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Invisible Institutional Work and Fragility of Gender Equity Governance: Policy Enactment Insights in Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Despite formal commitments to gender equity across education systems, schools often struggle to integrate reforms into sustainable governance structures. Drawing on Institutional Theory, this study examines how gender policy enactment becomes sustained through informal institutional work rather than formal accountability mechanisms, using an instrumental qualitative case study. The research investigates how gender reform is interpreted and enacted within a large public secondary school, using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to examine the alignment among the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars. Findings reveal strong regulative compliance but weak normative and cultural-cognitive internalization, resulting in policy-practice decoupling. In the absence of embedded leadership structures and monitoring systems, gender initiatives are sustained through discretionary and reactive labor carried by informal advocates, rendering reform agency-dependent and structurally fragile. The study contributes to Australian and international debates on equity governance by conceptualizing these actors as invisible institutional carriers who compensate for institutional fragility. It highlights the governance risks of symbolic mainstreaming and offers implications for embedding gender equity within accountability and leadership frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Across contemporary education systems, gender equity has been formally embedded within policy frameworks, leadership standards, and whole-school reform agendas designed to promote inclusion and ethical understanding. Governments increasingly require schools to demonstrate compliance with equity mandates through reporting mechanisms and accountability systems. Yet research consistently shows that the policy presented does not guarantee institutional transformation.

Australian and international scholarship identifies a persistent tension between policy intent and school-level enactment. Equity reforms frequently remain vulnerable when not structurally embedded within governance systems, professional standards, and school improvement processes. In such contexts, reform becomes interdependent on individual advocacy rather than institutional architecture, raising critical questions about sustainability and governance design.

Institutional Theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing these tensions. Scott's three-pillars' institutions - regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive - offer insight into why formal mandates may produce surface-level compliance without deep professional internalization. When regulatory requirements are not accompanied by normative consolidation and shared cultural understandings, organizations may exhibit what institutional scholars describe as decoupling, symbolic conformity to external expectations while core practices remain weakly embedded.

Gender mainstreaming initiatives are particularly

susceptible to this pattern. Although framed as whole-of-institution reforms, they often become event-based programs, reporting exercises, or compliance-driven activities disconnected from everyday pedagogical and governance routines. Under such conditions, equity reform risks becoming agency-dependent rather than structurally institutionalized.

This study examines how gender policy is enacted within a public secondary school context, using an instrumental qualitative case study to generate theoretical insights relevant to broader equity governance debates. Rather than evaluating program effectiveness, the research investigates the institutional dynamics that shape policy enactment, focusing on the alignment -or misalignment- between regulative mandates, normative commitment, and cultural-cognitive embedding.

Although grounded in a Southeast Asian setting, the study contributes to Australian and international discussions on educational leadership and governance by analyzing how equity reform becomes sustained through informal institutional work in the absence of durable structural reinforcement. By conceptualizing educators as invisible institutional carriers of policy, the study advances understanding of the government risks associated with agency-dependent reform and highlights the structural conditions necessary for the sustainable institutionalization of gender equity.

This study examines how gender policy is enacted within a public secondary school, asking how institutional alignment across regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars shapes the sustainability of equity reform.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the data, and all records were securely stored. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for educational qualitative research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Institutional Theory, particularly Scott's three pillars of institutions: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements. The regulative pillar refers to formal rules, mandates, and accountability systems. The normative pillar encompasses values, professional norms, and expectations. The cultural-cognitive pillar reflects shared understandings and taken-for-granted beliefs.

In the context of gender reform, strong regulative mandates do not necessarily produce normative commitment or cultural-cognitive transformation. When these pillars are misaligned, decoupling may occur, and organizations symbolically comply with policy requirements while substantive practices remain underdeveloped. The study also draws on the concepts of institutional work, defined as the purposive actions of individuals and groups aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions. By focusing on micro-level actors within schools, this research examines how frontline educators engage in invisible institutional work that compensates for structural weaknesses.

International and Australian Perspectives on Gender Mainstreaming in Schools

Australian research consistently demonstrates that gender equity in schooling remains an evolving governance challenge rather than a completed reform project. Although federal and state education systems formally endorse inclusion and equity principles, empirical studies suggest uneven implementation across institutional contexts.

