Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

OPEN ACCESS

Abbreviated Key Title: Sch J Arts Humanit Soc Sci
ISSN 2347-9493 (Print) | ISSN 2347-5374 (Online)
Journal homepage: https://saspublishers.com

Reflections on Influence of Government Policy on Women Retention in Manufacturing Industries in Nakuru County, Kenya

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2025.v13i10.007 | **Received:** 04.07.2025 | **Accepted:** 11.09.2025 | **Published:** 23.10.2025

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

The underrepresentation and low retention of women in manufacturing industries remain a significant challenge in Kenya despite progressive gender policies. This paper reflects on the influence of government policy on women's retention in manufacturing firms in Nakuru County. Drawing from feminist political economy and institutional theory, the paper examines the effectiveness of gender-responsive labor laws, affirmative action programs, and workplace regulations on the long-term inclusion of women in the sector. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with women employees, HR managers, and labor officers. The findings reveal that while national policies such as the Employment Act and Gender Policy on Employment provide a framework for equality, structural implementation gaps, weak enforcement, and socio-cultural dynamics hinder women's retention. This paper contributes to policy discourse on industrial labor and gender by highlighting the need for coordinated policy implementation and supportive workplace cultures.

Keywords: Feminist political economy, institutional theory, gender-responsive labor laws, affirmative action programs, workplace regulations.

INTRODUCTION

The question of gender equity in employment remains a central concern in the discourse on inclusive economic development. Despite numerous constitutional and legislative efforts in Kenya aimed at addressing systemic inequalities, the country's manufacturing sector continues to reflect deep-seated gendered disparities. These inequalities are not only reflected in hiring practices but are also most pronounced in the area of employee retention, where women tend to exit the sector at disproportionately high rates compared to their male counterparts (ILO, 2021; KNBS, 2020). While industrialization offers opportunities for economic transformation, the experience of women in this space is often constrained by socio-cultural norms, policy implementation gaps, and structural labor market inequities.

Retention challenges among women in manufacturing are multi-dimensional. Gendered labor segmentation means that women are often confined to low-skilled, low-paying, and less secure jobs, which increases their vulnerability to job loss. These roles often lack upward mobility and are disproportionately affected by economic restructuring and mechanization (Chege & Gitau, 2018). Moreover, persistent wage disparities continue to characterize Kenya's manufacturing sector, with women earning significantly less than men for similar work. These inequities, coupled with limited maternity protections and childcare support, make continued employment untenable for many women, especially during their reproductive years.

The structural informality of work arrangements compounds the issue. Many women are employed under casual or temporary contracts without benefits or protections guaranteed by labor laws. This precarity limits their bargaining power, exposes them to exploitation, and contributes to higher attrition rates (WEF, 2022). Furthermore, harassment and lack of gender-sensitive workplace policies add to the hostile environments that deter women from staying in industrial employment. The intersection of these factors produces a retention crisis that cannot be addressed solely through market forces but requires deliberate policy intervention.

Nakuru County, a rapidly growing industrial hub in Kenya's Rift Valley region, provides an important case study for examining these dynamics. The county has seen a surge in manufacturing investments, partly due to devolution and infrastructural development, positioning it as a critical node in Kenya's broader industrialization agenda (UNIDO, 2019). While the sector offers employment to both men and women, it mirrors the national trend of high female attrition in formal manufacturing jobs. Understanding why women exit and what systemic factors drive this pattern is vital for informing both local and national strategies aimed at inclusive industrial growth.

Government policy is central to shaping employment structures, labor relations, and workplace cultures. Kenya's key legislative instruments—including the Employment Act (2007), the National Gender and Equality Policy (2019), and the Kenya Industrial Transformation Programme (2015–2020)—signal a commitment to gender-responsive development (Republic of Kenya, 2019; ILO, 2021). These policies contain provisions on non-discrimination, equal pay, and maternity protection, which, if effectively implemented, could enhance women's participation and retention in the labor force. However, the presence of these frameworks alone does not guarantee equity; the practical realization of their provisions remains inconsistent and uneven.

