

Gender Bias and Its Effect on the Gender Dynamics of Interior Design Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that where there is a gender balance, there are higher chances of gainful financial returns and economic growth in such sectors. Interior design as a budding profession in Nigeria, offers endless economic opportunities for growth and financial return. Yet, it faces a pervasive issue of gender bias, especially with how it affects the gender dynamics within the field of interior design education and practice, which severely limits the potential of this budding industry. This paper employs a comprehensive review of existing literature and empirical data from real-world surveys to examine how gender bias manifests in educational and professional settings and the resulting impact on individuals within the field. The study aims to identify the factors which contribute to gender bias in the interior design educational and professional scenes in a bid to foster a more equitable and inclusive discipline. This study first examines gender bias, its forms and consequences then, the existing situation in the educational and professional scenes of the industry is investigated and analysed, and finally, a survey is carried out among Interior design students and practitioners from three selected interior design platforms located in Abuja Nigeria. The research employs a descriptive survey method. All results are graphically represented and modelled as pie and bar charts. This research contributes to the ongoing dialogue on Gender mainstreaming and Gender parity in the Nigerian Interior Design Industry.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender diversity within professional sectors can contribute to broader organisational performance. "Studies have shown that where there is a gender balance, there are higher chances of gainful financial returns and economic growth in such sectors" (Altuzarra et al, 2021). However, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published a report which disclosed a disturbing reality; "The world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030" (Conceição et al, 2023) much less the industries that exist within it. This sombre conclusion by the UNDP stems from the observed stagnation of the "The global Gender Inequality Index (GII) value since 2019 indicating persistent disparities in empowerment." The report highlights that "while considerable progress for women has been achieved in many basic capabilities, such as the right to vote and equal participation in education, it is still evident that from corporate boardrooms to presidential cabinets, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions." The reason for this is attributed to "biased gender social norms." (Conceição et al, 2023). This is despite the fact that since 1995, gender mainstreaming has been accepted globally as the international norm for achieving gender equality and has been aggressively marketed by the UN as one of the key components to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 21st century (Acosta et al, 2019). It is in recognition of the significant role of gender mainstreaming in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 21st century in the creation of a better world (UNSDG, 2019), that this study analyses the effects that gender bias has on the gender dynamics of the education and practice of interior design. The study aims to identify the factors which contribute to gender bias in the interior design educational and professional scenes in a bid to foster a more equitable and inclusive discipline. Through a literature review

and an online survey, the study is able to acquire qualitative insights into how gender bias affects gender dynamics and quantitative insights into the perspectives of interior designers in Abuja, Nigeria. Ultimately, this study intends to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on Gender mainstreaming and Gender parity in the Nigerian Interior Design Industry.

What is Gender Bias?

Gender bias can be said to be "a systemic, unfair difference in the way men and women are treated in a particular domain" (Masiero & Aaltonen, 2020). Gender bias can lead to situations where one gender is deemed as being inferior to another gender. Rai & Kumar, 2020 further defined Gender bias as a "misrepresentation of one gender over the other gender". The effect of this sort of misrepresentation is gender discrimination; which can be viewed as the disadvantageous or unequal treatment of a human being above another based on their gender (Floranza & Suresh, 2022).

What is Gender Dynamic?

In order to understand how gender influences experiences within a given context, it is important to first consider the concept of gender dynamics. "Gender dynamics refer to the relationships and interactions between and among people, based on gender usually informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them" (University of Auckland, 2022). "These dynamics can influence various aspects of life, from career choices to how individuals participate in group interactions (Kimani & Mwikamba, 2011). "When our beliefs, expectations, and reactions result in differential treatment of an individual based on their gender, rather than the individual's unique circumstances, this interpersonal interaction is reflective of gender dynamics impacting the individual's power, status, and

authority" (Blankenship, 2023). "To illustrate, When a man and woman display equal assertiveness but the woman is deemed as being too forward, this is reflective of a gender dynamic at play, similarly, when a man but not a woman elicits disgust for carrying out traditionally feminine household chores, it underscores another aspect of gender dynamic at play" (Blankenship, 2023)".

