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## Professional Ethics, Moral Standards, and the Workplace Experiences of Female Secretaries in Higher Education

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### Abstract

The clerical and administrative cadre that sustains the routine operations of contemporary universities occupies a position of substantial practical importance yet limited scholarly visibility. This review interrogates the ethical, moral, and lived occupational dimensions that shape the labour of women employed in supportive administrative capacities across institutions of tertiary learning. Drawing on four decades of organisational sociology, feminist scholarship, and applied ethics, the discussion synthesises classical theoretical traditions—Kantian deontology, Aristotelian virtue ethics, care ethics, and integrative social contracts theory—with empirical findings from gender and organisation studies. The paper traces how bureaucratic structures, embedded patriarchal assumptions, and the symbolic gendering of administrative competence converge to produce distinctive ethical pressures and identity constraints upon women in these roles. Particular attention is given to confidentiality obligations, emotional labour, the management of asymmetric authority relations with

academic principals, and the systemic risk of sexualised mistreatment. The review also examines mobility patterns, professional identity formation, and the institutional architectures that either protect or disenfranchise this workforce, with comparative attention to African and global Northern contexts. Findings indicate that prevailing codes of conduct, while formally egalitarian, often fail to address structural asymmetries that disadvantage administrative women, and that meaningful reform requires intersectional, context-sensitive, and participatory governance. The analysis advances a moral economy framework in which administrative women are positioned as ethical agents whose dignity, voice, and career flourishing are constitutive of any genuinely equitable academy. Theoretical, policy, and methodological implications are offered for university leadership, human resource practitioners, and researchers committed to advancing equity in tertiary environments, alongside productive directions for further empirical inquiry.

**Keywords:** administrative labour, gender equity, organisational ethics, tertiary institutions, professional identity, workplace harassment

### 1. Introduction

The university, as a sociologically distinctive workplace, has long been the focus of normative scrutiny concerning the conditions under which knowledge is produced, transmitted, and stewarded (Macfarlane, 2004). Beneath the visible professoriate and the institutional leadership cadre, however, a far less examined population of administrative workers carries out the routine but indispensable labour that holds these organisations together. Within this stratum, women constitute a numerical majority, occupying clerical, executive-support, and registry-related positions whose ethical complexity has historically been understated in scholarship on higher education and on professional ethics more broadly (Pringle, 1988). The present review undertakes a synthesis of this neglected terrain, locating the moral, behavioural, and experiential dimensions of these workers' professional lives within the wider corpus of writing on gender, organisations, and ethical practice.

Existing accounts of professional ethics within tertiary institutions have tended to centre academic staff and senior administrators, treating the support cadre as an unremarked background condition. Yet the women who staff administrative offices routinely handle confidential disciplinary records, financial information, sensitive correspondence, and the personal disclosures of students and faculty. The custodianship of such information demands not merely competent performance but a settled disposition of integrity, prudence, and discretion (Macfarlane, 2009).

Without explicit consideration of these obligations, models of institutional ethics risk treating subordinate workers as ethically incidental instruments of higher decisional authority rather than reasoning moral agents in their own right.

Concurrently, the workplace experiences of these women cannot be detached from the deeply gendered structuring of organisations themselves (Acker, 1990). The clerical workforce of universities has been historically feminised both numerically and symbolically, and these gendering shapes the kinds of authority that may be exercised, the routes of advancement that remain available, and the forms of mistreatment that are encountered (Kanter, 1977). Empirical scholarship on the rationalisation of the office, and on the symbolic association between secretarial competence and a kind of personalised, affective devotion to a principal, has shown that the very job category emerged in tandem with assumptions about feminine deference and emotional availability (Truss, 1993).

The discharge of these duties places significant emotional and ethical demands upon women that are not adequately captured by conventional descriptions of clerical labour. Sustained interaction with stressed students, anxious parents, and demanding senior colleagues entails what scholars of service work have characterised as emotional labour: the disciplined management of one's own feelings to produce a publicly observable demeanour appropriate to the institution's expectations (Hochschild, 1983). When the asymmetric power relations between principal and assistant are added to this affective burden, the resulting environment becomes one in which boundary violations, including sexualised mistreatment, can be normalised, minimised, or rendered organisationally invisible (Berdahl, 2007).

These dynamics are not confined to any single geographical context. African scholarship has begun to address them with comparable seriousness, noting that the post-colonial expansion of higher education has not been accompanied by commensurate transformation in the gender architecture of campus administration (Mama, 2003). Across Nigerian universities in particular, administrative women encounter culturally inflected expectations regarding deference, propriety, and acquiescence that complicate any straightforward application of imported codes of professional conduct.

The contribution of this review is fourfold. First, it consolidates theoretically dispersed traditions in applied ethics and feminist organisation theory into a coherent analytic frame applicable to the administrative cadre. Second, it examines the empirical evidence on the moral dilemmas these women routinely face, with particular attention to confidentiality, loyalty, and reporting obligations. Third, it situates their lived experiences within institutional structures that are simultaneously formal—policy, statute, and code—and informal: custom, climate, and expectation. Fourth, it identifies the policy and governance reforms most likely to enhance both ethical conduct and substantive equity within tertiary administrative environments.

By aggregating insights from sociology, applied ethics, gender studies, and higher education policy, this paper seeks to remedy the marginal status accorded to this workforce in the existing scholarship. The dignity of work and the protection of those who perform it are not peripheral concerns to the moral life of the university; they constitute its day-to-day enactment. Where institutional rhetoric concerning ethical leadership and equality fails to penetrate the

administrative substrate of the organisation, that rhetoric remains a polished surface beneath which much that is morally consequential goes unaddressed.