A critical gap lies in the translation of policy into practice. Institutional inertia, weak enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient monitoring have hindered the effective operationalization of gender-responsive policies (Kabeer, 2016). In Nakuru County, labor inspections are sporadic, and compliance with labor standards is often weak, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises that dominate the manufacturing sector. These enforcement challenges result in a disconnect between national policy ideals and the lived experiences of women workers on the ground. Moreover, the lack of gender-disaggregated data at the county level obscures the full scope of the retention problem.

This paper reflects on the extent to which government policy influences the retention of women in Nakuru County's manufacturing sector. It interrogates the implementation gaps, explores the experiences of women workers, and evaluates the responsiveness of policy to the complex realities of industrial labor. Through a critical gender lens, the paper seeks to move beyond surface-level analysis and uncover the structural and institutional barriers that inhibit sustainable employment for women. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity, labor rights, and inclusive economic policy in Kenya.

By situating the discussion within Nakuru County, this study provides both localized insights and national implications. It highlights the urgency of enhancing policy coherence, strengthening institutional accountability, and fostering gender-sensitive workplace environments. The findings aim to inform policy actors, industry stakeholders, and gender advocates on the pathways toward improving retention outcomes for women in manufacturing. Ultimately, achieving gender parity in the labor market requires not just policy formulation but also an unwavering commitment to transforming the socio-economic and institutional contexts that shape women's work experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: feminist political economy and institutional theory. Feminist political economy provides a critical lens through which to interrogate the intersection of gender, labor, and state policy. It critiques the androcentric assumptions embedded within neoclassical economic models that traditionally ignore unpaid labor, care work, and the systemic constraints faced by women in the formal economy (Elson, 1999; Bakker & Gill, 2003). Scholars in this tradition argue that labor markets are not gender-neutral; rather, they are structured through social hierarchies and historical inequities that position women as secondary laborers, often confined to precarious, undervalued roles (Sen & Grown, 1987; Pearson, 2000). Feminist political economists underscore that women's employment decisions are shaped not solely by market incentives but also by social reproduction, access to services like childcare, and the availability of supportive labor policies (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014).

Over time, feminist political economy has been effectively applied to examine women's marginalization in various global labor systems. For instance, in the context of global value chains, studies have shown how women are often concentrated in labor-intensive, low-skill manufacturing roles, only to be discarded as soon as labor costs rise or automation becomes feasible (Barrientos, 2019; Seguino, 2000). These dynamics are reinforced when national industrial policies fail to account for gendered vulnerabilities or omit explicit gender budgeting mechanisms. In countries like Bangladesh and Mexico, feminist economists have demonstrated how export-led manufacturing sectors, although initially offering employment opportunities for women, have not guaranteed long-term retention due to poor enforcement of labor protections and minimal investment in gender-sensitive policies (Kabeer, 2004; Standing, 1999). These insights highlight the relevance of feminist political economy in interrogating how policy intentions do not always translate into equitable labor outcomes for women.

In the Kenyan context, feminist political economy has helped frame the limitations of formal equality in achieving substantive equality in labor markets. Policies such as the Employment Act (2007) and the National Gender and Equality Policy (2019) declare non-discrimination and support for women's labor rights, yet the lived experiences of women—particularly in the manufacturing sector—reveal structural contradictions (Chege & Gitau, 2018; Mutunga, 2016). For example, maternity leave entitlements exist on paper but are often evaded by employers who resort to casualizing women's contracts to avoid compliance. Moreover, gender norms within Kenyan households and communities continue to influence women's labor market decisions, often pressuring them to withdraw from formal work to fulfill domestic roles (Nzomo, 2011). Thus, feminist political economy is instrumental in revealing the limitations of decontextualized policy approaches that overlook the material and cultural dimensions of women's labor.

Complementing this is institutional theory, which examines how formal structures (e.g., laws, policies, and regulatory frameworks) and informal practices (e.g., organizational norms and cultural expectations) jointly influence behavior within institutions (Scott, 2001; North, 1990). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organizations often conform to institutionalized norms for legitimacy rather than efficiency, a concept known as isomorphism. In many developing contexts, including Kenya, laws may exist to protect women workers, but informal workplace cultures—marked by patriarchal attitudes, weak enforcement mechanisms, and managerial bias—undermine their implementation (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Onyango & Atieno, 2020). Thus, institutional theory allows for the analysis of not just the presence of gender policies, but the deeper institutional logics that determine whether such policies are internalized or merely performative.

