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Beyond the "Him-Her-ing" Dichotomy: Unpacking Gendered Power Logics in Tanzanian Public Administration

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Abstract

Despite decades of policy commitment to gender equity in Tanzania, substantive inequality within public administration endures. This study moves beyond quantifying women's underrepresentation to investigate the discursive and performative mechanisms that sustain a gendered power logic, termed him-her-ing. Situated within post-structural feminist theory and drawing on qualitative data from 21 in-depth interviews and a critical review of policy documents, this paper reveals how administrative practices—from leadership norms to routine task allocation—continuously reproduce a binary that privileges masculine-coded authority. Findings demonstrate that ostensibly neutral bureaucratic procedures, religious and customary influences, and informal patronage networks coalesce to marginalize feminine subjectivities, even within inclusive policy frameworks. The study concludes that dismantling this logic requires not merely adding women to existing structures but fundamentally reimagining administrative culture through feminist pedagogies and intersectional institutional audits.

Keywords: Gender binary, Administrative power, Post-structural feminism, Intersectionality, Tanzania, Performativity

Introduction

The institutionalization of gender equality agendas in Tanzania, marked by milestones such as the National Gender Policy (2000) and commitments to international frameworks including CEDAW and SDG 5, presents a compelling paradox. Despite these progressive legal and policy instruments, hierarchical gender structures exhibit a remarkable persistence within the machinery of the state. This gap between formal inclusion and substantive inequity forms the core problematic of this study. While women's numerical representation has improved in certain arenas, particularly through quota-based mechanisms, their authority, influence, and capacity to reshape institutional culture remain circumscribed by deeply embedded normative codes (UN Women Tanzania, 2025).

This study posits that this persistence can be understood through the conceptual lens of *him-her-ing*, an institutionalized logic that actively reproduces gender binaries across administrative domains. This logic operates not merely through overt discrimination but through subtle, routinized practices that associate legitimate authority, rationality, and leadership with masculinized norms, while positioning femininity as supplemental, emotional, or subordinate.

To empirically ground this problem, the structural reality of gendered imbalance must be made visible. As demonstrated in Table 1, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior decision-making echelons across executive, bureaucratic, parliamentary, and local government institutions. Official data show that women occupy roughly 28–36 percent of cabinet positions, approximately one-fifth of senior civil service posts, and markedly fewer top appointed local executive offices such as District Commissioners (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2024; The United Republic of Tanzania, 2025; UN Women, 2024).

Table 1: Gender Representation Status in Key Tanzanian Public Institutions

Institution / Leadership Level	**Approx. Percentage of Women**	**Key Source**	**Implied "Him-Her-ing" Dynamic**
Cabinet Ministerial Positions	~28–36%	Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); UN Women Tanzania (2025)	Women are disproportionately assigned to socially coded "soft" portfolios (e.g., community development, health), while "hard" ministries (finance, defence, energy) remain male-dominated.
Senior Civil Service (Permanent Secretaries & Directors)	~17–21%	The United Republic of Tanzania (2025); UN Women (2024)	A steep attrition pipeline toward the apex of bureaucratic authority, where masculinized leadership styles are normalized and rewarded.
Parliamentary Leadership (Committee Chairs)	~35–38% women MPs; fewer chairs	UN Women Tanzania (2025); IPU (2024)	Numerical inclusion through quotas masks gendered gatekeeping of influential oversight and agenda-setting committees.
Local Government Executive Leadership (District Commissioners)	~12–26%	UN Women (2024); The United Republic of Tanzania (2025)	Reinforces masculine authority in territorially grounded executive power and discretionary decision-making.

Note. Figures are indicative and synthesized from official government reports, UN Women evaluations, and IPU datasets. Variations reflect differences between elective and appointed positions.

This paper, therefore, asks: *How is him-her-ing dichotomy performatively sustained within Tanzanian public administration, and through what institutional mechanisms does it resist transformative gender equity policies?* The purpose is to deconstruct the symbolic and procedural architecture that maintains binary gender arrangements, moving beyond an additive model of inclusion to a transformative critique of administrative power itself (Benschop & Verloo, 2018).

The significance of this inquiry is threefold. First, it contributes to feminist political theory by applying post-structural lenses to the empirical context of African bureaucracy. Second, it offers a diagnostic tool for policymakers and practitioners, shifting attention from representation gaps to the cultural and discursive logics that produce them. Finally, it aligns with decolonial feminist scholarship by centering the Tanzanian experience and interrogating the intersection of colonial bureaucratic legacies, religious norms, and global gender governance frameworks (Chilisa, 2017; Tamale, 2020).