The argument proceeds in seven substantive parts following this introduction and its subsidiary problem-framing sections. The paper articulates a conceptual foundation drawing together the moral theories most pertinent to the discussion; traces the historical gendering of clerical labour; analyses the specific ethical demands occasioned by access to confidential information; reviews the empirical patterning of harassment and discrimination; examines trajectories of professional identity formation and career advancement; and interrogates the policy architectures within which all of these dynamics are produced. A concluding reflection consolidates the principal arguments and identifies productive avenues for further empirical, theoretical, and policy-oriented inquiry.

### 1.1. Background to the Study

The administrative offices of contemporary universities have evolved across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from comparatively small clerical pools into elaborate networks of registries, faculty offices, departmental secretariats, and executive support functions that increasingly underwrite the institution's capacity to function. Across the Anglophone and Francophone academic worlds, and in the post-colonial higher education systems of sub-Saharan Africa, the great majority of these positions are occupied by women, in many institutions reaching proportions of seventy to ninety per cent of the support workforce (Bagilhole, 2002). Despite this demographic preponderance, the conditions of their work have been substantially under-theorised relative to those of academic staff.

Comparative African scholarship on women in tertiary institutions has documented patterns of recruitment, retention, and advancement that demonstrate persistent inequities even where formal equal opportunity policies are in place. Studies based on Ghanaian public universities have shown that women administrators experience disproportionate workloads, slower promotion trajectories, and limited representation on the deliberative committees that shape institutional decision-making (Adusah-Karikari, 2008). Analogous research in Cameroon has identified comparable patterns alongside cultural pressures that constrain women's assertiveness and discourage formal grievance procedures (Endeley & Ngaling, 2007).

Within Nigerian higher education specifically, the administrative cadre absorbs much of the friction generated by chronic resource constraints, rising student numbers, and the bureaucratic burden of compliance with regulatory authorities. Female secretaries, registrars' clerks, and faculty office staff often serve as the principal interface between the institution and its stakeholders, mediating relationships in conditions that are emotionally demanding, materially under-resourced, and frequently sexualised. These contextual realities establish the background against which the ethical and experiential analysis offered in subsequent sections of this paper must be situated, and they justify the sustained attention this review now affords them.

### 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the indispensability of the administrative cadre to the daily functioning of the university, scholarly engagement with the moral and occupational world of women in supportive roles remains thin, fragmented, and

uneven across disciplinary boundaries. Investigations of professional ethics in higher education have concentrated almost exclusively on teaching, supervision, research conduct, and the leadership obligations of senior officers, leaving the obligations and vulnerabilities of administrative staff at the margins of normative inquiry. The literature on gender and work, on the other hand, has produced rich analyses of harassment, segregation, and emotional labour, but has only intermittently brought these analyses to bear on tertiary education specifically and on its substantial body of female support workers in particular.

This division of intellectual labour has produced a problem of consequence. Codes of conduct adopted by universities frequently treat the support workforce as ethically passive—bound to confidentiality and procedural compliance, yet seldom recognised as moral agents whose judgement, formation, and protection require systematic attention. Where harassment policies do address administrative women, they tend to do so through generic complaint procedures that fail to acknowledge the asymmetric authority structures within which these women operate. Where career architectures formalise advancement, the routes available to administrative staff are typically narrow, opaque, and disconnected from the meritocratic narratives that shape the academic estate of the institution.

The practical consequence is a workforce whose ethical demands are routinely complex but whose ethical recognition is comparatively weak, and whose lived experience of harassment, mobility constraint, and identity strain is documented anecdotally far more often than it is examined analytically. A focused review is therefore required to consolidate available evidence, identify enduring gaps, and inform an agenda for institutional reform that takes the dignity, voice, and developmental needs of these workers seriously as constitutive members of the higher education community.

### 1.3. Significance of the Study

The significance of an integrative review of this kind is multifaceted and operates at the theoretical, practical, and policy levels of analysis. Theoretically, the synthesis offered here contributes to the ongoing refinement of organisational ethics by demonstrating that any adequate account of moral life in the academic workplace must extend below the level of the professoriate to encompass the obligations, vulnerabilities, and agency of the administrative cadre. The classical theoretical traditions in applied ethics, alongside contemporary care ethics and feminist organisational theory, gain explanatory traction when they are deliberately applied to a workforce that has historically been overlooked, and the resulting analytic apparatus is of value beyond the immediate domain of higher education.

Practically, the review yields insights that are directly relevant to those responsible for the day-to-day administration of universities, including registrars, faculty officers, human resources personnel, and the senior leadership of the institution. By identifying the recurrent moral dilemmas faced by administrative women, by exposing the operational mechanisms through which harassment and discrimination are sustained, and by surveying the comparative evidence on protective and developmental policies, the analysis equips practitioners with a clearer understanding of where intervention is required and what forms intervention should plausibly take.

At the policy level, the review provides a basis upon which regulatory authorities and institutional governance bodies can revisit existing codes of conduct, harassment frameworks, and career architectures. Particularly in the African higher education context, where these instruments are often inherited from external models or adopted formally without commensurate cultural translation, the review offers a context-sensitive resource for indigenous reform. Cumulatively, then, the work undertaken here is of significance to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with the constitution of equitable, dignified, and ethically defensible higher education institutions.

### 1.4. Aim, Objectives, and Scope of the Review

The principal aim of this review is to synthesise the dispersed scholarly literature on professional ethics, moral standards, and gendered occupational experience as these intersect within the administrative tier of contemporary higher education, and to derive from that synthesis a framework that is theoretically coherent and practically actionable.