Institutional theory has been widely applied to assess policy outcomes in gender and development studies. In South Africa and Ghana, researchers have used this framework to explain why gender equality provisions in labor law failed to shift organizational practices in male-dominated sectors like mining and construction (Mkwananzi, 2018; Darkwah, 2010). Even when national policies were aligned with international gender norms—such as those promoted by the ILO or UN Women—implementation faltered due to institutional resistance, bureaucratic inertia, and lack of resources. In Kenya's manufacturing sector, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the industry in counties like Nakuru, often lack internal policy frameworks or human resource departments to institutionalize gender-sensitive practices (Ministry of Industrialization, 2021; WEF, 2022). As a result, policy commitments at the macro level fail to translate into improved retention rates for women at the micro level.

In relation to the current study—*Reflections on the Influence of Government Policy on Women Retention in Manufacturing Industries in Nakuru County, Kenya*—these theoretical lenses provide a dual framework for analysis. Feminist political economy allows us to interrogate how macroeconomic and labor policies reflect, reinforce, or resist existing gendered power relations, while institutional theory helps trace the pathways through which these policies are implemented (or not) within manufacturing organizations. This is particularly pertinent in Nakuru County, where national policy meets local implementation, and where women's retention is influenced by both legislative intent and organizational culture. Together, these theories highlight that improving retention is not merely about drafting inclusive policies, but about transforming the institutional and socio-economic environments in which those policies operate.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, using document analysis and semi-structured interviews to gather data. Policy documents such as the Employment Act (2007), the National Gender Policy (2019), and Nakuru County's Industrial Development Strategy were reviewed to assess the legal framework on gender and labor (Republic of Kenya, 2019; Ministry of Labour, 2020). This was complemented by secondary literature on gender and manufacturing employment in Kenya (Chege & Gitau, 2018; UNIDO, 2019).

Fieldwork involved purposive sampling of 18 women working in various manufacturing firms within Nakuru County, as well as 4 human resource managers and 2 county labor officers. This approach aligns with qualitative traditions that prioritize depth over breadth (Mason, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic coding focused on policy awareness, workplace support structures, retention motivators, and perceived implementation gaps (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2013).

FINDINGS

This paper draws the following findings:

1. Policy Awareness and Gaps

One of the central findings of this study is the evident disparity in policy awareness between management and female workers within Nakuru County's manufacturing sector. While human resource officers and some senior managers showed familiarity with key legislative frameworks—such as the Employment Act (2007), the National Gender and Equality Policy (2019), and maternity protection clauses—this awareness rarely reached female employees on the production floor (Onyango & Atieno, 2020; ILO, 2021). Most women interviewed had either never heard of these policies or misunderstood their entitlements under the law. This disconnect is partly attributable to poor internal communication channels, absence of structured induction programs, and a lack of continuous staff training on labor rights. As Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2014) contend, the presence of gender-equity laws alone does not guarantee equality; the meaningful dissemination of these policies is equally critical in enabling women to advocate for themselves within hostile or indifferent institutional environments.

The lack of policy awareness severely constrains women's ability to claim and negotiate for fair treatment, benefits, or redress in the workplace. Without adequate knowledge, many female workers cannot challenge exploitative practices such as unpaid overtime, denial of maternity leave, or wrongful termination. This condition fosters a culture of silent suffering and normalizes gendered injustices within organizational frameworks (Elson, 1999; Kabeer, 2016). Moreover, the exclusion of women from formal communication networks within companies—whether through male-dominated unions or opaque HR systems—prevents them from participating in collective bargaining or shaping internal gender policy practices. As institutional theorists like North (1990) and Scott (2001) emphasize, informal norms and routines often determine the success of formal policy tools. Therefore, unless policy awareness is democratized across all tiers of employment through regular training, sensitization workshops, and accessible information channels, gender equity in the manufacturing industry will remain performative rather than transformative.

