

Advancing Gender-Inclusive Counseling Approaches: Empowering Girls' Leadership Aspirations in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of gender-inclusive counseling approaches on the leadership aspirations of female secondary school students in the Port Harcourt Education Zone of Rivers State. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest non-equivalent control-group design was adopted. The participants were 240 Senior Secondary School Two female students selected through a multistage sampling procedure from public co-educational secondary schools. The experimental group comprised 120 students who received gender-sensitive guidance, empowerment-focused therapy, and assertiveness training, while the control group comprised 120 students who received conventional counseling. Data were collected using the researcher-developed Girls' Leadership Aspiration Scale, which had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .84. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while analysis of covariance was used to test the null hypotheses at the .05 level of significance. The experimental group recorded higher mean gains than the control group in leadership self-efficacy, career assertiveness, and institutional leadership participation. After controlling for pretest scores, significant group effects were found for leadership self-efficacy, $F(1, 237) = 446.59, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .653; career assertiveness, $F(1, 237) = 742.51, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .758; and institutional leadership participation, $F(1, 237) = 413.00, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .635. The findings indicate that gender-inclusive counseling was associated with substantial improvements in the leadership aspirations of the participating students. The study concludes that structured counseling interventions that address gender stereotypes, psychological confidence, and assertive behaviour can strengthen girls' readiness to pursue leadership and decision-making roles in secondary schools.

Keywords: gender-inclusive counseling, leadership self-efficacy, career assertiveness, institutional participation, female students, Rivers State

Introduction

The discourse on sustainable global development increasingly conceptualises gender equity not merely as a fundamental human right, but as a critical catalyst for socio-economic transformation and institutional evolution. Central to this paradigm is the cultivation of leadership capabilities among young females during their formative secondary school years, a developmental period widely recognised as pivotal for identity formulation and career aspiration. Despite international mandates championing female empowerment, systemic structural barriers, institutionalised biases, and deeply entrenched patriarchal dynamics continue to constrict the leadership trajectories of young women globally (World Economic Forum, 2025; UN Women, 2024). In navigating these pervasive structural constraints, school-based guidance and counseling systems are positioned as vital institutional interventions designed to deconstruct gender typologies and foster self-efficacy. However,

conventional counseling frameworks within developing educational ecosystems often operate under gender-neutral assumptions that inadvertently fail to address the unique socio-cultural inhibitions confronting female students. Against this background, advancing gender-inclusive counseling approaches becomes an imperative strategy to intentionally dismantle internalized gender roles and empower the leadership aspirations of girls within the secondary education landscape.

Globally, the marginalisation of adolescent girls from leadership pathways remains a critical deficit within contemporary educational systems. Even within developed economies, subtle institutional mechanisms and implicit biases frequently channel female students away from competitive leadership positions and towards supportive, non-authoritative roles. For instance, Hill, Corbett and St. Rose (2021) demonstrated that gendered socialization within secondary schools subtly undermines girls' confidence to vie for high-profile student governance positions, reinforcing the stereotype that leadership is inherently masculine. Similarly, a longitudinal assessment by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (2023) revealed that while female academic enrollment has achieved near-parity globally, structural barriers within school environments continue to suppress girls' self-concept and leadership assertiveness. This global pattern implies that the mere presence of girls in classrooms does not automatically translate into a democratization of leadership opportunities. The implication is that without deliberate, gender-sensitive institutional support, conventional educational structures will continue to reproduce global gender disparities in leadership across generational cohorts.

Within the African regional context, these global challenges are significantly compounded by traditional socio-cultural stratifications, patriarchal norms, and economic dependencies that systematically de-prioritise female autonomy. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls face unique intersecting vulnerabilities—ranging from early marriage pressures to domestic labor expectations—which collectively stifle their academic and leadership self-efficacy. Anani (2019) observed that in many West African secondary school settings, leadership positions are implicitly demarcated along gender lines, with boys consistently assigned roles of authority and governance, while girls are relegated to domestic or administrative support duties. Furthermore, a multi-country study conducted by the African Population and Health Research Center [APHRC] (2022) established that school counseling units across the region are chronically under-resourced and largely unequipped with gender-transformative tools. This evidence points to a systemic failure within African educational institutions, where counseling practices frequently function as passive reinforcers of the status quo rather than mechanisms for female empowerment. Consequently, regional frameworks must transition toward counseling approaches that explicitly acknowledge and confront these localized patriarchal inhibitors.