Forms of Gender Bias

Gender Bias can manifest in many forms. According to the US National Judicial Education Program, the most prominent forms of gender bias are "Stereotyped thinking about the nature and roles of women and men; Devaluing what is perceived as 'woman's work'; Lack of knowledge of the social and economic realities of women's and men's lives" (Halilović et al, 2017). However, the most dangerous form of bias is notably the "Implicit bias". "This is a form of bias that occurs automatically. Implicit bias, although unintentional, nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviours" (NIH, U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). "Implicit bias is thought to be shaped by experience and based on learned associations between particular qualities and social categories, including race and/or gender. Individuals' perceptions and behaviours can be influenced by the implicit biases they hold, even if they are unaware they hold such biases. Implicit bias is an aspect of implicit social cognition: the phenomenon that perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes can operate before conscious intention or endorsement" (American Psychology Association, 2022).

Consequences of Gender Bias

The consequence of allowing gender bias in whatever form to proliferate, going unchecked in the interior design industry, is bound to have far-reaching effects on the growth of the profession as a whole. Gender bias can impact an individual's emotional and psychological well-being thereby limiting their desire for personal development (Duan, 2019). It perpetuates stereotypes which are bound to limit the level of diversity within the field. This is especially discouraging for many talented male individuals who would have sought to pursue a degree in the interior design industry, but because of some preconceived stereotypical notions, they withdraw (Pilotti, 2021). Whereas, in the professional scenes of the interior design sector, an unchecked gender bias can result in an unequal share of opportunities, resources and recognition. This poses a severe threat, especially to the feminine gender in achieving their full potential as they are judged regardless of their actual skills or abilities thereby creating an environment that is neither inclusive nor accommodating for growth.

The Educational Scene

In this regard, "employing a vast database of about 30 million profiles in the USA, Zippia generated an estimated demographical statistics for interior designers in the region revealing that about 72.7% are women and only 22.4% are men" (Zippia, 2023). In interior design educational institutions, we find that more women than men opt to study interior design courses (Turpin, 2007). One of the key influencing factors of this situation might be that "many interior design programs were part of the home economics and human ecology department, which taught style and decoration as a complement to homemaking classes" (Ruff, 2014; Darbandi et al, 2023). Subsequently though, to combat the notion of "inferiority" attached to the name "interior design" some practitioners and academic programs adopted the nomenclature "Interior Architecture" in an attempt to

align status with the already male-dominated field of architecture" (Wild, 2019).

The fact as stated above, that there are often more women than men who opt to study interior design in higher institutions, results in the primary recipients of gender bias when it comes to interior design education being those of the male gender. (Matthews & Hill, 2011). There are several factors which may contribute to this phenomenon, some of these factors are as a result of cultural, religious or stereotypical norms. In a study of the enrolment pattern of the interior architecture program at Arizona State University in the US, it was found that amongst others, issues such as Gender Socialisation, History of the Profession, The Name "Interior Design, Societal Expectations, Media Portrayal, Misconceptions about the Content of the Program, all contribute to the normative bias which poses a challenge for men interested in obtaining a degree in this course (Ruff, 2014). Furthermore, a study by Barth & Fox, 2017, revealed "that a key for attracting men to female-dominated vocations may be to provide opportunities for men to consider an occupation in ways that prevent or disrupt comparison to traditional stereotypic archetypes." This study found that the nomenclature as well as the dominant presence of females in a course was enough to discourage men from registering for the course especially when there are no dominant male figures in that course.

The Professional Scene

In the professional realm, however, we find the same statistics but a different dynamic. While a higher percentage of men are present when compared to the educational sector of interior design (Matthews & Hill, 2011). A review of Belis et al's 2014 study, "Interior Architecture in Flanders: Gendered Perceptions and Professional Realities," reveals that despite an 80%-20% male-female ratio among graduates, 60% of families prefer to employ male interior architects. Furthermore, recognition for cutting-edge work is disproportionately skewed towards men, with an 80%-20% ratio in contrast to the student representation. The study identifies factors such as assumptions about the job description of the profession, and the demanding nature of the profession, leading to disparities in the gender dynamics in the school vs the field. Additionally, the study found that in the management scene, despite a female majority of graduates from Council of Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) programs, interior design management remains primarily male-dominated. The author concludes that gendering in interior design aligns with historical norms, framing it as a feminine concern, except at the top echelons where men set the tone. This is further reinforced by statistics which show an enormous gender disparity in leadership roles within the interior design industry. "The International Interior Design Association (IIDA), identifies from their demographic study that 69% of the 87,000 practitioners in the interior design industry are women, yet female leadership at design firms is only 25%" (Nieminen, 2020). These are disconcerting figures which are indicative of a lack of gender balance both in the educational and professional scenes of the profession.