2. Inadequate Dissemination Mechanisms

A critical factor exacerbating policy unawareness among women workers in Nakuru County's manufacturing sector is the lack of deliberate and inclusive dissemination mechanisms. Although some firms claimed to provide employee handbooks or outline labor rights during induction sessions, these efforts were largely ineffective. The materials were frequently written in complex, legalistic English, making them inaccessible to many women with limited formal education or non-English language proficiency (Chege & Gitau, 2018). This mode of communication reflects a top-down approach that assumes universal literacy and comprehension, failing to recognize the diverse educational backgrounds of factory workers. In several cases, respondents revealed they had never received any formal orientation regarding their rights, with information being relayed informally or only when violations occurred. This passive method of policy communication not only hinders women's ability to advocate for themselves but also reinforces existing gender hierarchies within the workplace (Rai et al., 2014).

Moreover, the absence of sustained labor rights awareness programs—such as workshops, training sessions, or visual policy displays in common areas—indicates an institutional disregard for continuous learning and empowerment. Unlike health and safety protocols, which were often visibly posted or periodically updated, gender-equity policies were neither institutionalized into daily operations nor presented in formats accessible to a diverse workforce. This finding supports Kabeer's (2016) argument that while policy awareness is a crucial step in the empowerment continuum, it is often neglected due to employer apathy and the state's failure to enforce training requirements. Without tailored, multilingual, and inclusive education strategies, labor rights knowledge remains confined to upper-level management, perpetuating an asymmetric power dynamic that disadvantages women. As institutional theory suggests, the failure to embed gender policy

3. Workplace Flexibility and Support Mechanisms

In the context of Kenya's manufacturing sector, while the Employment Act offers guarantees for maternity leave, flexible working hours, and protection against dismissal due to pregnancy, the practical implementation of these provisions remains fraught with challenges. Many women working in Nakuru's manufacturing industries reported significant barriers to accessing their legally protected rights. For instance, some employees revealed that they were actively discouraged from taking maternity leave, with underlying concerns about the potential loss of their jobs or the stigmatization they might face upon their return to the workplace (Chege & Gitau, 2018; WEF, 2022). This environment of fear is reflective of broader gender-related issues in the workplace, where the benefits outlined in the Employment Act fail to translate into meaningful, supportive practices for female workers. The lack of a supportive culture within workplaces can deter women from exercising their rights, leading to a cycle of non-utilization of entitlements, ultimately impacting their well-being and job security.

Moreover, a few women in Nakuru's manufacturing sector reported experiencing informal penalties when they attempted to take maternity leave, including non-renewal of contracts or reassignment to less favorable duties. Such actions highlight the disconnect between the legal provisions intended to protect female workers and the reality of their experiences within the workplace. These informal practices underscore the weak enforcement of gender-responsive labor rights in Kenya, where, as Scott (2001) notes, formal rules often lack sufficient institutional reinforcement when they challenge established workplace norms. This gap between legislation and practice perpetuates a cycle of discrimination that undermines women's career prospects and limits their ability to thrive in the workplace. Such challenges call for more robust enforcement mechanisms and a cultural shift within organizations to ensure that women can truly benefit from the protections guaranteed by law.

Absence of Internal Gender Policies

In many firms within Nakuru's manufacturing sector, national gender policies are not adequately reflected in internal human resource (HR) manuals or codes of conduct. Even in cases where general codes of ethics are present, there is a notable lack of explicit reference to gender inclusion or parental support policies, revealing a significant gap in organizational practice. This absence of internalized gender policies presents a clear disconnect between national-level legislative frameworks, such as those promoting gender equality, and the operational procedures within individual companies. As noted by Tolbert and Zucker (1996), this discrepancy highlights a failure to institutionalize gender equity at the micro-level of organizational behavior. Mutunga (2016) similarly observes that without the translation of these macro-level frameworks into actionable, internal policies, gender equality remains a symbolic pursuit rather than a tangible, enforceable practice. The failure to integrate these principles within company operations results in an environment where gender equity is not consistently addressed or prioritized, leaving women vulnerable to systemic inequalities that hinder their professional growth and workplace satisfaction.