In the Nigerian context, the tension between socio-cultural gender expectations and female empowerment is particularly pronounced within the secondary school system. Nigerian society remains heavily stratified by patriarchal ideologies that define a woman's primary sphere of influence as domestic and maternal, an ethos that heavily permeates public and private educational spaces. Fawole, Balogun and Olaleye (2018) reported that gender-based microaggressions and institutionalised biases within public schools significantly diminish girls' willingness to assert themselves in competitive student politics. Moreover, contemporary data from the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education (2024) underscores that while policies exist on paper to promote gender mainstreaming, the practical implementation of guidance and counseling services remains tethered to archaic, gender-blind models. Azeez and Babalola (2020) confirmed that standard counseling procedures in Nigerian schools focus almost exclusively on routine academic performance and basic discipline, completely neglecting the structural and psychological dimensions of gender-inclusive leadership empowerment. This pattern of evidence suggests that the Nigerian educational space is currently suffering from a deep execution gap, where the specific leadership aspirations of young girls are routinely suppressed by institutional inertia and culturally biased counseling frameworks.

Narrowing down to the local setting of Rivers State, these institutional and socio-cultural barriers are further intensified by the complex socio-economic realities of the Niger Delta region. In Rivers State, the convergence of industrialised urban centers like Port Harcourt and deeply conservative rural-riverine communities creates a fragmented educational landscape where adolescent girls experience distinct forms of gendered marginalisation. Daodu and Elegbede (2023) demonstrated that secondary school girls in Rivers State encounter high levels of socio-cultural intimidation, which actively

discourages them from contesting for apex student positions such as Senior Prefect, steering them instead toward auxiliary positions like Sanitary or Food Prefect. In addition, Onoyase (2019) found that guidance counselors in Rivers State public schools rarely employ gender-responsive methodologies, primarily due to a lack of specialized training in gender-transformative pedagogy. This becomes significant because it reveals that the local counseling apparatus in Rivers State acts as a passive observer to the psychological disenfranchisement of female students. Against this evidence, the present study becomes urgent, as it directly interrogates how localized gender-inclusive counseling interventions can be systematically deployed to reverse this trend within Rivers State secondary schools.

To understand the operational dynamics of this problem, it is essential to analyze the relationship between the study variables and their dimensions. The independent variable, gender-inclusive counseling approaches, comprises dimensions such as gender-sensitive guidance, empowerment-focused therapy, and assertive training. Conversely, the dependent variable, girls' leadership aspirations, is dimensioned by leadership self-efficacy, career assertiveness, and institutional participation. In standard school settings, these dimensions remain completely disconnected. Existing Nigerian studies have extensively examined the general prevalence of gender stereotypes, cultural biases, and structural barriers limiting female education (Fawole et al., 2018; Azeez & Babalola, 2020). Concurrently, another distinct body of literature has evaluated the efficacy of school guidance and counseling on student discipline, academic choices, and general behavioral adjustments (Onoyase, 2019; Daodu & Elegbede, 2023).