While none of the studies highlighted above directly discuss the existing situation in Nigeria, they provide insight as to what type of gender dynamics are present in the industry and how it affects the gender dynamics of the profession. The literature review reveals that both genders face bias and these biases are at different points of advancement in the profession. While men contend with bias and preconceived stereotypes when they want to study interior design, women struggle to get recognition and find their place in the leadership positions of the interior design profession as a

result of gender-related biases. These biases have the potential to act as limitations that hinder both parties from benefiting from the full well of wealth that inclusivity, diversity and gender balance offer in any sector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the study is identifying the factors which contribute to gender bias in the interior design educational and professional scenes in a bid to foster a more equitable and inclusive discipline.

A descriptive survey method was employed in this study to gain insights into the factors which contribute to gender bias in the interior design educational and professional scenes in Nigeria. The qualitative data was obtained through a literature review while the quantitative data was retrieved through a self-designed survey, created, published and distributed using Google Forms, a free web-hosted survey tool.

The targeted participants of the survey were members of the WhatsApp platform of IDAN (Interior Designers Association of Nigeria) Abuja design community, the Maven Interior Design School Abuja Alumni platform and the students of architecture at Baze University Abuja who had taken a course on interior design at any point in time. These groups were

selected because they represent a diverse cross-section of interior design students and practitioners in Abuja, Nigeria. The survey was personally administered by the author via a link to a random group of 106 (One hundred and six) participants who were selected from the previously mentioned platforms. This resulted in a total number of 54 (fifty-four) responses giving an improved response rate of 50.9%.

Ethical considerations such as Informed consent and voluntary participation guided the data retrieval process in this study. The purpose of the survey was clearly stated and the participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous so they were encouraged to state their open and honest responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total number of 54 people participated in the study and all of the participants indicated that they are currently working and practising as interior designers or have/are taking an interior design course in Nigeria. Out of the 54 participants, the survey shows that 65% of the survey participants are female and 35% of the respondents are male (Figure 1).

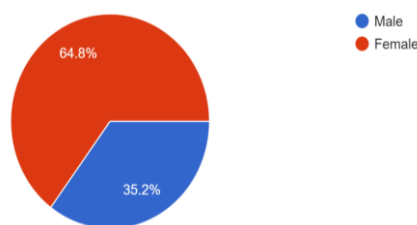


Figure 1: Gender distribution of participants of the survey

The survey shows that 35% of the participants are between the age of 18-24 years, 43% are between that age of 25-34 years, 20% are between the age of 35-44 years and 2% (1 respondent) is between the age of 45-54 years (figure 2). This

result indicates the participants in the survey, generally comprise of a youthful selection of those practising and training as interior designers.

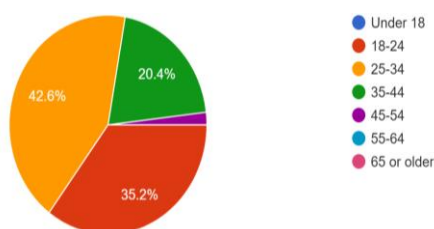


Figure 2: Age Range of Participants

The survey shows that 59% of the respondents are practitioners of interior design while 41% are students (figure 3).

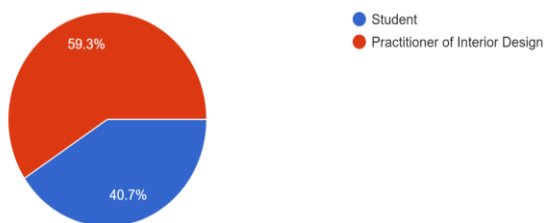


Figure 3: Status of participants

The survey shows that 85% of the respondents indicated that they went through some form of formal training in the field of interior design while 15% indicated that they received no

form of formal training in the field of interior design (figure 4).