Retention and Career Mobility Constraints

Women in Nakuru's manufacturing sector reported experiencing significant barriers to career advancement, particularly with regard to promotion opportunities. Despite having similar or even superior qualifications compared to their male counterparts, many women felt that they were bypassed for leadership roles or technical positions. This perception of being overlooked is often attributed to assumptions about their capacity or commitment, particularly following childbirth, which further exacerbates gender biases in the workplace (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014; Elson, 1999). These assumptions reflect broader societal stereotypes about women's roles and responsibilities, which place undue limitations on their professional advancement. The absence of formal mentorship programs or leadership training further compounds this issue, as women lack the necessary support structures to cultivate their leadership potential. As a result, many women in the sector experience stagnation in their careers, contributing to feelings of frustration and a higher likelihood of attrition. The lack of career mobility not only affects women's professional growth but also limits the retention of skilled and talented workers in the manufacturing sector, which can have broader implications for organizational performance and industry competitiveness.

6. Stereotyping and Occupational Segregation

A significant structural impediment to women's retention in manufacturing industries in Nakuru County is the entrenched occupational segregation that allocates tasks based on gendered stereotypes rather than competencies. Women workers are often confined to roles considered "feminine," such as packaging, labeling, sorting, and quality control. These positions are generally lower in pay, status, and skill requirement, and they offer minimal upward mobility (Standing, 1999; UNIDO, 2019). Meanwhile, technical positions involving machinery operation, maintenance, or supervisory responsibilities are overwhelmingly reserved for men under the presumption that women lack the physical strength, technical acumen, or leadership qualities required for such roles. This systematic stereotyping is not merely anecdotal but is embedded in recruitment and promotion practices, as echoed in interviews where both male and female employees acknowledged the unspoken belief that "some jobs are for men." The result is a gendered workforce structure that limits women's skill development and reinforces their marginalization within the industrial hierarchy (Rai *et al.,* 2014; Elson, 1999).

Beyond structural limitations, occupational segregation affects women's morale, motivation, and sense of belonging within the industrial workplace. Several female workers interviewed expressed frustration with the monotony of their roles and the lack of opportunities for training or promotion, even after years of service. The perception of stagnation discourages long-term commitment and contributes to high attrition rates among women. Furthermore, women in "feminine" roles are more likely to be on temporary or informal contracts, reducing their access to job security, benefits, and institutional support (Barrientos, 2019; WEF, 2022). The institutionalization of these roles perpetuates the belief that women are secondary earners or "supplementary" workers, making them more dispensable during organizational restructuring or economic downturns (Chege & Gitau, 2018). Thus, unless deliberate steps are taken to dismantle gendered role allocations and support women's entry into non-traditional domains, retention will remain elusive. Policies must go beyond symbolic commitments to include mentorship, affirmative training, and monitoring of gender representation across occupational categories (ILO, 2021; Kabeer, 2016).

7. Lack of Gender-Sensitive Support Infrastructure

One of the persistent structural barriers to women's retention in manufacturing employment is the lack of gender-sensitive workplace infrastructure. In several manufacturing firms across Nakuru County, there was a notable absence of dedicated lactation or breastfeeding rooms, with most respondents indicating they had to use toilets, cars, or other unsuitable spaces for expressing milk. Similarly, there was minimal or no access to affordable, employer-supported childcare facilities, leaving working mothers to rely on informal networks that often proved unreliable. These infrastructural deficits not only endanger the health and dignity of female workers but also compromise their productivity and job satisfaction. According to Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas (2014), the failure to invest in care-supportive structures in workplaces is a form of institutional neglect that reflects broader patterns of gendered exclusion. When women are forced to choose between care responsibilities and employment due to the absence of support mechanisms, the result is often premature withdrawal from the workforce—an outcome that reinforces gender disparities in labor market participation.