For example, Ullman, Manlik, and Ferfolja (2020) conducted an audit of Australian government education department policies and found significant variability in how gender and sexuality diversity commitments were structurally embedded across jurisdictions. While policy rhetoric frequently affirmed inclusion, formalized accountability measures, professional development frameworks, and implementation guidelines were inconsistently developed. Their findings indicate that regulatory endorsement does not automatically translate into institutional consolidation.

In related work, Ullman and Ferfolja (2015) examined parent attitudes toward the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in schooling and found that tensions surrounding curriculum context often shape how schools

operationalize inclusion policies. These tensions illustrate the normative pressures that influence policy enactment, reinforcing the importance of institutional alignment beyond formal documentation.

Broader Australian scholarship on gender and schooling similarly emphasizes the persistence of subtle gendered dynamics in everyday school life. The special issue edited by Weaver-Hightower and colleagues (2019) highlights how gender continues to structure student experiences, curricular priorities, and behavioral expectations despite policy commitments to equality. This research underscores that institutional change requires cultural-cognitive transformation alongside regulatory compliance.

Qualitative research by Rasmussen (2017) exploring young people's perspectives in Australian secondary schools found that students often articulate fluid and non-binary understanding of gender that challenge traditional institutional norms. The study suggests a growing cultural-cognitive gap between evolving youth identities and comparatively slower institutional adaptation within schooling structures.

Leadership research in the Australian context further reveals structural gender inequities in educational governance. Blackmore (2011) argues that although women constitute the majority of the teaching workforce in Australia, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles due to institutional barriers, cultural expectations, and systemic constraints. This pattern illustrates how governance structures themselves may reproduce inequity despite formal equality policies.

Australian research demonstrates that sustainable gender equity depends on alignment across regulatory mandates, professional norms, leadership structures, and school culture. When reform remains dependent on individual advocacy rather than embedded within governance systems, implementation becomes uneven and vulnerable to discontinuity. These findings resonate with institutional theory's emphasis on decoupling and highlight the importance of structural embedding for durable equity reform.

By situating the present study within this Australian scholarship, the analysis contributes to ongoing debates about equity governance. Although empirically grounded outside Australia, the institutional dynamics identified - policy - practice decoupling, uneven normative consolidation, and reliance on invisible institutional work - mirror challenges documented within Australian schooling contexts.

Australian research has highlighted that equity reform often becomes vulnerable when not structurally embedded within leadership accountability systems or school improvement planning. The reliance on individual champions has been identified as a recurring risk in sustaining reform, particularly in areas of gender and inclusion. This study extends such scholarships by offering an institutional explanation of how agency-dependent governance emerges under conditions of partial normative consolidation.

Comparative Governance Perspectives on Gender Equity in Schooling: Philippine and Australian Contexts

While this study is situated in the Philippines, the public education systems, its focus on the institutionalization of Gender and Development (GAD) resonates with broader international discourses on gender equity in schooling, particularly within the Australian context. In Australia, gender equity in education is advanced through national and state-based frameworks such as the Australian Curriculum's General Capability on Ethical Understanding, Respectful Relationships Education, and gender equity strategies implemented across state education departments. These policies emphasize whole-school approaches, leadership accountability, and curriculum integration - principles that parallel the intent of the Philippine GAD framework.

Blackmore (2013) and Lingard & Mills (2007) highlighted that Australian research has similarly documented the gap between policy commitments and school-level enactment. Studies in Australian educational settings highlight that gender equity initiatives often depend on the advocacy of individual teachers or school leaders rather than being fully embedded in institutional systems. This mirrors findings in the Philippine context, where gender-responsive education is frequently sustained through informal leadership and personal commitment rather than structural support.

Moreover, Australian scholarship on educational leadership underscores the role of school culture, professional learning, and distributed leadership in advancing equity agendas. The challenges identified in this study - limited professional development, uneven leadership support, and cultural resistance - echo Australian findings that equity work becomes vulnerable when not formally recognized in workload models, leadership frameworks, or accountability mechanisms.

By situating this Philippine case alongside Australian experiences, the study contributes to a comparative understanding of how gender equity policies travel from policy texts to school practices across different governance and cultural contexts. For Australian education researchers and practitioners, this analysis offers insight into the institutional conditions necessary for sustaining gender-responsive education beyond symbolic compliance.

