements, it has evolved into a global celebration

**Of women's social, economic, cultural, and political achievements.**



# The Theme of International Women's Day 2025

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- According to the World Economic Forum (2024), it will take until 2158, which is roughly five generations from now, to reach full gender parity at the current rate of progress
- This year's Theme, "**Accelerate Action**" is focusing on the need to Accelerate Action and emphasizes the importance of taking swift and decisive steps to achieve gender equality. It calls for increased momentum and urgency in addressing the systemic barriers and biases that women face, both in personal and professional spheres.

The theme for International Women's Day 2025 is

## Accelerate Action

Calling on us all to collectively, accelerate Action for gender equality



# African HigherEd (Universities) Leadership: The uncomfortable Truth

A report by Education Sub-Sahara Africa (in collaboration with AAU)  
Only **two and a half percent** of vice-chancellors across Africa are women,  
and just five percent of CEOs are female

- Women constitute less than 20% of vice-chancellors across African universities
- STEM female enrollment remains below 30% continent-wide
- Research funding distributions show persistent gender gaps
- Sexual harassment remains significantly underreported and underpunished

These aren't just statistics. They represent talent unrealized and voices unheard.



# Outline

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1. The Current Landscape
2. Redefining Success in Gender Equality
3. The Need for Acceleration
4. Five Pillars of Acceleration
5. A Call to Action
6. Conclusion

# The Current Landscape: Progress and Persistent Challenges

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Let us begin by taking stock of where we stand. Across the African continent, we have witnessed significant progress in female participation in higher education over the past decade. In several countries, we have seen enrollment parity at the undergraduate level, with some nations even reporting higher female enrollment rates. This represents a remarkable shift from where we stood just a generation ago.

Yet, these headline figures mask persistent disparities:

- While undergraduate enrollment has improved, representation decreases dramatically at postgraduate levels, particularly in doctoral programs
- Women remain significantly underrepresented in STEM disciplines, where enrollment rates often hover below 30%
- The percentage of women in senior academic and leadership positions remains disproportionately low, with women constituting less than 20% of vice-chancellors and presidents across African universities
- Research funding and recognition continue to be unevenly distributed, with female academics receiving fewer grants and citations

These statistics represent more than numbers—they reflect systemic barriers that continue to hinder the full participation and advancement of women in our institutions. They reflect the persistence of stereotypes, biases, and structural impediments that we must address with greater urgency and determination.

# Beyond Access: Redefining Success in Gender Equality

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For too long, our conversations about gender equality in higher education have focused predominantly on access. While access is fundamental, true equality extends far beyond enrollment figures. It encompasses:

- The quality of experience within our institutions
- Opportunities for advancement and leadership
- Recognition and reward for contributions
- Influence in shaping institutional cultures and policies
- The ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities without penalty

When we expand our definition in this way, we acknowledge that achieving gender equality requires comprehensive transformation across multiple dimensions of academic life. It requires us to examine and reform the very structures, policies, and cultural norms that have historically defined our institutions.

# The Imperative for Acceleration

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Today, I want to emphasize that incremental progress is no longer sufficient. The time has come to accelerate our actions. This imperative arises from several critical factors:

- **First, talent cannot wait:** Every year that we delay meaningful action, we lose the potential contributions of countless brilliant women whose insights and innovations could be advancing knowledge and addressing our continent's most pressing challenges.
- **Second, our students deserve better:** Young women entering our institutions today should not have to face the same barriers that previous generations encountered. They deserve to see themselves represented at all levels of academic life and to study in environments that affirm their potential and ambitions.
- **Third, our societies need transformation:** Universities have always been catalysts for social change. As we seek to build more equitable societies across Africa, our institutions must model the changes we wish to see in the broader community.
- **Finally, competition demands it:** In an increasingly global higher education landscape, those institutions that effectively harness the talents of all their members will ultimately outperform those that fail to do so.



# Five Pillars for Accelerated Action

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I propose that we structure our accelerated efforts around five key pillars:

1. Institutional Leadership and Accountability
2. Transforming Academic Culture
3. Creating Enabling Environments
4. Targeted Interventions in STEM and Leadership
5. Research and Knowledge Production

# Pillar 1: Institutional Leadership and Accountability

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Without accountability, we risk perpetuating a cycle of good intentions without meaningful outcomes. Let us move from rhetoric to measurable commitment.