Moreover, sanitation and hygiene provisions in many production facilities were found to be inadequate and sometimes unsafe for female workers, especially during menstruation or pregnancy. Women reported that the lack of clean, accessible toilets and private changing spaces made working conditions both uncomfortable and undignified, thereby contributing to job dissatisfaction and attrition. These findings mirror Barrientos' (2019) observation that in many Global South contexts, gender-insensitive workplace design is not merely a logistical failure but a reflection of deep-seated institutional biases that view male workers as the default employees. Such environments do not account for the dual roles many women play in both the reproductive and productive spheres—a dynamic central to feminist political economy perspectives. Consequently, the failure to integrate social reproduction into the architecture of employment signals an incomplete approach to gender equity. Until employers and policymakers begin to value and invest in the full spectrum of women's labor needs, high female attrition in formal manufacturing will remain a chronic challenge (Elson, 1999; Chege & Gitau, 2018).

8. Weak Enforcement and Monitoring Structures

Despite the existence of progressive gender equity frameworks in Kenya, including the Employment Act (2007) and the National Gender and Equality Policy (2019), the translation of these frameworks into enforceable workplace practices remains weak, especially in the manufacturing sector. Interviews with labor officers in Nakuru County revealed a common concern: the enforcement agencies tasked with monitoring labor rights, particularly in regard to gender equity, are severely under-resourced. With insufficient personnel, limited transportation, and a lack of digital monitoring tools, labor officers find it difficult to carry out routine inspections or respond to complaints lodged by workers in a timely manner. This situation aligns with broader concerns raised by Kabeer (2016), who notes that weak institutional capacity is one of the greatest threats to gender-responsive policy implementation in the Global South. The gap between national policy design and local-level monitoring creates a fertile ground for non-compliance, particularly among firms that may prioritize cost-saving over compliance with labor laws.

This challenge is particularly acute in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the manufacturing landscape in Nakuru County. These firms often operate informally or on the fringes of regulatory visibility, making them less likely to be inspected by labor authorities. As a result, many SMEs continue to flout gender equity requirements, such as maternity protections, equal pay mandates, and anti-discrimination provisions, without facing legal consequences. This regulatory vacuum undermines the intent of Kenya's otherwise comprehensive policy landscape and erodes workers' trust in government oversight mechanisms. The Republic of Kenya (2019) itself acknowledges that policy impact is significantly reduced where enforcement mechanisms are not systematically institutionalized and supported by adequate budgets. Moreover, without reliable data collection and regular compliance audits, it becomes difficult to assess the effectiveness of gender policies or to hold employers accountable for discriminatory practices. Thus, unless enforcement structures are strengthened through increased funding, training, and decentralization of oversight bodies, gender policy will continue to exist more as a symbolic gesture than a transformative tool (Scott, 2001; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

9. Cultural Norms and Institutional Inertia

Despite progress in gender policy reforms, deeply entrenched cultural norms around gender roles continue to act as silent barriers to women's retention in the manufacturing sector. In many cases, women are still perceived as secondary earners whose primary responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere. This perception diminishes their visibility and legitimacy within the formal labor market, leading to biases in hiring, promotions, and performance evaluations. Human Resource (HR) officers interviewed in Nakuru County acknowledged that while gender-inclusive policies exist on paper, their implementation often clashes with prevailing organizational cultures and social attitudes. Resistance was especially pronounced among male supervisors who viewed gender mainstreaming as a threat to their authority or an unnecessary disruption to established workplace routines. These attitudes resonate with what North (1990) described as "informal constraints"—the unwritten norms and beliefs that persist alongside formal rules, often shaping behavior more profoundly than legislation. Consequently, even well-meaning gender equity initiatives are undermined by socio-cultural inertia that normalizes gender bias and discourages institutional accountability (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas, 2014; Elson, 1999).