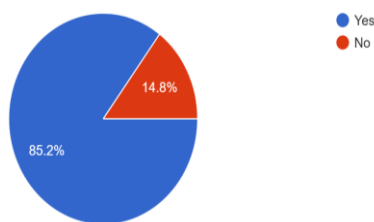


Figure 4: Formal Training of the participants

The institutions where the participants received formal training in interior design can be seen in figure 5, the image on the right. This result shows that primarily, out of those who had indicated that they had some form of formal training, 44%

indicated that they had obtained a training certificate in the field of interior design while 9% had attained a Master's degree and 2% were from the building profession and 45% are studying to gain a degree in architecture (Figure 5).

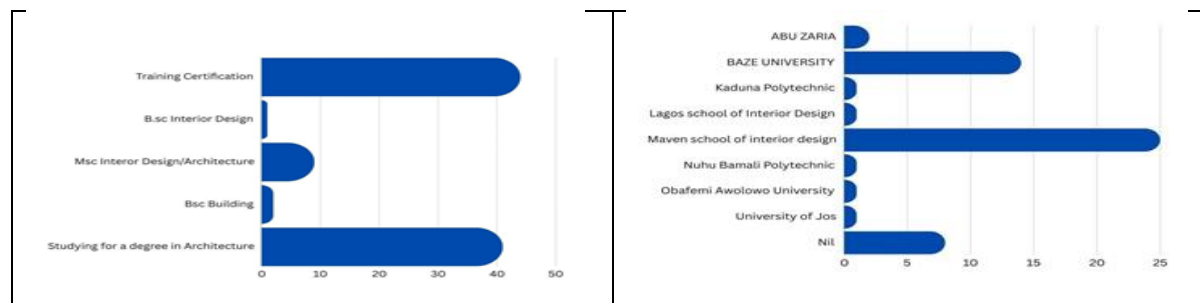


Figure 5: Degree Qualifications (Left) & Institutions (Right) where it was attained by participants.

The survey shows that 83% of the respondents view interior design to be a feminine course while just 17% are of the view that it is not (figure 6). This result is indicative of the

prevailing stereotypical association of the female gender to interior design as noted by Darbandi *et al*, (2023).

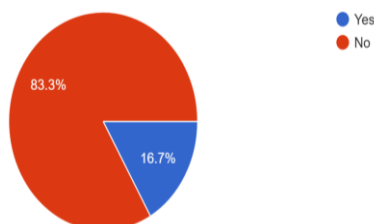


Figure 6: Gender norms

The survey shows that while 44% of the respondents view interior design as a homemaking course, 53% do not view it as such and 3% think it is a homemaking course but much more (figure 7). This result shows that there is an equal divide

in how interior design is viewed among the respondents. This is surprising given the initial result of a whopping 83% of the participants submitting that they view interior design as a feminine course.

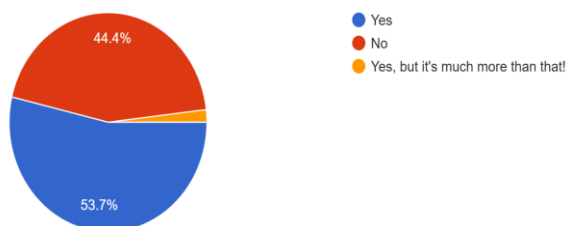


Figure 7: Societal norms

With this in mind, participants were then asked “whose job it is to make the home look beautiful?” The survey shows that 91% of the respondents are of the view that it is the onus falls on both genders to make the home look beautiful, 92% are of the view that it is solely the duty of the woman and 0% view

it as solely the man's duty (figure 8). This result is indicative of some implicit biases that might have been reinforced as a result of certain societal norms as noted by Conceição *et al*, (2023).

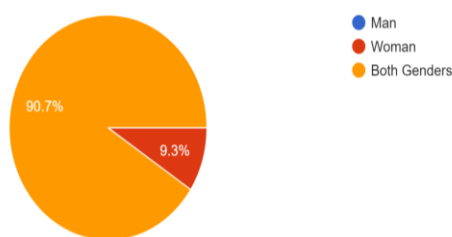


Figure 8: Societal norms

The survey shows that 52% of the respondents are of the view that students are encouraged differently based on gender in

specific subjects, while 48% are of the view that students are not encouraged differently based on gender (figure 9).