- Meaningful change begins with committed leadership. This means:
- Establishing clear, measurable targets for gender equality at all levels
- Creating transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms
- Embedding gender equality in strategic planning and resource allocation
- Holding leadership accountable for progress
- Implementing gender-responsive budgeting

# Pillar 2: Transforming Academic Culture

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The cultures within our institutions often perpetuate inequalities through unwritten rules, expectations, and practices. Transformation requires:

- Addressing implicit biases through ongoing training and awareness
- Rethinking evaluation criteria that may disadvantage women
- Creating mentorship programs specifically designed to support female academics
- Establishing networks that amplify women's voices and contributions
- Challenging harmful traditions and practices that marginalize women

Culture change is perhaps the most challenging aspect of our work, but it is also the most fundamental. Without it, structural changes remain hollow.

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# Pillar 3: Creating Enabling Environments

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Women face unique challenges in balancing professional demands with societal expectations. Enabling environments include:

- Flexible work arrangements that accommodate family responsibilities
- Adequate parental leave policies for both women and men
- Childcare facilities on campus
- Programs that support re-entry after career breaks
- Measures to prevent and address sexual harassment and gender-based violence

These provisions are not special accommodations but essential components of truly inclusive institutions.

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# Pillar 4: Targeted Interventions in STEM and Leadership

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Some areas require particularly focused efforts:

- Scholarships and financial support for women in underrepresented fields
- Leadership development programs for mid-career female academics
- Recruitment targets for senior positions
- Research support specifically designed to address gender disparities
- Recognition programs that highlight female achievement

While we work toward systemic change, these targeted interventions can help address immediate gaps.

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# Pillar 5: Research and Knowledge Production

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Finally, we must enhance our understanding of the complex factors that perpetuate inequality:

- Supporting research on gender dynamics in African higher education
- Documenting and sharing successful interventions across institutions
- Developing context-specific approaches rather than importing models uncritically
- Using data to inform policy and practice
- Creating platforms for dialogue and knowledge exchange

Better knowledge leads to more effective action.

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# A Call to Action

## From Individual Institutions to Collective Movement

- First we must recognise that the challenges we face cannot be addressed by individual institutions working in isolation. We need coordinated efforts that leverage our collective strengths and resources. This is where networks like WoHEN play a crucial role.

I CALL UPON ALL INSTITUTIONS REPRESENTED HERE TODAY TO:

01

Share successful practices and innovations

02

Establish peer learning and support mechanisms

03

Develop joint initiatives and programs

04

Speak with a unified voice on policy matters

05

Hold each other accountable for progress

Through collaboration, we can accelerate the pace of change across the continent.



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# A Personal Commitment



- Before I conclude, I want to share a personal commitment.
  - Throughout my career, I have benefited from the courage and determination of women who came before me—those who opened doors that were previously closed, who challenged norms that limited women's potential, and who created spaces where I could thrive.
  - I commit to continuing this legacy by actively mentoring the next generation of female academics, by using my position to advocate for systemic change, and by being transparent about both my successes and struggles. I invite each of you to make a similar commitment—to be not just beneficiaries of progress but also its architects.





# Accelerate Action: Call for Personal Commitment



International  
Women's Day

- As leaders, what will be your legacy? I therefore invite distinguished colleagues to commit to:
  - Actively mentor the next generation
  - Use your position to advocate for systemic change
  - Be transparent about successes and struggles
  - Commit to specific actions by specific dates
  - Be the architect of progress, not just its beneficiary





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## Conclusion: The Journey Ahead

- Distinguished colleagues, the journey toward gender equality in African higher education is neither simple nor short. It requires sustained commitment, courage to challenge entrenched systems, and willingness to reimagine our institutions.
- But the potential rewards are immense. When we succeed in creating truly inclusive institutions, we not only enhance the lives and careers of women; we enhance the quality and impact of our universities as a whole. We strengthen our capacity to address complex challenges. We better serve our students and communities.
- On this International Women's Day, let us move beyond celebration to acceleration. Let us commit to specific, measurable actions that will transform our institutions. Let us hold ourselves and each other accountable for progress.
- The time for incremental change has passed. The moment for bold, transformative action is now.





# Accelerate Action



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