Literature Review

A robust body of literature informs this study, spanning feminist state theory, African feminist critique, and empirical analyses of gender in bureaucracy. This review synthesizes these strands to identify the gap this study fills. Post-structural feminism provides the primary theoretical scaffold. Judith Butler's concept of performativity is pivotal, suggesting gender is not what one *is* but what one *does* through stylized, repetitive acts within a regulatory frame (Butler, 1990). In bureaucracy, this translates to the daily performance of administrative roles—chairing meetings, writing directives, allocating tasks—which are imbued with gendered expectations. Michel Foucault's insights into discourse and power complement this, revealing how administrative language, policy documents, and "best practice" models function as technologies that produce certain subjects as legitimate (the decisive male leader) and marginalize others (Foucault, 1977). Together, they move analysis from static structures to the dynamic *process* of gendering institutions.

Western-centric feminist frameworks often fail to capture the complex terrain of gender in post-colonial Africa. Scholars like Sylvia Tamale and Bagele Chilisa advocate for decolonial epistemologies that center African lived experiences and confront the entangled legacies of colonialism, customary law, and patriarchal religious traditions (Tamale, 2020; Chilisa, 2017). Their work warns against the uncritical importation of gender mainstreaming models, which can become technocratic exercises that overlook localized power dynamics. This study heeds this call by employing *him-her-ing* as an analytic born from observing Tanzanian administrative practice.

Existing empirical work on Tanzanian administration predominantly focuses on quantifying disparities in representation or evaluating specific policy outcomes (Mwaipopo et al., 2011).

A smaller strand identifies cultural barriers. However, a significant gap remains: few studies deploy a performative or discursive lens to investigate *how* inequality is actively produced and normalized in the mundane, everyday interactions of bureaucratic life. Studies often document the *outcome* but less frequently dissect the *ongoing process* that recreates this outcome daily. This study aims to bridge this gap by using the *him-her-ing* metaphor to guide a micro-level analysis of administrative practice, thereby offering a richer explanation for the stubborn persistence highlighted in Table 1.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design informed by feminist methodological principles, prioritizing depth, context, and the nuanced exploration of power (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The aim was to generate rich, empirical data on the lived experiences and discursive constructions of gender within administrative settings.

The study utilized a multi-method approach to enable triangulation and enhance validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Primary data was collected through 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants purposively sampled from various tiers of Tanzanian public administration. The cohort comprised six senior administrators, five middle-level managers, seven entry-level officers, two gender specialists, and one national-level policy analyst. Interviews explored themes of leadership perceptions, career progression narratives, daily routines, and interpretations of gender policies. To situate interview data within the formal policy framework, a critical discourse analysis was performed on key documents (Fairclough, 2013). The search and selection were guided by subjects central to the *him-her-ing* dynamic, including the National Gender Policy, the Public Service Management Act, ministerial strategic plans, and public speeches by senior officials on reform and equity.

Data analysis was an iterative, two-stage process. First, interview transcripts and document passages were coded thematically using NVivo software. Following the transcription of interviews and preparation of documents, the data was imported into NVivo (Version 14) for systematic coding and thematic analysis. An inductive approach was initially employed, generating over [e.g., 85] free nodes from the textual data. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, these codes were clustered into sub-themes (child nodes) and, ultimately, synthesized into the four primary themes (parent nodes) presented in Table 2. This structure forms the empirical architecture of the findings. The 'Sources Coded' and 'References' columns demonstrate the prevalence and saturation of these themes across the dataset, ensuring the analysis is grounded in a broad base of evidence.

Moreover, the *him-her-ing* framework was actively used as a sensitizing concept to interpret these codes, directing analytical attention toward how observed practices *performed* a binary logic. For instance, codes about task allocation were examined for how they enacted a gendered division of labour, moving analysis from *what* was said to *how* it reproduced a specific power logic. The study adhered to strict ethical protocols: informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed using pseudonyms, and research clearance was secured. A feminist ethic of care and reflexivity guided engagements, acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in the research process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings structured to first restate the analytical journey, then establish historical context, before detailing the core themes that emerged from the data. Table 2 presents the structured output of the inductive thematic analysis conducted using NVivo software. It details the parent nodes (primary themes), child nodes (sub-themes), and illustrative free nodes (specific codes) that emerged from the data, along with their source distribution and reference count. This format demonstrates the empirical density and analytical process behind the "him-her-ing" framework.