Empirical Studies on the Institutionalization of Gender and Development in Schools

In the Philippine educational context, GAD implementation is mandated by the Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710) and institutionalized through Department of Education policies such as DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, which provides guidelines on gender-responsive basic education. These mandates aim to promote inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, numerous studies highlight a disconnect between policy and practice. According to the Philippine

Commission on Women (2020), the degree of GAD mainstreaming varies widely, with urban schools more likely to implement GAD programs compared to those in rural settings due to better access to training and resources.

Lindo and Cabansag (2019) found that while teachers generally support the concept of gender equality, many are not adequately equipped to translate these values into classroom practices. They observed a lack of continuous capacity-building efforts and insufficient teaching materials tailored to address gender issues. Similarly, Alampay and Tindowen (2020) concluded that gender awareness among teachers tends to be superficial, often relying on stereotypes or symbolic compliance rather than integrating critical gender discourse into teaching methodologies.

GAD implementation in schools faces multiple systemic and cultural barriers. Ocampo (2021) emphasized the scarcity of localized GAD instructional materials and the tendency of some schools to delegate GAD-related responsibilities to undertrained focal persons. Cultural resistance remains a major hurdle, particularly in regions where gender norms remain deeply entrenched. Studies by Alvior (2020) and David & Dizon (2017) further indicate that lack of funding and leadership support constrain GAD integration in curriculum and co-curricular activities.

Research on the role of guidance counselors reveals similar challenges. Tolentino (2018) reported that while guidance counselors are often aware of GAD mandates, they are rarely involved in strategic decision-making regarding gender mainstreaming in their schools. Their roles remain limited to reactive interventions rather than proactive planning. Domingo (2020) observed that in many schools, GAD is largely event-based - commemorated during Women's Month or similar observances - but seldom embedded in core institutional programs.

This pattern is further reinforced by related studies of Pelino (2026) examining the role of educators in contexts where institutional support is limited. In a qualitative investigation on school-based risk management, *Managing Risks in Education: A Qualitative Study on Risk Management Practices* highlights how teachers and school personnel often assume additional responsibilities in addressing student vulnerabilities, frequently extending beyond formal role expectations. Similarly, *Career Stagnancy: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Unpromoted Teachers* by Pelino & Protacio (2026) reveals that educators experiencing career stagnation continue to demonstrate professional commitment through discretionary efforts, despite limited institutional recognition or advancement opportunities. These studies collectively suggest that in educational settings, institutional gaps are frequently compensated through informal, emotionally intensive, and often invisible labor. This reinforces the present study's finding that gender and equity work is sustained not only through formal

policy structures but through the relational and moral commitment of individual educators.

Further studies by UNESCO (2020) have emphasized that GAD integration is most effective when backed by institutional mechanisms such as monitoring tools, capacity-building programs, and leadership accountability frameworks. Schools with active GAD focal persons and engaged leadership demonstrate higher gender inclusivity in teaching practices and policy enactment.

Recent Australian research on educational leadership and equity governance further emphasizes the importance of structural embedding. Studies examining distributed leadership and school improvement have demonstrated that reform initiatives gain durability when incorporated into accountability systems and professional standards rather than remaining dependent on individual champions. This scholarship reinforces the argument advanced in the present study: sustainable gender equity requires institutional alignment across governance mechanisms, cultural norms, and professional expectations.

Invisible and Emotional Labor in Gender and Equity Work

International studies on gender and equity work in educational institutions highlight the often-unrecognized emotional, relational, and administrative labor carried by educators tasked with inclusion and gender advocacy. Such labor, frequently undertaken without formal designation or compensation, includes counseling, mediation, advocacy, and the creation of safe spaces for marginalized learners. Research suggests that when equity work relies heavily on personal commitment rather than institutional structures, it becomes vulnerable to burnout and discontinuity. This literature provides an important lens for understanding how gender mainstreaming is sustained or undermined at the school level.

Synthesis of the Review

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that gender equity reform frequently encounters structural constraints that inhibit full institutionalization. Across both Philippine and Australian contexts, research reveals recurring patterns of policy–practice decoupling, uneven normative consolidation, and reliance on discretionary advocacy. These findings underscore the need to examine gender reform not merely as policy compliance but as a governance process shaped by institutional alignment. This study extends existing scholarship by empirically analysing how institutional work compensates for partial structural embedding within a secondary school context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an instrumental qualitative case study design to generate theoretical insights into institutional processes shaping gender equity governance. The case was selected not for representativeness but for its analytical potential to illuminate institutional

dynamics under conditions of formal policy mandate and partial structural embedding. The aim was conceptual generalization rather than statistical generalization.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in a large public secondary school in Southeast Asia operating under a formal Gender and Development (GAD) mandate. Six participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in gender-related initiatives and governance responsibilities: four classroom teachers, one guidance counselor, and one school leader.

