

## REVIEW

# The shadow curriculum in higher education: exploitation and gender bias in African graduate supervision - a narrative review

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### ABSTRACT

The supervision of graduate students is vital in shaping their academic and professional development paths. However, in many African universities, informal and unregulated practices- collectively referred to as the shadow curriculum - govern supervision through undocumented educational practices that operate parallel to formal systems. This paper aims to explore how the shadow curriculum perpetuates gender bias, exploitation, and unequal power dynamics in postgraduate supervision across selected higher education contexts in Africa, as well as ethically and culturally responsive supervision and mentorship practices. This paper adopts a narrative review and interpretive synthesis approach, examining literature published between 1990 and 2024 to capture evolving supervision practices and related gender dynamics. The findings indicate that weak regulations and patriarchal structures enable supervisors to exploit students through unpaid labor, limited academic independence, and the appropriation of research ideas, with female students particularly affected. Female students also face additional barriers, including discrimination, exclusion, and harassment. There are, therefore, opportunities to engage more effectively with accountability frameworks and gender-responsive supervision models based on equity, transparency, and academic autonomy. The review indicates that these approaches may support fairness in postgraduate education, strengthen research capacity, and promote sustainable development within higher education contexts represented in this review.

### KEYWORDS:

Shadow curriculum, graduate supervision, African higher education, exploitative supervision, gender bias

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## INTRODUCTION

Graduate supervision has been extensively studied across Europe, North America, and Asia, focusing on power dynamics, ethical dilemmas, and student vulnerability<sup>1-3</sup>. However, these challenges manifest differently in African higher education, where structural inequities and cultural hierarchies shape supervisory relationships and outcomes<sup>4-6</sup>. In higher education, the shadow curriculum refers to informal, unapproved, and sometimes harmful systems that exist alongside formal ones and affect students' academic experiences<sup>2, 7-9</sup>.

In African universities, it manifests in practices such as the misappropriation of students' research ideas, expectations of unpaid academic labor, gendered allocation of opportunities, tolerance of harassment that disadvantages female students, and other behaviors'. These practices are often normalized within institutional cultures, reinforced by hierarchical power relations, and exacerbated by ineffective monitoring or reporting mechanisms, which undermine academic integrity, student well-being, and equity in postgraduate education<sup>2, 10-12</sup>.

Supervisors, who typically exercise unilateral power over dissertation approval, research access, and mentorship, can exploit their authority-intentionally or unintentionally-to undermine students' autonomy<sup>2, 10</sup>. Female students are more adversely affected by

patriarchal structures, gender norms, and exclusion from academic networks<sup>13</sup>. Weak institutional governance and the absence of formal procedures for filing complaints allow misconduct to persist and students to remain silent<sup>5, 14</sup>.

These inequities not only slow students' progress but also cause psychological distress, anxiety, and attrition, particularly among women<sup>11, 15</sup>. Although previous studies have examined how gender bias and power relations affect graduate supervision in Western and Asian contexts<sup>2, 12</sup>, there has been relatively little discussion of how these issues operate in African universities. The roles of gendered exploitation, hidden academic hierarchies, and weak institutional accountability have been overlooked<sup>10, 14</sup>. Cultural and structural inequities may further intensify the impact of these hidden practices on graduate supervision.

This paper aims to define and analyzes the shadow curriculum in African graduate supervision by examining how gender bias, hidden power relations, and exploitative practices influence mentoring experiences and student outcomes. It further proposes gender-responsive and context-sensitive models to promote ethical, transparent, and supportive supervisor-student relationships in African higher education. Table 1 below demonstrates the impact of the shadow curriculum on female graduate students in African higher education.