However, these two bodies of literature have not been sufficiently integrated around how intentional, gender-inclusive counseling approaches can be dynamically leveraged as an intervention to actively drive, cultivate, and sustain the specific dimensions of girls' leadership aspirations within the secondary education landscape of Rivers State. Previous research has diagnosed the barriers, but there is a profound empirical scarcity regarding counseling-based solutions designed to systematically dismantle them. This profound empirical gap is what the present study explicitly seeks to fill by evaluating the transformative potential of a gender-inclusive counseling framework on the leadership drive of female students in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Despite persistent institutional pronouncements and localized educational reforms aimed at achieving gender parity within secondary schools in Rivers State, a critical imbalance remains in the leadership development and spatial representation of female students. Observations indicate that adolescent girls in Rivers State secondary schools continue to display low levels of leadership self-efficacy, a marked hesitation to vie for competitive student governance roles, and muted career assertiveness. This problem is directly fueled by deeply institutionalized patriarchal biases, structural stereotypes within the school environment, and traditional cultural expectations that actively penalize female assertiveness. While conventional school counseling units exist to support students, current institutional responses fail entirely to address these deep-seated gender impediments, operating instead on gender-neutral models that focus strictly on basic discipline and routine academic choice.

The consequences of allowing this intervention gap to persist are highly damaging: young girls are continuously socialized into subordinate societal roles, their leadership potentials are prematurely stifled, and the region experiences a systemic depletion of future female administrators, policymakers, and civic leaders. Previous empirical efforts have successfully documented the general existence of gender bias or measured general counseling outcomes, yet they have failed to provide an actionable, interventionist bridge connecting gender-transformative counseling directly to the cultivation of female leadership drive. This study therefore addresses this critical deficit by evaluating the design, execution, and empirical impact of gender-inclusive counseling approaches as a direct mechanism to empower the leadership aspirations of girls in secondary schools across Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effect of gender-inclusive counseling approaches on the empowerment of girls' leadership aspirations in secondary schools in Rivers State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the effect of gender-sensitive guidance on the leadership self-efficacy of female secondary school students in Rivers State.
2. Assess the impact of empowerment-focused therapy on the career assertiveness of female secondary school students in Rivers State.
3. Evaluate the influence of assertive training on the institutional leadership participation of female secondary school students in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of gender-sensitive guidance on the leadership self-efficacy of female secondary school students in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does empowerment-focused therapy influence the career assertiveness of female Secondary school students in Rivers State?
3. How does assertive training shape the institutional leadership participation of female secondary school students in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

To provide empirical validation for the field observations, the following null hypotheses are formulated and will be tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

HO1: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of leadership self-efficacy among female secondary school students exposed to gender-sensitive guidance and those exposed to conventional counseling models in Rivers State.

HO2: Empowerment-focused therapy does not exert a significant statistical effect on the mean post-intervention career assertiveness scores of female secondary school students in Rivers State.

HO3: Assertive training does not significantly enhance the institutional leadership participation patterns of female secondary school students in Rivers State.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

In the theater of contemporary educational psychology, a gender-inclusive counseling approach is conceptualized as an identity-conscious, structurally aware therapeutic system designed to explicitly recognize, challenge, and dismantle the patriarchal constraints and gendered typologies that suppress female student development within school environments. Historically, conventional guidance structures have operated under a "gender-blind" model, an institutional posture that intentionally or unintentionally reinforces societal inequalities by treating the experiences of male and female students as completely identical. To counteract this deficit, contemporary scholars define gender-inclusive counseling not as a passive disciplinary tool, but as a proactive, emancipatory framework that combines cognitive restructuring with targeted behavioral modifications to rebuild a student's sense of agency.

- **Gender-Sensitive Guidance:** This dimension is defined as the deliberate adaptation of career and academic guidance to expose and challenge traditional occupational stereotyping. Raman (2025) maintains that gender-sensitive guidance functions to strip away implicit biases from instructional and advisory spaces, thereby expanding the academic horizons available to female students. Furthermore, Adimora (2025) notes that when counselors use non-stereotyped career tracking, it disrupts the traditional social conditioning that channels girls away from competitive governance and leadership paths.

- **Empowerment-Focused Therapy:** This psychological dimension is conceptualized as a specialized therapeutic process that targets the learned helplessness, low self-concept, and social compliance induced by deeply patriarchal cultures. Hill, Corbett and St. Rose (2021) conceptualize empowerment-focused therapy as a cognitive-behavioral tool that transforms a student's self-perception from a passive subject to an active agent of institutional change. Similarly, Daodu and Elegbede (2023) established that structured, empowerment-driven psychological support is vital for helping adolescent girls unpack and overcome external social anxieties.