Participants were selected to capture perspectives across instructional, counseling, and leadership roles. Although numerically small, the sample enabled in-depth exploration of institutional processes. Recurring patterns across interviews indicated analytical sufficiency, particularly regarding themes of compliance, decoupling, and agency-dependent reform.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis of school-level gender plans and reports, and field observations. Interview protocols were informed by national gender policy frameworks and institutional theory contract.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected over a three-month period through semi-structured interviews that took a range of 90 to 120 minutes each, document analysis of school-level GAD plans and reports, and observational field notes from school activities.

Interview protocols were informed by institutional theory constructs, particularly Scott's regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted through iterative coding. First-cycle coding identified patterns. First-cycle coding identified patterns related to regulatory compliance and policy enactment. Second-cycle coding focused on institutional alignment, decoupling, and forms of institutional work.

Analytical rigor was strengthened through peer debriefing, reflexive memoing, and repeated comparison across data sources. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of interviews, documents, and observations. The researcher maintained reflexive awareness of positional proximity to the field and engaged in analytic distancing during interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic presentation of findings is organized to directly respond to the research questions. Each theme corresponds to a specific dimension of Gender and Development institutionalization, namely awareness,

existing practices, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening implementation. This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the code to answer the specific questions drawn from the statement of the problem.

Theme 1: Regulatory Compliance without Normative Internalization

Participants demonstrated clear awareness of formal gender mandates and departmental directives. Regulatory expectations were visible through commemorative activities, documentation practices, and public signaling of gender responsiveness. This reflects the presence of what Scott (2014) conceptualizes as a strong regulatory pillar, wherein formal rules and external accountability structures shape organizational behavior.

The findings illustrate partial institutionalization where external mandates produce visible conformity but fail to penetrate normative and cultural-cognitive domains. This aligns with Connell's (2020) analysis of the gender regime of public education, which argues that institutional norms often reproduce established patterns even under reformist policy frameworks.

As one participant noted: "We celebrate Women's Month and join the campaigns, but I think that's mostly how we practice GAD in school." Also, the GAD coordinator specifically stated that "I know GAD helps protect the rights of all students regardless of gender, but I think it's still mostly about activities like contests and seminars." Such statements indicate that gender equity within the school operates as a legitimacy signal rather than a structurally embedded practice or as a core pedagogical commitment. This phenomenon echoes Gewirtz and Cribb's (2021) argument that values-based reforms often struggle to shift embedded professional norms without structural reinforcement.

The regulatory pillar is present; however, normative consolidation remains weak. Without deep professional internalization, compliance remains episodic rather than transformative.

Theme 2: Policy–Practice Decoupling in School Governance

Despite formal mandates requiring integration into planning and budgeting systems, participants reported minimal embedding within lesson planning frameworks, school improvement processes, or monitoring mechanisms. Notably, the absence of a formally designated and trained GAD focal person illustrates weak structural anchoring.

According to Scott (2022), this condition constitutes institutional decoupling, where formal structures signal compliance while core organizational routines remain largely unchanged. Decoupling allows institutions to maintain legitimacy in regulatory environments while preserving existing governance patterns. Equity reform operates adjacent to, rather than integrated within, organizational systems.

A school leader reflected: "We support GAD in principle,

but it is not really part of our planning system. It depends on who initiates activities." Policy continuity, therefore, relies on discretionary initiative rather than formalized governance architecture. This statement is aligned with Datnow and Park's (2021) analysis of policy coherence, which suggests that without leadership integration and system-level alignment, policy initiatives often operate parallel to rather than within governance systems. Similarly, Thrupp and Willmont (2020) argue that policy enactment is shaped by local governance cultures that mediate formal mandates.

Theme 3: Symbolic Mainstreaming and Peripheral Integration

Gender initiatives were highly visible during specific observance but rarely linked to performance indicators, professional standards, or evaluation tools. Monitoring structures were limited, and integration into curriculum review processes remained inconsistent.

Such practices reflect what Maguire, Braun, and Ball (2022) describe as symbolic enactment, wherein schools demonstrate visible compliance while deeper governance routines remain stable. Symbolic mainstreaming enables institutional legitimacy without redistributing authority, resources, or accountability structures.