**Table1: Manifestations of the shadow curriculum affecting female graduate students in African higher education**

Manifestation	Description	Illustrative evidence/examples	Link to the shadow/hidden curriculum	Policy / intervention implications
<b>Gender bias and stereotyping</b>	Female graduate students experience stereotypes, discrimination, and unequal expectations that undermine academic contributions	Exclusion from research projects and networking opportunities <sup>(16-19)</sup>	Implicitly teaches that academic competence and leadership are gendered	Gender-sensitive supervision guidelines; bias-awareness training
<b>Patriarchal academic cultures</b>	Entrenched patriarchal norms position men as default authority figures	Limited recognition of women in senior academic roles <sup>(17)</sup>	Normalizes male dominance within academic hierarchies	Institutional gender equity policies; leadership pathways for women

<b>Sexual harassment in supervision</b>	Harassment occurs within supervisory relationships, often beyond professional boundaries	~70% of female graduate students in Nigeria report sexual harassment <sup>(21)</sup>	Blurs boundaries while masking abuse as normal academic interaction	Clear codes of conduct; zero-tolerance sexual harassment policies
<b>Ambiguity and moral respectability politics</b>	Inappropriate behavior framed as mentorship, care, or concern	Misconduct justified as kindness or guidance <sup>20</sup>	Teaches reinterpretation of abuse as acceptable behavior	Clarification of supervisory boundaries; ethics training
<b>Silence reinforced by power imbalance</b>	Fear of retaliation discourages reporting of misconduct	Withdrawal of feedback after refusal of private meetings	Socializes students into silence and compliance	Independent reporting mechanisms; whistleblower protections

## MANIFESTATIONS AND EXPLOITATION WITHIN THE SHADOW CURRICULUM IN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

### Manifestations of the shadow curriculum

In African universities, female graduate students experience various forms of inequity and exploitation due to informal supervisory practices, power imbalances between professors or supervisors and graduate students, and patriarchal cultural norms. These practices constitute a shadow or hidden curriculum that systematically disadvantages women in academic progression, research opportunities, and access to leadership positions. Women encounter numerous barriers in these areas. Table 1 summarizes the main manifestations of inequitable and exploitative

practices, their theoretical implications, and policy developments that can address inequity and exploitation affecting female graduate students.

### Exploitation within the shadow curriculum

Shadow curriculum refers to exploitative acts against graduate students at African universities example: Research Labor (not credited); gender-based discrimination; ghost writing; consulting and financial/psychological pressure on students, etc., which enforce compliance, silence, and endurance on the part of graduate students thus reproducing hierarchies and inequities in academic recognition and development; the different forms of exploitation can be seen in Table 2 below as well as some potential effects.

**Table 2: Exploitation within the shadow/hidden curriculum of African graduate supervision**

Form of exploitation	Description	Illustrative evidence/examples	Link to the shadow/hidden curriculum	Implications
<b>Uncredited research labor</b>	Graduate students collect data, transcribe interviews, and conduct fieldwork for supervisors' funded projects without authorship or inclusion in grant budgets	Students' intellectual contributions absorbed into supervisors' publications <sup>2,10</sup>	Teaches that invisible labor and obedience are prerequisites for academic progression	Reinforces unequal power relations and limits academic recognition
<b>Gendered exclusion and discrimination</b>	Female students experience disproportionate discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from academic networks	Surveys show women are frequently excluded from authorship and research opportunities <sup>2,13</sup>	Normalizes gendered power hierarchies and silence around misconduct	Reproduces gender inequality in academic careers

<b>Ghostwriting and unpaid academic writing</b>	Students write sections or entire papers, reports, or book chapters without co-authorship or compensation	Writing literature reviews in exchange for informal promises of “good supervision” <sup>2,10,23-26</sup>	Implicitly legitimizes hierarchical ownership of knowledge	Undermines academic development and ethical scholarship
<b>Exploitation through consulting contracts</b>	Students used as unpaid or underpaid labor for supervisors’ personal consulting projects	Reported in public universities in Kenya and Nigeria; imposed contract-driven topics <sup>5,27, 28</sup>	Socializes students into accepting blurred boundaries between training and personal gain	Distorts research agendas and reinforces dependency
<b>Financial and psychological exploitation</b>	Supervisors solicit financial inducements; practices generate anxiety, burnout, and disillusionment	Evidence from Uganda of psychological distress among Postgraduates <sup>2, 27,29, 30</sup>	Frames endurance, silence, and distress as normal aspects of academic training	Sustains fear, compliance, and long-term inequities