Table 2: NVivo Thematic Analysis Output - Codes, Sources, and References for Key Themes

Child Node (Sub-Theme)	Illustrative Free Nodes (Specific Codes)	Sources Coded	References
1. Gendered Performance of Administrative Labour			

Child Node (Sub-Theme)	**Illustrative Free Nodes (Specific Codes)**	**Sources Coded**	**References**
1.1 Task Allocation by Gender	• Assignment of 'hard' technical tasks • Delegation of 'soft' logistical work • Gendered assumption of specializations	16 Interviews 8 Documents	47
1.2 Meeting & Interaction Dynamics	• Men solicited for technical opinions • Women managing minutes & comfort • Interruption patterns based on gender	14 Interviews 3 Documents	32
1.3 Gendered Career Pathwaying	• Fast-tracking via technical roles (men) • Sidelining into support tracks (women) • CV/portfolio differentiation over time	12 Interviews 4 Documents	30
2. Discursive Construction of Competence			
2.1 Language of Merit & Leadership	• Valuing "decisiveness," "assertiveness" • "Forceful leadership" as ideal in docs • "Independent strategic thinker" criteria	11 Interviews 7 Documents	41
2.2 The Professional Double Bind	• Criticism for being "too quiet" • Penalization for being "aggressive" • Experiencing "moving goalposts"	18 Interviews 2 Documents	39
2.3 Systemic Bias in HR Instruments	• Masculine-coded job descriptions • Performance reviews penalizing collaboration • Promotion criteria favoring masculine archetype	6 Interviews 5 Documents	32
3. Structures Sustaining the Binary			
3.1 Informal Patronage Networks	• "Old boys' club" gatekeeping • Promotions discussed in social settings	19 Interviews 1 Document	44

Child Node (Sub-Theme)	Illustrative Free Nodes (Specific Codes)	Sources Coded	References
	• Exclusion from mentorship circles		
3.2 Normative & Cultural Sanctions	• Religious justifications in office talk • Customary law influencing local office culture • Jokes reinforcing male authority	14 Interviews 8 Documents	31
3.3 Bureaucratic Complicity & Conformity	• Social friction for challenging norms • Choosing the "safe" (male) candidate • Self-censorship to maintain harmony	13 Interviews 4 Documents	28
4. Consequences of Institutionalized Dichotomy			
4.1 Policy Distortion & Co-optation	• Training women to "lean in" • Gender programs leaving core logic untouched • Equity as "fixing the women"	9 Interviews 6 Documents	27
4.2 Epistemic Exclusion in Decision-Making	• Lived experience absent in policy design • Policy failures due to knowledge gaps • Not consulting women's groups	11 Interviews 9 Documents	26
4.3 Professional & Psychological Toll	• Exhaustion from constant performance • Talent attrition and disillusionment • Internalized self-doubt	15 Interviews 0 Documents	27

Source: Interviews and Reviewed Document

Historical Genesis of the Administrative Gender Binary

The *him-her-ing* logic is not ahistorical. Its roots lie in the colonial administrative model, which explicitly gendered the bureaucracy by recruiting African men into low-level clerk and chief roles while consigning women to the domestic sphere (Chege & Sifuna, 2006). Post-independence *Ujamaa* socialism rhetorically promoted equality but often instrumentalized women's labour for national development without granting commensurate political authority

(Tamale, 2020). This created a path-dependent trajectory where the public administrator was, from inception, imagined as male. Subsequent neoliberal reforms and gender mainstreaming efforts, as one Policy Analyst noted, often merely "grafted gender-sensitive language onto a trunk that was already shaped as masculine," leading to inclusion without transformation (Interview, PA1; Elomaki & Ylöstalo, 2024).

The Performative Division of Administrative Labour

The day-to-day work of government offices is a critical site where gendered assumptions become reality. Participants consistently described a practical, observable pattern where tasks are divided not only by job title but by an unspoken gender code. This code operates like a hidden script, influencing who is asked to perform which roles. Technical, high-visibility, and external-facing tasks, such as leading a budget presentation, representing the ministry at a field operation, or chairing a critical meeting, were automatically assumed to be the domain of male officers. Conversely, supportive, clerical, and relational tasks, such as taking minutes, organizing logistics for meetings, managing office supplies, or following up on stakeholder concerns, were typically directed toward women.