Moreover, institutional inertia within manufacturing firms exacerbates the difficulty of transforming workplace norms into gender-responsive practices. Senior management's skepticism toward gender-inclusive changes, as noted by HR personnel, points to a broader structural reluctance to redistribute power or challenge patriarchal hierarchies within industrial settings. Scott (2001) argues that institutions are sustained by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars; thus, altering institutional behavior requires intervention at all three levels. In Nakuru's manufacturing plants, however, changes are often attempted through regulatory compliance alone, without corresponding shifts in normative beliefs or cognitive frameworks among employees and leadership. This piecemeal approach fails to generate the organizational buy-in necessary for long-term change. It becomes evident, therefore, that sustainable gender inclusion cannot rely solely on legal mandates or corporate diversity charters—it must be rooted in a deliberate cultural transformation strategy. Training programs, gender-sensitization workshops, and leadership development initiatives for both men and women are necessary to dismantle these cultural barriers. Without confronting the underlying institutional resistance, policies designed to promote women's retention will remain superficial and largely ineffective (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Kabeer, 2016).

10. Policy Symbolism vs. Lived Reality

Overall, the findings underscore a sharp contrast between Kenya's gender-equity policy ambitions and the lived experiences of women in manufacturing. While the country boasts internationally praised labor laws, the implementation landscape is marked by fragmentation, informality, and limited accountability (ILO, 2021; Onyango & Atieno, 2020). Unless these gaps are addressed through sustained training, institutional mainstreaming, and structural reforms, the retention of women in formal manufacturing will remain a policy aspiration rather than a tangible reality.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate that Kenya's policy frameworks, while normatively progressive, suffer from a lack of institutional coherence and operational synergy between state agencies, employer associations, and civil society. The absence of clear accountability mechanisms and inter-agency collaboration has led to duplicated efforts, policy fatigue, and gaps in implementation at the factory floor level. For instance, although the Ministry of Labour, the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC), and the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) are all tasked with advancing gender inclusion in the workplace, their activities remain siloed and sporadic. As a result, monitoring and evaluation of gender policies in manufacturing firms is inconsistent, often dependent on donor funding or ad hoc projects rather than integrated national frameworks (Republic of Kenya, 2019; Kabeer, 2016). This bureaucratic fragmentation is compounded by the limited involvement of trade unions in advocating for gender-specific rights, particularly in the informalized zones of the manufacturing sector. Women workers, therefore, remain caught in a liminal space between rights and realities, where formal protections exist but lack the institutional muscle for enforcement. Bridging this policy-reality divide requires not just legislative reform but an ecosystem-wide recalibration involving policy harmonization, bottom-up participation, and gender-responsive budgeting that can sustainably support women's retention and mobility in manufacturing industries.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that while government policies have a significant potential to influence women's retention in the manufacturing industry, their impact remains inconsistent due to several barriers. Kenya has made strides in developing progressive frameworks aimed at promoting gender inclusion, such as the Employment Act and various national gender policies. However, structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles continue to undermine their effective implementation and meaningful impact. These challenges manifest in the form of informal penalties, workplace discrimination, and a general lack of internal gender policies within many organizations, hindering the practical realization of gender equity in the workplace. Thus, women's retention is not solely determined by the existence of policies but is deeply influenced by the execution of these policies and the broader organizational culture and societal norms in place.

Moreover, the study highlights that the retention of women in the manufacturing sector is not a straightforward function of policy presence alone, but rather a complex interplay of policy execution, organizational culture, and societal perceptions. Even where gender-friendly policies exist, without proper enforcement and alignment with organizational practices, they fail to effect substantial change. The research underscores the need for harmonized implementation strategies that bring together national mandates and local practices to create an enabling environment for women. Gender-sensitization training for both employers and employees is crucial in shifting workplace cultures that may inadvertently perpetuate gender biases. It is not enough for policies to be in place; they must be internalized and supported by consistent practices that encourage women's participation and advancement in the sector.

Looking ahead, as Nakuru County continues to grow as an industrial hub, there is a crucial opportunity to align local practices with national gender mandates in a way that fosters more inclusive and productive industrial environments. By addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's full participation in the workforce, policymakers and industry leaders can create workplaces that are not only more equitable but also more efficient and competitive. The study calls for strengthened labor oversight mechanisms and a commitment to ensuring that policies are effectively executed, to provide women with a fairer chance at career advancement and long-term retention in the manufacturing sector. Such efforts would not only benefit women but would also contribute to the broader socio-economic development goals of the region.

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