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND EXPLOITATION IN THE SHADOW CURRICULUM

The shadow curriculum draws on critical theories of power, such as Foucault’s<sup>31</sup> (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Bourdieu’s<sup>32</sup>. This narrative review employs Bourdieu’s concept of social capital to examine how informal networks, hierarchical power relations, and unspoken norms perpetuate systemic inequalities within African higher education<sup>33</sup>. Informal networks can reproduce hierarchical distinctions while granting access to authorship, research funding, academic recognition, and priority within scholarly spaces to their members. Students with substantial social and institutional capital are often privileged in this context<sup>34</sup>. In many African university systems, opportunities for adequate supervision and mentoring are facilitated through informal networks and personal relationships rather than transparent institutional mechanisms, thereby exacerbating gender and power disparities within the system<sup>34, 35</sup>. Consequently, everyday academic practices and supervisory relationships have been identified as avenues through which inequalities persist, alongside formal policy interventions<sup>35, 36</sup>.

Forms of unpaid research and administrative work vary across disciplines. In STEM fields, for example, “students... run and conduct experiments, maintain laboratories, and even manage funded projects in the guise of obtaining ‘practical experience’<sup>22, 37</sup>. In the social sciences and humanities, however,

apprenticeship-style unpaid labor includes transcribing interviews, conducting fieldwork, and preparing reports<sup>38</sup>. In education and development studies, for example, graduate students often facilitate workshops and prepare workshop materials without compensation for their time or effort<sup>13, 39</sup>.

These types of countries also differ in their practices. For example, South African research universities offer partial stipends, but stipend payments still reflect racial inequities<sup>40</sup>. In Nigeria, Sudan, and East African cases, students often undertake unpaid weekly teaching, administration, or consultancy work<sup>41</sup>. Collectively, these practices demonstrate how hidden structures of supervision reduce opportunities through informal and formal mechanisms that threaten postgraduate development and ethical forms of knowledge production.

## UNDERLYING DRIVERS OF HIDDEN PRACTICES AND GENDER INEQUITIES

In African universities, the continuation of unpaid supervision, gender discrimination, and inequalities can be attributed to numerous interconnected issues. The failure of institutions to acknowledge the covert curriculum, ineffective complaint channels, established male dominance in supervisory relationships, and a lack of equality in supervision contribute to the existence of the unacknowledged curriculum. These factors also play a role in increasing the difficulty of successfully challenging informal inequities by creating divisions in access to resources,

chances, and protection. In Table 3, the main factors contributing to this situation, their relationships with

the covert curriculum and the respective possible policy measures to address them are outlined below.

**Table 3: Underlying drivers of hidden practices and gender inequities in African higher education, and policy responses**

Underlying driver	Description	Supporting evidence/examples	Link to the shadow/hidden curriculum	Policy response implications
<b>Institutional non-recognition of the shadow curriculum</b>	Universities fail to formally acknowledge informal academic hierarchies and shadow curriculum elements in policies	Lack of recognition enables exploitative and biased supervisory practices <sup>42,43</sup>	Allows hidden norms and power relations to operate outside formal oversight	Explicit recognition of the shadow curriculum in institutional policies; integration into supervision guidelines and training
<b>Weak complaint and support systems</b>	Student grievance mechanisms and support services are insufficient or absent	Inadequate reporting structures documented across institutions <sup>44</sup>	Teaches students that reporting misconduct is ineffective or risky	Establish independent, confidential reporting mechanisms with clear protection against retaliation
<b>Gendered impacts on retention and progression</b>	Inequitable supervision disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups	Female postgraduate dropout linked to gender bias and harassment in Ghana and Tanzania <sup>10, 45</sup>	Normalizes exclusion and erodes sense of belonging	Gender-responsive supervision policies; monitoring of progression and attrition by gender
<b>Power asymmetries in supervision</b>	Supervisors control key academic decisions and exploit student dependency	Supervisory authority used for personal or professional gain <sup>47</sup>	Reinforces hierarchical authority as a “normal” feature of academic culture	Clear limits on supervisory power; co-supervision models and transparent evaluation procedures
<b>Cultural norms and fear of reprisal</b>	Patriarchal norms and deference to authority discourage challenging supervisors	Silence and fear of retaliation widely reported <sup>48,49</sup>	Socializes students into compliance, silence, and endurance	Cultural change initiatives, ethics training, and awareness programs addressing power and gender norms