In pursuit of this aim, the review pursues six specific objectives. The first is to consolidate the principal theoretical traditions in applied ethics—deontological, consequentialist, virtue-based, care-oriented, and contract-theoretic—and to elaborate their pertinence to the administrative cadre of the academy. The second is to reconstruct the historical and sociological account of how clerical and support roles in universities became feminised, and to identify the durable structural consequences of that feminisation. The third is to examine the particular ethical demands placed upon administrative staff by virtue of their access to confidential information, their proximity to senior authority, and their role in mediating institutional communication. The fourth is to survey the empirical evidence on workplace harassment, discrimination, and the broader ethical climate within which administrative women operate. The fifth is to analyse the patterns of career mobility, professional identity formation, and recognition that characterise this workforce. The sixth is to evaluate the institutional policy architectures designed to address ethical conduct and equity, and to identify productive directions for reform.

The scope of the review is purposively interdisciplinary, drawing upon sociology, applied ethics, organisation studies, gender scholarship, and higher education policy research. Geographically, the analysis privileges African and global Northern literatures with a particular emphasis on the Nigerian context, while remaining attentive to comparative insights drawn from other regional traditions and from the historical evolution of the field.

## 2. Conceptual Foundations: Ethics, Morality, and Administrative Labour

A coherent analysis of moral standards in the administrative tier of the academy requires explicit engagement with the principal theoretical traditions in applied ethics, alongside the empirical scholarship that translates these traditions into the language of organisational practice. No single tradition captures the entire field of obligation that bears upon support staff in universities, but each illuminates a distinct dimension of moral life that any defensible institutional ethic must accommodate. Deontological reasoning, with its emphasis on universalisable duty and the categorical refusal to treat persons as mere means, generates a foundational claim that

administrative workers are owed respect not merely as functionaries but as ends in themselves, possessing rights to dignity, privacy, and self-determination that bind the legitimate authority of supervisors and senior officers.

Cognitive-developmental theories of moral reasoning have provided important resources for understanding how individuals navigate the dilemmas that arise within hierarchical workplaces. The stage theory advanced by Kohlberg (1981) traced the progression from heteronomous compliance through conventional reciprocity to principled reasoning, and remains a touchstone for the analysis of moral judgement in organisations. The neo-Kohlbergian framework subsequently elaborated by Rest (1986) extended the original account by distinguishing the components of moral awareness, judgement, motivation, and character, an analytic disaggregation that has proved fertile for empirical research on ethical conduct in administrative settings.

A parallel and equally consequential tradition has emphasised relational and contextual dimensions of moral life that the predominantly justice-oriented frameworks were criticised for neglecting. The pioneering work of Gilligan (1982) identified a distinct "voice" of care, responsibility, and connection in women's moral reasoning, an account that has shaped the subsequent reception of moral psychology and ethics across the disciplines. The educational and philosophical elaboration of this perspective by Noddings (1984) and the more recent political-theoretical synthesis offered by Held (2006) have together produced the influential body of work now known as care ethics, which positions attentive responsiveness to the concrete needs of particular others as the foundational moral relation.

Care ethics speaks with particular force to the administrative tier of the academy. The day-to-day work of secretaries, executive assistants, and registry officers is constitutively relational: it involves the continuous management of expectations, the absorption of others' stress, and the production of an institutional environment within which more visible labour can proceed. To extract this work from its moral context, treating it as a series of discrete tasks to be optimised, is to misdescribe what is actually being done and to render invisible the ethical accomplishment it represents.

Within the field of business and organisational ethics, the integrative social contracts theory advanced by Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) provided a sustained attempt to reconcile universal moral principles with the local norms of particular communities and organisations. The framework distinguishes hypernorms, which articulate the most basic moral commitments transcending cultural variation, from the authentic norms that arise within specific organisations and may legitimately vary across them. This distinction is analytically useful in the higher education context, where institutional codes must respect the cultural and historical specificity of the academy while remaining bound by transcultural prohibitions against harassment, exploitation, and discrimination.

Contemporary textbook treatments of business ethics, notably the comprehensive synthesis offered by Hartman, DesJardins, and MacDonald (2018) and the influential applied volume by Treviño and Nelson (2017), have consolidated the scholarly consensus that ethical conduct in organisations depends jointly on individual character, formal codes, leadership behaviour, and the ambient ethical climate of the workplace. These accounts emphasise that compliance-based approaches to ethics, which limit themselves to

enumerating prohibited conduct and prescribing sanctions, are demonstrably inadequate to produce the kind of practical wisdom that complex organisational dilemmas demand.

A substantial empirical literature has emerged around the construct of ethical leadership, defined operationally as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct among followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. The construct's development and validation in the work of Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) established its predictive value for follower outcomes, while the subsequent review by Brown and Treviño (2006) consolidated the field and identified its theoretical limits. The integrative reframing proposed by Eisenbeiss (2012) extended the construct beyond its Anglo-American empirical origins, identifying four central ethical orientations—humane, justice, responsibility, and moderation—that together constitute a more interculturally robust account of ethical leadership.

The applicability of these constructs to higher education has been examined in the educationally focused literature. The work of Strike and Soltis (2009) on the ethics of teaching, while primarily oriented toward classroom practice, established a vocabulary for considering institutional ethics that has been extended to administrative and leadership functions in subsequent scholarship. Social cognitive theory, articulated most influentially by Bandura (1986), provides the psychological mechanism through which observed leader behaviour comes to shape the moral conduct of subordinates: vicarious learning, modelling, and the development of self-regulatory standards together constitute the chain of influence through which ethical climates are reproduced or reformed within organisations.