This division goes beyond simple logistics and actively shapes career trajectories. A female entry-level officer from Dodoma illustrated this with a common frustration:

"I joined with the same degree and marks as my male colleague. Within a year, he was sent to high-level workshops on public finance management because he was 'good with numbers.' I was told I was 'good with people' and asked to coordinate all staff welfare events. Now his CV has technical skills, and mine says I can organize a good party." (Interview, ELO2)

A male middle-level manager described the subtle dynamics in meetings, noting the performative nature of these interactions and his own occasional complicity:

"Even when a woman is the substantive head, in meetings you will see male subordinates being asked for technical opinions, while she is expected to ensure the minutes are perfect. I have caught myself doing it—deferring to a junior male 'expert' over the female boss in the room. It's not a conscious decision; it's like a reflex. The work itself whispers 'him' for authority, 'her' for support." (Interview, MLM3)

This statement points to a powerful mechanism: the "hard" work of decision-making is symbolically coded as masculine, while the "soft" work of facilitation is coded as feminine. Every time this script is followed, whether in a formal meeting or an informal delegation, it performs and reinforces the binary. Over time, this repetitive performance becomes institutional common sense, making the gendered division of labour appear natural and inevitable rather than a product of social convention. It actively constructs and legitimizes the perception that leadership and authority are inherently male attributes.

Discourse and the Masculine Default in Competence

The language used to define good work within the public service usually defines who is considered competent. Analysis of official documents and interview data revealed a pattern where qualities culturally associated with masculinity, such as decisiveness, assertiveness, toughness, and independent strategic thinking, are consistently framed as the gold standard for

effective administration and leadership. This creates a "masculine default" for competence; the ideal administrator is imagined with these traits.

A senior female administrator with two decades of experience articulated the exhausting performance this necessitates, revealing the personal toll of this discursive bind:

"To be accepted as a leader, you must perform a very careful script. Early in my career, I was told I was 'too quiet' to lead. Later, when I spoke up firmly, I was called 'difficult' and 'confrontational.' My male counterpart, doing the same thing, was 'passionate' and 'decisive.' You must be strong like a man, but not too strong to threaten them. It is an exhausting performance where the standard is always set by the 'him,' and the goalposts keep moving." (Interview, SA2)

A policy analyst involved in drafting performance review frameworks confirmed this systemic bias, noting its subtlety:

"When we write phrases like 'demonstrates forceful leadership' or 'makes independent strategic decisions,' we are not being neutral. We are using a vocabulary that has a gendered history. We rarely have core indicators that value 'builds collaborative consensus' or 'demonstrates ethical care' with the same scoring weight. So, we are not saying men are better leaders; we are building a system that measures everyone against a traditionally male archetype." (Interview, PA1)

This discourse operates as a powerful gatekeeping tool. By defining the ideal in masculine-coded terms, the bureaucratic system inadvertently filters for men, ensuring that women, regardless of skill, are always starting at a disadvantage, needing to prove they can meet a standard that is not designed for them.

Sustainers of the Dichotomy: Religion, Custom, and Informal Networks

The power of the *him-her-ing* performance within the office is significantly reinforced by external and internal social structures that provide it with legitimacy and practical enforcement. External supports include religious teachings and customary law. A gender specialist explained how these norms transcend the workplace:

"You cannot separate the office from the mosque or church. When a senior male manager quotes a religious text implying women should be submissive, even in a joke, it sets a tone. It frames male authority not just as an organizational rule, but as a divine or natural order. Challenging him then feels like challenging something much bigger than office policy." (Interview, GS1)

More potent, however, were the internal, informal networks described by participants. These networks are akin to an "old boys' club" operating beneath the formal organizational chart. An entry-level officer explained how this creates an uneven playing field:

"The real map of power is not on the organogram. It is in the tea rooms and after-work gatherings where the 'big men' network. Promotions are discussed there. Problems are solved there. If you are not part of that brotherhood—and as a woman, you are usually not invited—you are simply not in the game, regardless of your performance. You only hear about opportunities after they have been decided." (Interview, ELO5)

A middle-level manager from Dar es Salaam candidly admitted the social cost of disrupting these norms, highlighting how the system polices itself:

"I once recommended a brilliant female officer for a tough assignment. My boss agreed, but my peers questioned my judgment. 'Is she tough enough? What if she gets emotional under pressure?' They never ask that about a man. Pushing for her created friction. Eventually, you learn it's easier to go with the flow and recommend the safe choice, which is usually another guy." (Interview, MLM4)

These networks act as invisible gatekeepers. They control access to the informal mentorship that is crucial for career advancement, provide tips on upcoming opportunities, and decide who is seen as "leadership material." Because these circles are predominantly male and often exclusionary, they systematically filter women out of the pipeline to power, ensuring that even when women enter the system, they lack the social capital needed to ascend.