## METHODS

This manuscript uses a narrative synthesis framework to explore the influence of the shadow curriculum and gendered power relations on graduate mentoring in higher education contexts across selected African settings. No primary data was obtained from research sites. The analysis was based solely on published literature and secondary sources employing a narrative synthesis of literature review to better understand the full scope of the topic.

The review focused on studies published from 1990 to 2024 from South Africa, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda, and pan-African policy discussions. There was limited

evidence from Central and Francophone West Africa in particular. Therefore, the conclusions should be considered analytically general, rather than universally applicable across all African higher education contexts.

The review examined literature published from 1990 to 2024, focusing on master’s and PhD students, their supervisors, and academic administrative staff in universities in sub-Saharan and North Africa. This period was chosen because the 1990s, a decade of growth and policy reform in African higher education, provided an opportunity to examine changes in supervision and gender over three decades. Gaps in research to date, especially in Central and

Francophone West Africa mean that the conclusions should be considered analytically general, rather than universally applicable across all higher education contexts represented on the African continent. Including exploitation in supervision, gendered bias, sexual harassment, informal academic hierarchies relating to supervision, lack of clarity of supervision practices, including experiences of violence and trauma in supervision, peer-reviewed articles used, policy reports (UNESCO, CHE), and monographs on African higher education. Publications focusing exclusively on primary or secondary education, or contexts outside Africa that were not theoretically relevant were excluded. The searches were conducted in JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search in Scopus and Web of Science included (UNESCO)<sup>51</sup>, (CHE)<sup>50</sup> reports, and African Minds: Policy papers on doctoral education<sup>22</sup>.

The keywords, combined with Boolean operators, were: shadow curriculum, hidden curriculum, graduate supervision, gender bias, doctoral mentoring, Africa, and higher education. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the research objectives, followed by full-text review of sources deemed eligible. Data extraction and thematic synthesis were undertaken through an iterative process of analysis to identify patterns and recurring concepts. Synthesis followed the narrative synthesis qualitative framework proposed by Popay<sup>52</sup> et al. to maintain high standards of methodological integrity and analytical transparency.

To establish validity and reliability, primary data were extracted using a pre-determined template, and themes were identified through repeated reading and thematic coding, with cross-checking by co-authors to ensure fidelity. Triangulation across different sources limited selective reporting. An audit trail captured all decisions, and the synthesis was reviewed by multiple authors to mitigate interpretation bias and ensure the process was transparent and reproducible<sup>52, 53</sup>.

Boolean operators were used in combination with keywords such as "shadow curriculum," hidden curriculum, graduate supervision, gender bias, doctoral mentoring, Africa, and higher education. Titles and abstracts were examined for relevance to the research goals. Full-text reviews were conducted for sources that

met the search criteria, and relevant data were extracted. A thematic synthesis was then carried out through repeated analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and concepts.