The absence of accountability mechanisms reinforces the peripheral status of gender reforms within the school's operational core. Equity becomes episodic rather than continuous.

Participants acknowledged that while awareness campaigns were meaningful, they were not sustained through institutional mechanisms: "We post materials and conduct activities, but it's not something we evaluate or include in our performance indicators". Also, the School Head states that "We support GAD in principle, but sometimes there's fear, like, will the parents complain if we talk about gender roles or LGBTQ?" This dynamic is consistent with Holloway and Brass's (2020) discussion of performativity, where accountability regimes privilege documentation and signaling over substantive change. The absence of accountability mechanisms reinforces the peripheral status of gender reform.

The absence of monitoring structures and accountability frameworks reinforces the symbolic character of mainstreaming efforts. Gender reform becomes performative rather than structurally transformative. Additionally, participant concerns about parental resistance align with Reay's (2021) argument that cultural politics mediate reform uptake. Cultural-cognitive resistance limits the extent to which gender equity becomes normalized within everyday school practice.

This, gender reform becomes performative rather than structurally transformative - visible but institutionally marginal.

Theme 4: Invisible Institutional Work and Emotional Labor as Governance Infrastructure

In the absence of strong structural embedding, individual educators assumed responsibility for sustaining gender

responsiveness through discretionary institutional work. Guidance counselors and teachers described engaging in emotional support, advocacy, mediation, and the creation of safe spaces without formal designation or compensation.

One guidance counsellor shared, “I attend GAD webinars even if they’re not required. No one assigns me, but students need someone to talk to. There is no focal person, so I just take it upon myself to talk to learners who are bullied for being different.” This finding extends Institutional Theory by illuminating how reform continuity may depend on what can be conceptualized as informal institutional carriers. Spillane and Diamond (2021) emphasize that distributed leadership shapes reform enactment; however, the present study focuses on recognition or formal authority.

This labor functions as an informal governance infrastructure. These educators act as institutional carriers, maintaining policy continuity through relational commitment rather than structural authority. While stabilizing in the short term, this arrangement exposes governance fragility. Reform becomes personalized rather than institutionalized. Emotional labor, though essential, remains invisible within workload models and accountability frameworks, increasing the risk of burnout and discontinuity.

O’Connor and Grady (2021) note that gender equity work in education often relies on informal relational labor disproportionately undertaken by committed individuals. This emotional and relational work becomes a stabilizing yet precarious governance infrastructure.

While such labor sustains reform in the short term, its invisibility within workload models and performance systems increases burnout risk and institutional discontinuity. From an institutional perspective, this signals governance fragility reform stability depends not on an architecture, but on personal conviction.

Theme 5: Agency-Dependent Reform and Structural Fragility

Across themes, a consistent governance pattern emerges, and gender equity is sustained through agency rather than institutional architecture. When committed individuals are present, reform gains visibility; when absent, momentum diminishes.

As one participant observed: “If someone is passionate about it, GAD becomes active. But if no one pushes, it becomes quiet.” This reveals the structural vulnerability of agency-dependent governance. Without alignment across institutional pillars—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive—policy enactment remains uneven and reversible. From a governance perspective, this condition represents fragile institutionalization. Equity reform persists, but precariously.

This also aligns with Eacott’s (2021) argument that educational reform is frequently mediated through relational positioning rather than formal structures. The

absence of alignment across Scott’s regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars produces what may be termed fragile institutionalization.

The participant observation— “If someone is passionate about it, GAD becomes active”—captures this vulnerability. Without structural embedding, equity governance remains reversible and uneven.

Wilkinson and Kemmis (2022) argue that sustainable educational change requires alignment between professional practice and institutional conditions. The present findings confirm this proposition: reform persists, but precariously, when institutional architecture fails to consolidate normative and cultural-cognitive transformation.

Discussion

This study reframes gender equity reform as a governance configuration rather than a programmatic initiative. The findings demonstrate that strong regulative mandates may generate visible compliance without normative consolidation or cultural-cognitive embedding. Under such conditions, institutional decoupling emerges: gender reform is symbolically present yet structurally peripheral. The data reveal a hybrid institutional arrangement characterized by regulatory alignment but weak integration into planning systems, accountability frameworks, and professional standards. Equity initiatives operate adjacent to core governance processes rather than within them. This configuration renders reform vulnerable to discontinuity.