Taken together, these traditions establish a conceptual platform sufficient to support the subsequent analysis. They generate three composite claims that orient the remainder of the review: first, that administrative staff are moral agents whose obligations and entitlements demand explicit theoretical recognition; second, that institutional ethics is constituted by the interaction of formal codes, leadership conduct, and the ambient affective and relational climate of the workplace; and third, that the gendered and culturally specific features of any given institutional setting must be accommodated within the analysis rather than abstracted away from it.

### **3. Historicising Secretarial Roles in the Gendered University**

The contemporary configuration of administrative work in universities is the product of a long historical process whose principal features were established between the late nineteenth century and the immediate post-war decades. Across this period, the office became a numerically expanding and increasingly feminised workplace, and the role of the secretary or clerk acquired the symbolic associations with personal service, deference, and emotional accessibility that have proved remarkably durable. The detailed sociological reconstruction provided by Pringle (1989) traced the entanglement of bureaucracy, rationality, and sexuality in the constitution of the secretarial role, demonstrating that the apparently impersonal procedures of the modern office are in practice saturated with embodied and gendered assumptions about who should perform which tasks and how.

The gendering of administrative work cannot be explained by the supposed natural aptitudes of women for service. Detailed historical analyses have shown that it was the product of deliberate organisational and political choices, repeatedly contested, and reinforced through formal training schemes, occupational guidance, and the active resistance of male incumbents to the entry of women into more highly remunerated positions (Cockburn, 1991). The struggle for equal opportunity in employment has been documented in comparable empirical detail across Australian and British contexts, where formal anti-discrimination law has frequently outpaced the actual transformation of organisational practice (Burton, 1991).

The sociology of the professions has provided a complementary lens. The interrogation of professionalism as an inherently masculinised category, advanced influentially by Davies (1996), demonstrated that the autonomy, expertise, and authority claimed by recognised professions were defined in opposition to the supposedly subordinate, technical, and personal qualities ascribed to administrative and caring work. By this logic, the very dichotomy between professional and clerical labour acquired a gendered valence that no amount of formal qualification could fully neutralise. The experience of men who entered traditionally feminised occupations has further illuminated the symbolic structure of the gendered workplace. The investigation by Williams (1995) of male nurses, librarians, and primary school teachers documented the operation of a "glass escalator" through which men in these settings were channelled upward into supervisory positions, while women in adjacent administrative and support roles encountered structural impediments to comparable advancement. The asymmetry is constitutive rather than incidental: it reveals that the gendering of the workplace is reproduced through everyday practices of recognition and recruitment as much as through formal job descriptions.

The broader restructuring of gender relations and employment across the late twentieth century has been documented in the comparative work of Crompton (1999), which traced the decline of the male breadwinner model and the rise of dual-earner households without a parallel transformation in the gendered organisation of domestic labour. The accommodations and tensions produced by this transition have been pervasive in the administrative workforce, where women combine the demands of paid employment with disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care.

Empirical surveys of women and men at work, such as the comprehensive synthesis by Padavic and Reskin (2002), have shown that occupational segregation by sex has been remarkably resistant to change despite increases in women's educational attainment and labour force participation. Within the administrative occupational category, the segregation is particularly acute, and university administration mirrors the broader patterns visible in private sector and government employment.

Theoretical accounts of organisational behaviour and gender have offered explanatory frameworks for these durable patterns. The textbook synthesis by Wilson (2003) consolidated the principal psychological, structural, and cultural explanations, identifying mechanisms of in-group preference, tokenism, role congruity, and symbolic exclusion as jointly responsible for the gendered features of organisational life. Empirical research within particular

sectors, such as the multi-industry investigation by Halford, Savage, and Witz (1997), has demonstrated the operation of these mechanisms in detail, tracing the careers of women in banking, nursing, and local government.

The construct of the gender regime, developed in the comparative public administration analysis by Connell (2006), offers an analytic vocabulary for the institutional patterning of these dynamics. A gender regime, on this account, is the configuration of gendered relations of power, production, emotion, and symbolism that prevails within a particular institutional site. Different worksites exhibit different regimes, and the analytical task is to map them with sufficient detail to support targeted intervention.

The symbolic dimension of organisational culture has been illuminated in equal measure by the work of Gherardi (1995), whose ethnographic analyses of gender in workplaces demonstrated that the apparently neutral routines of administration encode systematic assumptions about masculine and feminine conduct, and that these assumptions are reproduced through narrative, ritual, and the moral evaluation of everyday performance. The practice-theoretical account advanced by Martin (2003) further distinguished between gender that is "said" through discourse and gender that is "done" through embodied conduct, arguing that the distinction is analytically indispensable for understanding the persistence of gendered inequalities in apparently progressive organisations.

The relevance of this historical and sociological corpus to the academic administrative cadre is direct. The contemporary office of the university registrar, faculty officer, or executive support staff member is the inheritor of a long process through which administrative work was constituted as women's work, marked by personalised service and an expectation of emotional availability, and consequently positioned at the lower rungs of a hierarchy that simultaneously depended upon and devalued it. Recognising this inheritance is the first analytical step toward identifying the contemporary patterns of ethical risk and occupational disadvantage that the remainder of this review will examine in more detail.