Divergent evidence was examined through comparative themes and contextual interpretations, rather than being excluded. Differences between studies were considered alongside institutional and socio-cultural contexts, allowing for the identification of common patterns as well as the differences between studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Informal academic hierarchies and gendered power relations**

Multiple studies show that informal academic hierarchies affecting supervisor–student relationships and maintaining power imbalances persist in African higher education contexts<sup>2</sup>. Gender bias and harassment continue to undermine women's experiences in postgraduate<sup>54</sup> supervision, with cultural and institutional factors worsening this inequity<sup>10, 11, 14</sup>. Supervision frameworks are often inadequate, and existing policies are not consistently enforced, leading to exploitation and uneven supervisory expectations<sup>5, 55</sup>. These factors have been linked to mental distress, disengagement, and attrition among postgraduate students<sup>12, 15</sup>.

### **The spiral of power, silence, and exploitation**

From our synthesis, we see an emerging spiral: increasing supervisory power produces student dependence; dependence combined with normative gendered expectations of deference produces silence; silence maintains a productive space for exploitative and sexist practices to be replicated- even in the presence of formal rules prohibiting these practices. Encouragingly, regional initiatives and policy reforms indicate a growing commitment to advancing gender equity, accountability, and improved supervision standards in African higher education<sup>56-58</sup>.

### **The shadow curriculum and reproduction of exclusionary academic cultures**

These outcomes indicate a persistent power structure in educational supervisory relationships, which serves to reproduce academically exclusionary cultures<sup>1-3</sup>.

The shadow curriculum is embedded within informal mentoring conventions and taken-for-granted assumptions that privilege certain students at the expense of others<sup>14,59</sup>. This alternative paradigm employs hidden pedagogies and unwritten institutional policies to maintain the status quo<sup>60</sup>. Oversight of these educational systems is difficult, yet their pervasiveness and continued detrimental effects on students' academic achievement and professional development are undeniable. Supervisory practices persist due to institutional limitations created by rigid academic hierarchies and the near absence of ethical guidelines for supervision<sup>5, 55</sup>. Students often relinquish agency when supervisors or faculty wield authority to create coercive practice environments<sup>61</sup>, hindering independent scholarship and innovation<sup>62</sup>.

### **Delayed graduation, mental health, and gendered disciplinary practices**

Poor supervision and biased practices contribute to prolonged study durations and delayed graduation among postgraduate students in African universities<sup>54, 63</sup>. Here, graduation delay functions as a disciplinary tool within the shadow curriculum. While formally framed as academic rigor, delays often reflect gendered expectations of obedience and deference, particularly toward female students. Morley and Crossouard (2016) show how women's academic progress is disproportionately slowed by subjective judgments masked as quality control. (Mama, A. (2003). Moreover, exploitative and gendered supervisory relations have been linked to anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion<sup>2,11</sup>. Furthermore, research indicates that these supervisory practices expose students to coercive and exploitative situations with lasting academic and psychological effects<sup>12</sup>. Gender inequities exacerbate the challenges of supervision and academic practices more broadly. Female-identifying students, or those enrolled in certain degree programs, more frequently encounter unconscious bias, limited opportunities for professional connections, and, in some cases, sexual harassment<sup>10, 11</sup>.

### **Structural inequities, patriarchal cultures, and invisible labor**

Barriers to women's success persist due to structural inequities and patriarchal organizational cultures. The lack of reporting protocols when misconduct occurs

further perpetuates cycles of exclusion, silence, and underrepresentation<sup>48, 56</sup> e.g. Male-dominated hierarchies often place men in senior and administrative positions while women are in junior positions<sup>17</sup>, and epistemic hierarchies often marginalize feminist knowledge<sup>64</sup>. This reflects gendered and radicalized emotional labor, where female graduate students are assigned invisible work aligned with care, hospitality, or representation. While not formally recognized, this labor sustains institutional functioning. Morley (2014) identifies this as part of the shadow workload disproportionately borne by women in African universities. These structural and cultural barriers limit women's participation, authorship, and leadership opportunities, as noted in other literature.

### **Weak accountability, student voice, and attrition**

Weak accountability systems impede student voices and reinforce the shadow curriculum, which governs academic relationships through invisible hierarchies and informal expectations. These issues waste time, erode academic confidence, and sometimes lead students to withdraw from their programs entirely<sup>55, 61</sup>. Female students, who face the unique challenges of academic biases and societal expectations, are likely even more susceptible to attrition<sup>10,56</sup>.