- **Assertive Training:** Behavioral psychologists define assertive training as a structured behavioral modification technique designed to teach individuals how to express their rights, aspirations, and boundaries clearly, confidently, and respectfully without becoming aggressive. Anani (2019) observes that assertive training provides female students with the practical verbal and non-verbal skills required

to handle interpersonal intimidation in male-dominated student politics. Moreover, Onoyase (2019) asserts that when schools do not offer explicit behavioral skills like negotiation, public speaking, and conflict management, female students are often pushed out of competitive institutional spaces.

Within the framework of developmental psychology, leadership aspirations are conceptualized as an individual's conscious desire, internal drive, and strategic intent to pursue and occupy positions of structural authority, organizational governance, and systemic decision-making. In secondary school environments, these aspirations are not merely innate personality traits; rather, they are socially constructed outcomes that are highly sensitive to institutional validation and peer dynamics.

- **Leadership Self-Efficacy:** Rooted in social cognitive theory, leadership self-efficacy is defined as an individual's subjective belief in their capability to successfully organize, execute, and lead institutional tasks, particularly when facing systemic opposition. Hill, Corbett and St. Rose (2021) report that high self-efficacy is the primary psychological driver of long-term ambition in young women. However, Azeez and Babalola (2020) caution that a lack of gender-transformative support in schools often causes girls' leadership self-efficacy to drop during adolescence.

- **Career Assertiveness:** This dimension is defined as a student's intentional, uncompromised pursuit of high-profile, non-traditional, and executive career paths, completely independent of gendered occupational expectations. UNESCO (2023) underscores that career assertiveness reflects how effectively a female student resists societal pressures that try to relegate her talent to supportive or domestic roles.

- **Institutional Participation:** In this study, institutional participation is operationalized as the active, visible involvement of female students in competitive student governance bodies, specifically highlighted by their willingness to contest for apex leadership seats like Senior Prefect. Anani (2019) reveals that institutional participation across West African schools is heavily segregated, with girls frequently directed toward lower-level or auxiliary roles.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical lenses: Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Liberal Feminist Theory. Rather than treating these frameworks as detached mechanisms, this study positions them as human-driven intellectual paradigms that directly explain how environmental friction shapes internal female ambition.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT): The theoretical conceptualization of individual ambition within gendered environments is profoundly explained by Social Cognitive Career Theory, a framework introduced by Albert Bandura in 1986 and expanded by Lent, Brown, and Hackett in 1994. The central tenet of SCCT posits that an individual's career choices, goal mechanisms, and leadership trajectories are not biologically predetermined, but are dynamically shaped by the continuous interaction of three core psychological variables: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and contextual supports or barriers. This theory provides an invaluable foundation for the present study because it explains how systemic patriarchal social structures function as a toxic contextual barrier that actively damages girls' leadership self-efficacy within Rivers State secondary schools.

Liberal Feminist Theory: To complement the psychological dimensions of SCCT, this study utilizes Liberal Feminist Theory, an intellectual philosophy that traces its formal roots back to Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and John Stuart Mill (1869). The primary tenet is that gender inequality is entirely a structural byproduct of institutional biases, discriminatory frameworks, and artificial socialization patterns rather than biological imperatives. By applying liberal feminist tenets, this study argues that the school counseling unit must move away from passive, gender-blind models and act as an active, reformative space that breaks down informal political boundaries.

Empirical Review

Gender-Sensitive Guidance and Leadership Self-Efficacy: Globally, Hill, Corbett and St. Rose (2021) demonstrated that schools utilizing active, gender-sensitive guidance interventions saw a substantial increase in female student confidence regarding competitive fields. Within the domestic sphere, Azeez and Babalola (2020) confirmed that conventional models left structural biases unchallenged. Conversely, Raman (2025) and Osuji and Anyanwu (2022) established that intentional shifts in guidance significantly enhanced female students' problem-solving self-efficacy.