#### **4. Confidentiality, Trust, and Information Stewardship in Tertiary Administration**

Among the distinctive ethical features of administrative work in the academy is the routine handling of information whose disclosure or misuse could cause significant harm. Disciplinary records, medical accommodations, examination materials, salary information, donor correspondence, complaints of misconduct, and the personal disclosures shared by students and colleagues all pass across the desks of secretaries, registry clerks, and executive support staff in the ordinary course of their work. The custodianship of this information is not a peripheral feature of administrative employment but a substantive moral undertaking whose discharge depends upon the cultivated dispositions of integrity, discretion, and prudent judgement that the ethics literature collectively designates as professional trustworthiness.

The asymmetric authority relationship within which administrative women typically operate complicates the ethics of confidentiality in distinctive ways. The principal who entrusts an assistant with sensitive material does so within a hierarchical relation that conditions what may be questioned, what may be refused, and what may be reported.

The pioneering ethnographic work of Marshall (1984) on women managers, although focused on management rather than administration, identified the experiential texture of life as a woman in a male-dominated organisational world and provided a vocabulary for the strategies of accommodation, resistance, and self-protection that women workers develop in such settings.

The intertwining of organisational power and embodied identity has been most fully analysed in the literature on the sexuality of organisations. The investigation by Sheppard (1989) of the image and self-image of women managers documented the continuous and exhausting management of appearance, comportment, and demeanour through which women negotiate their presence in organisational space. The ethical implications are direct: confidentiality and trust are not abstract bureaucratic principles but are enacted by embodied women whose every gesture is read through a gendered interpretive framework imposed by colleagues, supervisors, and members of the public.

The intersection of work and sexuality has been examined more recently in the conceptual analysis offered by Brewis and Linstead (2000), whose discussion of eroticised organisations identifies the ways in which organisational discourse imports, exploits, and reframes sexualised representations of workers. Although administrative work is rarely overtly sexualised in policy documents, the ambient organisational discourse around secretaries and assistants has historically carried sexualised undertones whose erosion of professional dignity is well-documented.

The theoretical reframing of organisational gender, advanced in the influential synthesis by Ely and Meyerson (2000), proposed four analytic frames for understanding gender in organisations: the fixing of women through assimilation programmes; the celebration of difference; the removal of structural barriers; and the deep revision of organisational practices that produce gendered outcomes. Each of these frames produces a different account of the ethical responsibility borne by administrators and by those who manage them, and the fourth in particular has substantive implications for how confidentiality and trust should be institutionalised in the contemporary academy.

The relational practices through which administrative work is actually accomplished, often discounted in formal job descriptions, have been documented in the empirical analysis by Fletcher (1999). The disappearing acts to which her title refers are the routine practices through which women in technical organisations enabled outcomes for which they received no recognition, with the work itself becoming invisible by virtue of its successful execution. The dynamic is observable in administrative work in higher education, where the careful management of confidentiality enables institutional processes to function smoothly while leaving no trace that would attract recognition or reward.

The gendered construction of academic excellence, examined in the case studies presented by Van den Brink and Benschop (2012), demonstrates how apparently meritocratic processes systematically produce gendered outcomes through the operation of unspoken criteria. Administrative women operating at the periphery of these processes are positioned to observe their workings in ways that academic peers seldom can, and the ethical demands placed upon them by this observational position—when, how, and to whom to disclose what is observed—are correspondingly acute.

The discursive intertwining of merit and gender has been

further analysed by Krefting (2003), whose examination of academic employment in the United States identified the rhetorical structures through which the appearance of merit-based selection is preserved even where the outcomes systematically disadvantage women. Administrative employment exhibits comparable patterns: stated criteria for promotion, recognition, and discretionary reward are formally gender-neutral, while their application produces predictably gendered outcomes.

Empirical research on overconfidence and status attainment has demonstrated that the assertive behaviours frequently rewarded in organisations are calibrated against masculine norms of self-presentation. The analysis offered by Anderson *et al.* (2012) showed that overconfidence functions as a status-enhancing strategy whose costs are unevenly distributed across gender lines. Administrative women observing this dynamic and required to maintain confidentiality in respect of the personnel processes through which it operates, occupy a particularly difficult ethical position.

The intersectional dimensions of these dynamics have been addressed in the substantial body of work on the experiences of Black women in professional life. The empirical study by Bell and Nkomo (2001) of Black and white women in professional employment in the United States documented the divergent strategies, costs, and sources of support through which professional identity was constructed across racial lines, offering an indispensable corrective to monolithic accounts of women's organisational experience.

The bureaucratic structures within which these confidentiality practices are embedded have themselves been interrogated. The case-study analysis by Bird (2011) of universities' incongruous, gendered bureaucratic structures demonstrated that the formal architectures of academic administration combine elements of rational-legal authority with vestiges of patrimonial and personalised governance, producing ethical environments whose contradictions are routinely managed by administrative women without formal recognition or institutional support. The foundational sociological analysis by Bourdieu (2001) of masculine domination, finally, provides a synthetic theoretical framework in which the production and reproduction of these patterns can be situated within the broader operation of symbolic power.

## 5. Workplace Harassment, Discrimination, and the Ethical Climate

The most extensively documented dimension of ethical breakdown in the workplaces inhabited by administrative women is the persistent occurrence of harassment, discrimination, and ambient hostility. A substantial empirical and theoretical literature, accumulated across more than four decades, has established that sexualised mistreatment in employment is not an aberration explained by individual pathology, but a structural feature of organisations whose authority relations, occupational segregation, and ambient discourses produce predictable patterns of vulnerability for women in subordinate positions. The foundational legal-theoretical analysis offered by MacKinnon (1979) reframed sexual harassment from a matter of private discomfort to a form of sex discrimination, an analytic move whose consequences for policy and organisational practice have been enduring.