Consequences: Policy Distortion and Epistemic Exclusion

The continuous performance of the *him-her-ing* logic has direct, harmful consequences for governance and policy effectiveness. One major effect is policy distortion. Gender equity initiatives, instead of transforming the system, are often co-opted by it. A gender specialist provided a clear example:

"We launched a 'Women in Leadership' program. Great idea. But the curriculum was all about 'executive presence,' 'negotiation tactics,' and 'strategic networking'—teaching women to mimic male leaders. We were fixing the women to fit the broken system, not fixing the system. The program was hailed as a success, but the masculine ideal of leadership in the ministry remained completely untouched." (Interview, GS2)

A more profound consequence is epistemic exclusion, the systematic devaluation and exclusion of knowledge that comes from women's lived experiences. A senior administrator overseeing a rural development portfolio gave a stark example:

"We designed an agricultural subsidy programme to increase yields. The committee, mostly men, focused on fertilizer access and seed quality. It was only after rollout failed in several regions that we learned, from women's groups, that the timing of distribution conflicted with their childcare and water-fetching duties. Their knowledge of the daily calendar of poverty was never sought. We had a knowledge gap, so we had a policy failure." (Interview, SA4)

This not only wastes resources but perpetuates inequality by creating policies that are ineffective or even harmful because they are based on an incomplete understanding of reality. When the perspectives of half the population are marginalized in decision-making, the state's ability to govern effectively for all its citizens is fundamentally compromised.

Moving Beyond the “Him-Her-ing” Dichotomy

The following is a list of action-oriented policy recommendations directed at specific institutional actors.

The President’s Office - Public Service Management and Good Governance, in collaboration with the Tanzania Public Service College, must mandate the integration of decolonial feminist theory and critical gender studies into the core curriculum for all public administration training

programs. This reform should move beyond a single module to embed a feminist critique of power, bureaucracy, and policy-making across the curriculum, equipping future administrators to recognize and challenge gendered logics.

The Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women, and Special Groups should develop and implement a mandatory Intersectional Gender Audit Framework for all ministries and independent departments. This audit must transcend quantitative headcounts to qualitatively evaluate gendered patterns in work allocation, meeting dynamics, internal communication, promotion narratives, and policy language. Audit results should be linked to ministerial performance assessments and budget allocations.

The Public Service Commission must lead a comprehensive review and revision of human resources instruments, including job descriptions, performance appraisal forms, and promotion criteria. This revision, conducted with technical support from gender specialists and feminist organizations, should explicitly value and reward collaborative, empathetic, and transformative leadership styles, thereby dismantling the discursive link between "competence" and masculinized traits.

The Chief Secretary should issue a directive formalizing transparent, panel-based promotion processes for all senior positions and establishing structured, cross-gender mentorship programs across the service. These programs should be designed to intentionally disrupt exclusionary informal networks by creating formal pathways for sponsorship and advocacy for high-potential officers from underrepresented groups.

In this regard, dismantling *him-her-ing* is not about making women more like the bureaucratic "him." It is about dismantling the dichotomy itself and fostering an administrative ethos that values plural, democratic, and genuinely inclusive forms of public service. This is the difficult but necessary work of building a state apparatus that reflects the full humanity of all it serves. The responsibility for initiating this transformation lies squarely with the custodians of Tanzania's public administration system.

Conclusion and Implications for Action

This study set out to investigate the persistence of gendered power in Tanzanian public administration through the lens of *him-her-ing*. By employing a post-structural feminist methodology, it moved beyond documenting representation gaps to illuminating the performative and discursive processes that actively recreate inequality.

The findings confirm that gender equity is thwarted not by a lack of policy, but by a deep-seated cultural logic embedded in history, daily practice, and informal institutions. The *him-her-ing* dichotomy is performed in task allocation, encoded in the language of competence, and fortified by religious, customary, and patronage networks. This creates a system where inclusion is often symbolic, leaving the masculine core of administrative power unchallenged.

The implications are significant. For theory, this study validates the utility of combining Butler's performativity with African feminist critiques to analyze the post-colonial state. For practice, it suggests that current policy tools—focused on quotas and training—are necessary but insufficient. Transformative change requires a fundamental re-engineering of administrative culture.

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