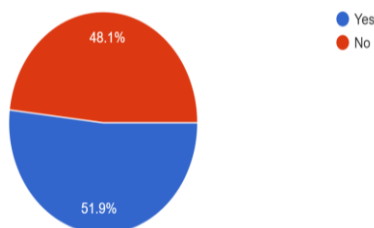


Figure 9: Educational gendering

The survey shows that 65% of the respondents are of the view that men avoid female-dominated fields because they fear the society might question their masculinity, while 35% are of the view that this is not the case (figure 10). This aligns with the results of the study by (Ruff, 2014) which posited that media

portrayal of men who are proficient at interior design as being of a particular sexual orientation led to a widespread classification of the course as being for women but not for “manly men”.

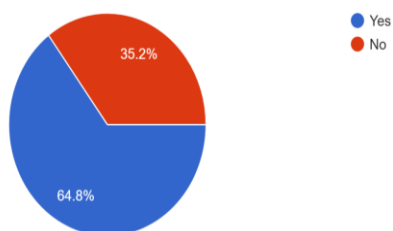


Figure 10: Professional Stereotyping

The survey shows that 65% of the respondents are of the view that the underrepresentation of prominent male role models in the interior design field hinders more men from studying the course (figure11). This is consistent with the result above in

figure 10. This aligns with Atolagbe, *et al.* (2026) which noted the low number of students generally interning at interior design firms.

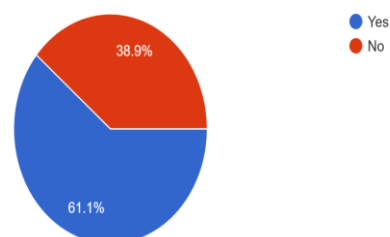


Figure 11: Role models

The survey shows that 70% of the respondents are of the view that interior design is a challenging course while 30% are of

the view that it is not a challenging course (figure 12).

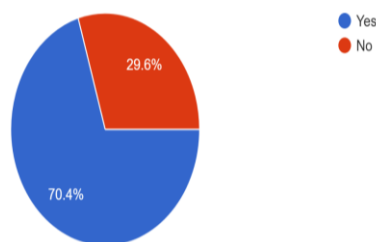


Figure 12: Level of perceived difficulty

When participants were asked to indicate if they believe interior design to be as technical as an engineering course, 63% of the respondents indicated that they are of the view that

it is just as complex while 37% indicated that it is not as technical as an engineering course (figure 13).

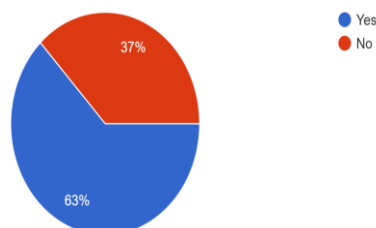


Figure 13: Level of perceived difficulty in comparison to Engineering.

A further inquiry was made to ascertain whether mentally challenging courses such as engineering are more feminine or masculine. 76% of the respondents indicated that mentally

challenging courses are perceived as both masculine and feminine while 15% voted for solely masculine, 7% voted for solely feminine and 2% opted to remain neutral (figure 14).

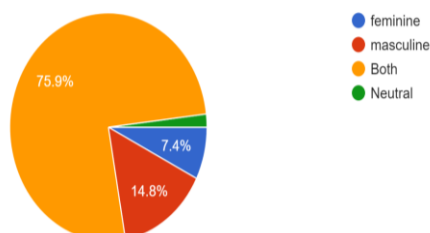


Figure 14: Level of perceived difficulty by gender.

When asked if they had observed any gender-related challenges faced by professionals in the interior design

industry, 74% indicated that they had not while 26% indicated that they had (figure 15).

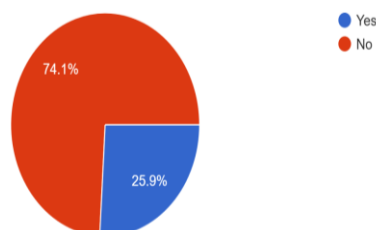


Figure 15: Gender discrimination Consciousness.

The 26% who responded in the affirmative were granted an opportunity to discuss the gender bias-related issues they had experienced and the following are some of the comments from the survey (figure 16). The results show that there is a

general belief that most clients would be reluctant to hire female interior designers as they believe that “she” may not be able to get the work done properly.

She is a woman and I guess she can't get the work done perfectly.