The empirical investigation of sexual harassment in academic

settings developed rapidly in the wake of this conceptual reframing. The survey research conducted by McKinney (1990) on the sexual harassment of university faculty by colleagues and students established that academic environments were not exempt from the patterns identified in industrial and commercial workplaces, and laid the empirical groundwork for institutional response. The subsequent integrated model developed by Fitzgerald *et al.* (1997) consolidated the antecedents and consequences of harassment into a single explanatory framework, identifying organisational climate, job-gender context, and personal vulnerability factors as principal predictors.

The contemporary empirical landscape has been illuminated by careful longitudinal research on the economic and career effects of harassment, exemplified in the analysis by McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone (2017) of the financial and occupational consequences experienced by women who report mistreatment in employment. Their work demonstrated the substantial career cost borne disproportionately by those who exercise their formal right to complain and underscored the inadequacy of policy frameworks that rely on individual complaint procedures as the primary remedy.

The organisational context within which harassment occurs has been theorised in considerable depth. The multi-organisational empirical study by Chamberlain *et al.* (2008) drew upon a large sample of ethnographic workplace studies to identify the structural conditions—*asymmetric authority, sex segregation, weak grievance procedures, ambient sexualised discourse*—that increase the prevalence of harassment. The original conceptual work by Gutek (1985) on sex and the workplace identified the spillover of gender role expectations into occupational settings as a principal mechanism producing the conditions under which harassment becomes routine.

The consequences of reporting, distinct from the consequences of the harassment itself, have been examined in the empirical work of Cortina and Magley (2003) on the events that follow interpersonal mistreatment. Their analysis showed that retaliation, both formal and informal, is common, and that the calculus of whether to raise a complaint is shaped not only by the gravity of the original incident but also by the realistic prospect of further harm. Administrative women, whose careers are typically more dependent on local supervisors than those of academic staff, face a particularly unfavourable version of this calculus.

The African empirical evidence on harassment in tertiary education, although less voluminous than the Western literature, is sufficient to establish that the patterns documented elsewhere obtain across this regional context as well. The survey research conducted by Onyeonoru (2002) in southwest Nigerian tertiary institutions provided one of the earliest systematic empirical accounts, identifying levels of harassment prevalence and disclosure consistent with international comparisons and underscoring the inadequacy of existing institutional response frameworks.

The broader theoretical analysis of gender, sexuality, and violence in organisations developed by Hearn and Parkin (2001) integrated the dispersed empirical literatures into a unified framework that treats harassment as one expression of a wider continuum of organisational violations. The framework is analytically useful because it relates overt incidents to the ambient micro-aggressions, exclusions, and devaluations that constitute the everyday texture of

organisational life for many administrative women, and that cumulatively produce significant occupational harm even where no single incident would meet the threshold for formal complaint.

The Nordic comparative evidence reported by Husu (2001) in respect of academic women in Finland confirmed that the patterns of hidden discrimination operate even in institutional contexts widely regarded as exceptionally gender-egalitarian, and that they manifest in the form of micro-decisions about networks, recommendations, and informal evaluations that cumulatively shape career trajectories. The applicability of these findings to administrative women is direct: invisibility, marginalisation, and the systematic discounting of contribution operate across the academic hierarchy and bear with particular force on those whose positions afford the least institutional protection.

The phenomenological reframing of the lived experience of these conditions has been articulated most influentially in the work of Ahmed (2017), whose analytic vocabulary of complaint, refusal, and the institutional management of grievance has shaped the contemporary scholarship on harassment policy. The work draws attention to the labour involved in raising a complaint, the procedural attrition through which complaints are dissipated, and the institutional uses of equality policy as a kind of performative reassurance that obviates substantive reform.

The conceptual analysis of oppression itself, classically developed in the essays of Frye (1983), provided the foundational vocabulary in which the cumulative, structural, and seemingly minor instances of mistreatment that characterise the ambient ethical climate of many workplaces could be understood not as isolated incidents but as elements of a coherent pattern. The metaphor of the birdcage, which she developed to explain the structure of systematic oppression, captures the experience of administrative women whose individual constraints may appear minor when examined in isolation but whose cumulative effect is profoundly restrictive.

Cumulatively, this body of empirical and theoretical work establishes that harassment and discrimination in the academic administrative workforce are not aberrations but predictable products of organisational structure, occupational segregation, and ambient discourse. The implication for institutional reform is that complaint-based remedies operating in isolation are inadequate, and that meaningful change requires structural intervention at the level of authority distribution, recruitment, and the everyday cultural practices through which gendered hierarchies are reproduced.

## 6. Career Mobility, Professional Identity, and Recognition

The trajectory through which an administrative woman moves across the course of her working life in the academy is shaped jointly by formal career architectures, informal patterns of recognition, and the construction of an occupational identity that is at once instrumentally useful and personally sustainable. The classical metaphor of the glass ceiling, which framed early scholarship on women's career advancement, has been progressively superseded by more nuanced analyses that capture the multiplicity of constraints, redirections, and contingencies that women navigate. The integrative synthesis offered by Eagly and Carli (2007), whose metaphor of the labyrinth replaced the more linear image of an invisible barrier, established a vocabulary in

which advancement is understood as a complex passage through interlocking turnings rather than a single ceiling to be broken.