### **Institutional reform and ethical supervision frameworks**

To address inequitable supervision, the mentorship process must be transparent and demonstrate fair practice, with institutional change being essential<sup>3, 11</sup>. Notably, regional and international frameworks from organizations such as UNESCO and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) have begun to highlight the need for transparency, accountability, and supportive systems, particularly in postgraduate education (UNESCO<sup>56</sup>, 2019; CHE<sup>58</sup>, 2020). Transformative actions should include supervisor training programs, codes of ethical conduct, and structured monitoring processes to encourage fairness, inclusivity, and a positive student experience in graduate supervision<sup>59</sup>.

### **Recommendation**

Universities and academic institutions should implement Anglo-American assessment standards in line with the principles of Ubuntu and social responsibility within their structures, practices, and

ethos. Furthermore, ethical program frameworks, codes of conduct with enforceable penalties, and independent reporting procedures are necessary to prevent exploitation and uphold integrity in supervision.

In this context, gender equity should be promoted through appropriate support for female student–staff mentoring, institutional procedures for reporting harassment within supervisory relationships, and training supervisors in gender sensitivity.

Graduate supervision should also adopt a comprehensive approach to mentoring, providing networks of support including supervisory committees, peer mentors, and collaborations with students' external institutions. Professional development and training for graduate supervision should emphasize culturally responsive teaching, ethical mentoring, and student-centered supervision strategies.

When tackling systemic issues, it is equally relevant to consider culturally appropriate methods of supervision and guidance. This could include incorporating African-based customs that promote unity among peers within an atmosphere of trust and co-operation, which leads to increased responsibility in the development of a student's education. These methods would lead to better supervision and further enhance Africa's objectives in higher education and development.

### **Limitation**

This paper is a narrative review based on an interpretive synthesis of published literature. Therefore, primary data were not collected, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, although we aimed to synthesize literature from African universities spanning 1990 to 2024, some relevant studies may not have been identified due to language and availability constraints. Despite these limitations, we are confident that the synthesis captured a broad range of existing literature regarding the shadow curriculum, gendered challenges, and supervision practices across selected higher education contexts in Africa.

## **CONCLUSION**

This narrative illustrates how the shadow curriculum is collectively enforced through normalization.

Exploitation is reframed as a rite of passage, and resistance is portrayed as weakness. Decolonial scholars argue that this normalization draws on colonial academic legacies that valorize authoritarian mentorship and silence critique (Zezeza P.T.). The hidden curriculum in African universities undermines graduate supervision through covert power dynamics that foster exploitation, gender-based discrimination, and weak institutional accountability. These systemic barriers reduce student agency, perpetuate inequitable mentorship, and increase attrition or the loss of intellectual potential if not effectively addressed. Addressing these challenges is essential to creating a fair, transparent, and supportive supervision system that promotes academic achievement and equity.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this study.

### **Ethical considerations**

This narrative review is derived strictly from already published literature and does not include any collection of original data, so ethical approval was not required. However, ethical practices were maintained by citing all sources accurately and by faithfully representing the information provided in the studies reviewed. Because of the nature of these issues, such as sexual harassment, sexism, and exploitation of people in the academic environment, a great deal of care was taken to ensure that any assertions were supported by empirical evidence documented in the studies in this review and that the authors refrained from making overgeneralizations about institutions or settings. While the synthesis acknowledges differences between the various African higher education institutions

collectively and does not imply that these institutions provide the same experiences, the authors contextualized the interpretations of these findings by indicating that they represented institutional, cultural and/or methodological differences, not common conditions. The focus on presenting and discussing these issues was done respectfully and analytically to avoid embellishment and preserve anonymity by using aggregate findings from the literature.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All contributing authors participated in creating and designing the study. They also drafted, revised, and approved the final manuscript.

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