The most analytically significant finding concerns the role of invisible institutional work. In the absence of structural embedding, educators assume responsibility for sustaining reform through relational, emotional, and discretionary labour. While stabilising in the short term, this compensatory work signals governance fragility. Reform continuity becomes contingent upon individual conviction rather than institutional architecture.

These findings resonate with Australian debates concerning policy enactment, leadership accountability, and equity governance. Across contexts, equity reform appears durable only when embedded within institutional systems that align regulatory mandates with normative expectations and shared professional understandings. Where such alignment is incomplete, reform remains agency-dependent and reversible.

Implications for Equity Governance

Reframing Gender Equity as Institutional Architecture rather than Programmatic Compliance.

The findings suggest that gender equity reforms require structural integration into leadership accountability systems, budgeting processes, and professional standards. When equity work remains dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional design, reform becomes precarious.

Embedding gender governance within formal institutional mechanisms reduces reliance on invisible

labor and enhances sustainability. This has implications for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to move beyond symbolic compliance toward durable equity transformation.

For Australian schooling systems, these findings underscore the importance of embedding gender equity in formal leadership standards, school review processes, and performance frameworks. Where equity work remains dependent on individual moral commitment rather than institutional architecture, reform becomes precarious. Australian policymakers may therefore consider strengthening structural accountability mechanisms to reduce reliance on discretionary labor.

Theoretical Contribution

This study advances institutional theory in education in two ways. First, it reconceptualizes gender equity reform as a governance configuration shaped by partial institutional alignment rather than simple policy compliance failure. By analyzing the interaction of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillar the study illustrates how reform can appear present yet remain structurally fragile. Second, the concept of invisible institutional carriers extends existing distributed leadership scholarship by foregrounding the compensatory institutional work undertaken in the absence of formal structural embedding. Rather than viewing discretionary advocacy as a leadership strength alone, the analysis interprets it as a symptom of incomplete institutionalization. This reframing shifts attention from individual agency toward institutional design as the central explanatory variable in equity reform sustainability.

Governance Implications

The findings suggest that gender equity reform is most durable when embedded within institutional architecture rather than sustained through discretionary advocacy. From a governance perspective, structural integration into leadership accountability systems, professional standards, and school review mechanisms reduces reliance on invisible institutional work.

For Australian education systems, the analysis highlights the importance of aligning regulatory mandates with normative consolidation and cultural-cognitive embedding. Equity reform that remains dependent on individual moral commitment risks instability. Sustainable gender governance requires institutional design that converts advocacy into structure.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reframes gender equity reform as a governance challenge rather than a programmatic initiative. While regulatory mandates generate visible compliance, durable institutionalisation requires alignment across regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions. In the absence of such alignment, reform becomes sustained through invisible institutional work rather than structural integration.

By conceptualizing educators as informal institutional carriers, the study contributes to institutional theory in education and offers a governance explanation for the fragility of equity reform. Although empirically grounded outside Australia, the institutional dynamics identified resonate with Australian debates concerning policy enactment, leadership accountability, and structural embedding. Gender equity cannot rely solely on individual commitment; it must be institutionally designed and structurally consolidated to ensure sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on a single-site instrumental case study involving a small purposive sample. While the aim was analytical rather than statistical generalization, findings should be interpreted as theoretically transferable rather than representative of broader systems. The focus on one school context limits the ability to assess variation across governance environments or policy regimes.

Future research may examine multiple school sites across different jurisdictions to test the robustness of the concept of agency-dependent reform and invisible institutional carriers. Comparative studies within Australian education systems would further illuminate how institutional alignment varies across accountability contexts and leadership models. Quantitative or mixed-method design could also operationalize governance fragility as a measurable construct, extending institutional theory into evaluative research.

Implications for Policy and Leadership

The findings suggest that gender equity reform requires structural embedding within governance systems rather than reliance on discretionary advocacy. Sustainable institutionalization depends on:

1. Integration of equity indicators into leadership accountability and school review frameworks.
2. Formal recognition of equity-related emotional and relational labor within workload models.
3. Systematic professional learning to strengthen normative consolidation across staff.
4. Monitoring mechanisms that move beyond event-based compliance toward curriculum and governance integration.

For Australian education systems, these findings highlight the importance of aligning regulatory mandates with institutional design. When reform remains agency-dependent, continuity becomes contingent. Embedding equity within formal structures reduces vulnerability and enhances long-term sustainability.

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