The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, developed in the influential analysis of Eagly and Karau (2002), provides a psychological mechanism for the disadvantages that women routinely encounter when they aspire to authoritative positions. The theory identifies the perceived incongruity between the agentic qualities associated with leadership and the communal qualities associated with femininity as the source of double-bind dilemmas in which women are penalised for inadequate warmth when they exhibit agency, and for inadequate competence when they exhibit warmth. Administrative women aspiring to managerial positions within the academic registry, the human resources function, or the senior support cadre encounter precisely these dilemmas.

The persistence of the "think manager, think male" association, documented across multiple cultural settings in the cumulative work of Schein (2007), reinforces the role congruity account by establishing the empirical regularity with which the cognitive prototype of the competent manager is masculine. The implications for the promotion of administrative women into supervisory and managerial positions are direct, and the persistence of the association decades after the documentation of formally equal opportunity policies underscores the depth of the cognitive structures that institutional reform must address.

The labyrinth metaphor was further elaborated by Carli and Eagly (2016) in their examination of the metaphorical vocabulary deployed across the scholarship to describe women's advancement. Their analysis showed that different metaphors generate different policy implications, and that the choice of metaphor is therefore consequential for the construction of institutional remedies. For administrative women in higher education, the labyrinth is particularly apt: their advancement is constrained not by a single barrier but by a sequence of contingent decisions about training, transfer, recognition, and visibility through which the cumulative pattern of disadvantage is produced.

The institutional case study offered by Bailyn (2003) of the gender equity reforms at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology illustrated the conditions under which substantive transformation of academic careers can be achieved. Although her focus was on the faculty, the analytic insights regarding the disruption of male-default career assumptions, the explicit institutional accounting for gendered patterns, and the redistribution of resources to remedy historical disadvantage are directly applicable to the administrative cadre.

The contemporary analysis of higher education leadership, developed in the work of Morley (2013) on the leaderist turn in universities and her subsequent investigation of women's leadership in the global academy (Morley, 2014), traced the paradox by which the formal feminisation of higher education has not been accompanied by commensurate advancement of women into senior positions. The analysis identified the operation of gendered talent pipelines, the discursive construction of leadership in masculinised terms, and the ambient cultural devaluation of women's leadership contributions as principal explanatory factors. Each of these mechanisms operates as well across the administrative tier, where the comparatively flat career architecture constrains advancement still further.

The work-family interface, central to the experience of many women in the academic administrative workforce, has been examined in the African context in the analysis by Aluko (2009) of work-family conflict among Nigerian women in academia. The empirical findings identified the disproportionate reliance on informal coping strategies, the inadequacy of formal accommodations, and the cultural expectations that magnify the conflict experienced by women whose domestic responsibilities are not commensurately reduced by their paid employment. Administrative women, whose schedules are typically less flexible than those of academic staff, experience these tensions with particular intensity.

The continuing gender challenges of higher education have been surveyed at length in the edited synthesis offered by Glazer-Raymo (2008), whose treatment of an "unfinished agenda" identified the persistence of mentorship deficits, the inadequacy of advancement policies, and the ambient cultural devaluation of women's administrative contribution as recurrent themes across institutional contexts. The work draws particular attention to the cumulative disadvantages experienced by women whose careers are interrupted by caregiving responsibilities, a population that includes a substantial proportion of administrative women in mid-career.

The experiences of academic non-mothers, examined in the empirical investigation by Ramsay and Letherby (2006), illuminate a different dimension of identity construction within the gendered university. Their analysis showed that the absence of motherhood is itself an organisationally salient feature whose interpretation by colleagues and supervisors shapes women's career trajectories in distinctive ways. For administrative women, whose institutional position is more closely surveyed than that of academic staff, the asymmetrical scrutiny of personal life is a recurrent source of strain.

The broader analysis of leaders' performance and identity construction, advanced in the empirical work of Blackmore and Sachs (2007) on the gendered restructuring of educational institutions, provided a framework for understanding the ways in which the contemporary reform agenda has reshaped the conditions under which women lead and administer. Their analysis identified the displacement of collegial governance by managerial accountability, the intensification of performative demands, and the gendered uneven distribution of the resulting workload as themes that reproduce across institutional contexts.

Taken together, this body of work establishes that the career trajectories of administrative women in higher education cannot be understood through the application of generic models of organisational mobility. Distinctive structural features, cultural assumptions, and embodied identity work converge to produce career patterns that warrant analysis on their own terms, and that demand institutional remedies tailored to their specific character.

## **7. Institutional Policy Architectures, Codes of Conduct, and Governance**

The translation of ethical principle into institutional practice depends upon the design, communication, and enforcement of policy frameworks that govern conduct, allocate authority, and provide remedies for breach. The mature scholarship on institutional ethics has long emphasised that codes of conduct operating in isolation are inadequate to produce the

behavioural outcomes they nominally pursue, and that effective governance requires the integration of codes with leadership behaviour, training, monitoring, and a wider organisational culture in which ethical conduct is intelligible and rewarded. The comprehensive treatment of ethical leadership and decision-making in education by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advanced a four-paradigm framework—encompassing justice, critique, care, and profession—whose deliberate integration produces decisions more defensible than those generated by any single perspective in isolation. The conceptual elaboration of ethical leadership offered by Starratt (2004) similarly emphasised that leaders bear responsibility not merely for their own conduct but for the cultivation of conditions in which ethical conduct by others becomes possible. The analysis distinguished proactive presence from reactive compliance, and identified the ethical leader as one who is both attuned to the human reality of the institution and committed to the structural reforms that protect it.