N/A

Yea most clients would prefer a female to undertake jobs with respect to the brief taking section most especially residential projects

Figure 16: Gender bias discussion by survey participants

Participants also raised issues that although women are more likely to get more jobs in the industry they still face challenges working with artisans who look down on the women in charge (figure 17)

Women are seen or perceived as mentally and physically not fit to perform most of the task on the field, which makes the artisans on site (mostly men) look down on the woman or women in charge. I can't say for sure but I believe Nigeria, as a society, has not evolved with that regards and despite the belief that say that women are more recognised in the field which is natural for a society that places the responsibility of taking care of the home on the women, it can only be thought so. The field might be perceived so and as such the field would in response have an heavy influx of women but this should not be misinterpreted as easy working conditions because the people, especially Nigeria where your mentally abilities are judged by your gender, trust men to be more focused on the job because the women are perceived more emotional and therefore lack the mentally and physical capacity to carry out the job as required.

None

women are offered more jobs in the interior design industry

Going to bid for contract while a female is selected for instead even as I had a better design

Figure 17: Gender bias discussion by survey participants

Participants also raised issues that male interior designers gain more respect because of the patriarchal society of Nigeria, which deems men as “smarter, more creative and superior to women”. It was also mentioned that “women's works are criticised more harshly than that of their male counterparts”. Interestingly the discussion also highlighted the bias men face in the field with a participant highlighting a common question amongst people saying “Why didn't he go for a more professionally inclined course” (figure 18).

I believe Nigeria culture create more constrain to the growth of female professionals in the industry. I will suggest the major role and time consuming aspect should be schedule for men.

Male interior designers are much more respected than female interior designers. It is significantly more difficult for women in ANY field where men are involved. Unfortunately, our society deems men as superior, smarter, more creative etc that women. Since interior design has more women, it would be easier for men to succeed in that field seeing as his only competition is other women. From my experience, I have noticed that women's interior design work tends to be criticised more harshly that their male colleagues. Other women have told me stories of how their works have been brushed aside and the only male in the room had his work praised. Even I myself, being a woman have struggled to find internships and had my abilities be underestimated due to my gender. These problems are not just due to sexism, but other factors such as nepotism also play a role in this situation

The stereotypical thinking of women being incharge of interior designs. There are some cases where professionals question a guy as to why he's an interior designer and why he didnt go for a "professionally inclined course"

Figure 18: Gender bias discussion by survey participants

Some participants stated that male clients are usually more inclined to hire women to do the job because they have a “soft spot for them” therefore they are more likely to be taken seriously by the clients than a man will be. While others stated a man is more likely to get the bid of a contract and be paid higher and he is more easily able to supervise the vendors and artisans on site (figure 19).

Clients most especially men have soft spot for women

A man will most likely get the bid for a contract, than a woman.

Women are likely to be taken seriously by clients than men

Male clients refusing to pay my rate because they think it's too high for a woman. Male vendors/artisans not listening to instructions unless it comes from a male lead

Figure 19: Gender bias discussion by survey participants

When asked if it is important to encourage both men and women to study a wide range of courses regardless of gender stereotypes. 96% of the respondents answered in the affirmative while 6% of the respondents were of the opposite view (figure 20).

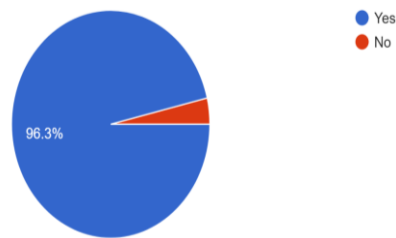


Figure 20: Gender bias discussion by survey participants

CONCLUSION

The study found that the gender dynamics in the field and the educational space of interior design are vastly different and that both men and women are victims of gender bias in the interior design industry. These biases result in gender-based discrimination, fuelled by deeply rooted societal and cultural norms as well as preconceived notions that foster implicit bias. These biases were influenced by the history of the profession as being a predominantly feminine one, the lack of prominent male role models in the profession, societal expectations prevalent in the Nigerian society, social norms and the demands of the profession in terms of long working hours and intense workload, the perception of interior design as a vocational course rather than a professional one. While the study was limited by its sample size, it provides a localised overview of the gender related challenges within the interior design sector. The findings highlight the need to strengthen the professional identity of interior design through standardised education and professional accreditation in order to promote inclusive practices, professional development and gender equity. These measures can contribute to the development of a more balanced and professionally recognised interior design industry in Nigeria.

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