The relationship between formal diversity policy and the lived experience of those it nominally protects has been examined in particular depth in the analytical work of Ahmed (2012) on the institutional life of equality and diversity policies. The empirical investigation documented the operation of policy as a kind of institutional performance in which the production of documents, the staffing of committees, and the celebration of inclusion can substitute for substantive change. The implication for the administrative cadre is direct: policy frameworks that recognise harassment and discrimination on paper, but provide ineffective remedies in practice, may aggravate rather than alleviate the conditions they ostensibly address.

The African empirical evidence on policy implementation has been illuminated in the qualitative work of Odejide (2007) on the experience of being a woman in a Nigerian university. The analysis demonstrated the cultural inflection of formal policy and the ways in which national and institutional reform agendas, even where formally adopted, are mediated by gendered cultural expectations that limit their transformative reach. The findings suggest that the importation of policy frameworks from external contexts requires sustained cultural translation if those frameworks are to operate as intended.

The structural analysis of organisational inequality offered by Acker (2006) advanced the concept of "inequality regimes" as a synthetic vocabulary for the loose configurations of practice, process, and culture that produce class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organisational settings. The analytic move from individual instances to systemic configurations is essential for the design of effective policy: institutional reform must be calibrated to the specific regime characterising a given university, rather than imported in standardised form from elsewhere.

The intersectional dimensions of any such reform agenda have been articulated most influentially in the foundational analysis by Crenshaw (1991) of the ways in which race, gender, and class converge to produce distinctive forms of disadvantage that no single-axis framework can capture. The implications for administrative women are particularly acute in institutions whose workforce is racially and ethnically diverse, and where the experiences of women of colour are systematically distinct from those of their majority-group colleagues. The integration of intersectional analysis into harassment, advancement, and grievance procedures is

therefore an ethical requirement rather than an optional refinement.

The theoretical elaboration of Black feminist thought provided by Collins (2000) developed the conceptual resources required for the construction of intersectional policy. Her analysis of the matrix of domination, the politics of empowerment, and the standpoint epistemology of marginalised workers offered an indispensable corrective to policy frameworks predicated on the experience of unmarked majority subjects. Administrative women whose experience is shaped by the intersection of multiple categories of disadvantage are entitled to policy frameworks that recognise this complexity rather than abstract it away.

The empirical investigation of organisational culture and practice in UK universities, conducted by Deem (2003), documented the operation of manager-academic governance and identified the gendered features of the resulting institutional environment. The analysis demonstrated that the formal transition to more managerial forms of leadership has produced new gendered configurations of authority, with implications for the conditions under which administrative women operate and the policy reforms most likely to address the disadvantages they encounter.

The comparative evidence on women managers in non-Western contexts, exemplified in the work of Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) on the career advancement of Lebanese women managers, provides an instructive set of policy-relevant insights. Their analysis identified the operation of family, religion, and culture as factors that intersect with formal organisational structures to produce distinctive patterns of advancement and constraint. The findings support the argument that effective policy frameworks must be calibrated to the cultural context in which they operate.

From these strands of scholarship, several policy implications follow with particular clarity. Codes of conduct should be drafted to recognise the moral agency and structural vulnerability of the administrative workforce, not merely to constrain its behaviour. Grievance procedures should be designed with explicit attention to the asymmetric authority relations in which administrative women operate, and to the realistic prospect of retaliation. Career architectures should be reformed to provide intelligible advancement pathways, transparent criteria, and credible mentorship. Harassment policies should integrate intersectional analysis and should be linked to substantive remedies, including reassignment, training, and, where appropriate, disciplinary action. Cultural translation should be undertaken explicitly in institutional contexts where imported policy frameworks risk operating as foreign objects rather than indigenous instruments of reform. Cumulatively, the policy architecture envisaged in this section is one in which formal instruments, leadership behaviour, training, and ambient culture jointly produce the conditions under which administrative women are recognised as moral agents, protected from foreseeable harm, and supported in the construction of dignified and developmentally rich careers within higher education institutions.

## 8. Conclusion

The integrative synthesis offered across the preceding sections has consolidated four decades of dispersed scholarship into an analytic framework adequate to the moral, occupational, and structural realities of administrative women in tertiary education. The framework rests on three

composite claims: that administrative workers are reasoning moral agents whose obligations and entitlements demand explicit theoretical recognition; that institutional ethics is constituted by the interaction of formal codes, leadership behaviour, and the ambient affective and relational climate of the workplace; and that the gendered and culturally specific features of any given setting must be accommodated within the analysis rather than abstracted away from it.

The substantive findings of the review can be summarised concisely. The administrative cadre of contemporary universities is constituted as women's work through a long historical process whose symbolic and structural features have proved remarkably durable. The ethical demands placed upon these workers, particularly with respect to the custodianship of sensitive information, are substantial and ill-served by codes of conduct that treat them as ethically passive. The empirical patterning of harassment, discrimination, and ambient hostility is documented with sufficient consistency across regional contexts to establish that it is a predictable product of organisational structure rather than an aberration. The career trajectories of these women are shaped by a labyrinthine combination of formal architecture, informal recognition, and embodied identity work that demands institutional remedies tailored to its specific character. The policy frameworks most likely to address these conditions are those that integrate formal codes, leadership conduct, training, monitoring, and ambient culture into a coherent ethical environment.

Productive directions for further inquiry include longitudinal empirical investigation of administrative careers across cultural contexts, comparative evaluation of grievance and advancement policies, and theoretical refinement of the moral economy framework gestured at across this review. The dignity, voice, and developmental flourishing of this workforce remain constitutive concerns for the genuinely equitable academy that scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have long claimed to seek.

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