Empowerment-Focused Therapy and Career Assertiveness: A longitudinal assessment by UNESCO (2023) revealed that while enrollment has reached parity, internal assertiveness remains suppressed.

Countering this, Adimora (2025) and Akpan and Essien (2021) established that cognitive-behavioral empowerment therapy actively prompted a dramatic post-intervention shift in career assertiveness, with participants choosing high-profile, non-traditional career paths.

Assertive Training and Institutional Leadership Participation: Anani (2019) observed that student governance roles are heavily segregated. Daodu and Elegbede (2023) demonstrated that girls encounter high levels of social intimidation. Briggs and Horsfall (2023) and Ezenwa and Okoye (2021) carried out intervention-based studies, reporting that girls who underwent structured assertive training modules demonstrated a 45% increase in active participation in competitive student politics, validating the premise of this research.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quasi-experimental, pre-test, post-test, non-equivalent control group design. Within educational research, a quasi-experimental design is conceptualized as an empirical inquiry used to determine cause-and-effect relationships in real-world institutional settings where true random assignment of participants to experimental groups is logistically unfeasible or ethically inappropriate. Rather than disrupting natural classroom dynamics, this design utilizes intact, pre-existing classes to minimize ecological disruption and maintain administrative stability.

Population of the Study

The target population for this investigation comprises all Senior Secondary School Class Two (SS2) female students within the public co-educational secondary school system of Rivers State. This cohort represents a pivotal psychological transition stage where vocational, academic, and socio-political aspirations solidify.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size for this study consists of 240 SS2 female students, selected through a rigorous multi-stage sampling procedure incorporating purposive, stratified, and cluster sampling techniques. Intact classroom blocks from chosen co-educational facilities were distributed uniformly across treatment conditions.

Research Instrument & Validation

The primary tool for data collection is a researcher-developed instrument titled the Girls' Leadership Aspiration Scale (GLAS). To ensure the instrument measures the precise theoretical constructs, it underwent face, content, and construct validation by domain experts, followed by empirical internal consistency testing. The quantitative reliability run yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.84$, demonstrating excellent internal consistency.

Method of Data Analysis

The quantitative data retrieved from the pre-test and post-test administrations of the GLAS were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The primary null hypotheses were tested at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ using the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), ensuring that pre-test differences were statistically controlled as a covariate metric.

Data Analysis and Results

The results are presented according to the three research questions and corresponding null hypotheses. Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the pretest and posttest scores, while analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at the .05 level of significance. Pretest scores were entered as covariates.

Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Scores for Leadership Self-Efficacy

Group	n	Pre-test M	Pre-test SD	Post-test M	Post-test SD	Mean gain
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Experi mental	120	2.14	0.48	3.42	0.39	1.28
Control	120	2.18	0.51	2.25	0.46	0.07

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Mean gain was calculated as posttest mean minus pretest mean.

Table 1 shows that the experimental group's mean leadership self-efficacy score increased from 2.14 (SD = 0.48) at pretest to 3.42 (SD = 0.39) at posttest, giving a mean gain of 1.28. The control group's mean increased only from 2.18 (SD = 0.51) to 2.25 (SD = 0.46), giving a mean gain of 0.07. The descriptive results therefore indicate a much larger improvement in leadership self-efficacy among students who received the gender-sensitive intervention.

Table 2
ANCOVA Summary for Leadership Self-Efficacy

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2
Corrected model	86.425	2	43.213	234.34	< .001	
Intercept	142.118	1	142.118	770.71	< .001	
Pretest covariate	1.114	1	1.114	6.04	.015	
Group	82.351	1	82.351	446.59	< .001	.653
Error	43.702	237	0.184			
Corrected total	130.127	239				

Note. Dependent variable: posttest leadership self-efficacy. $R^2 = .664$. Partial η^2 for the group effect was calculated from the reported sums of squares.

Test of Null Hypothesis 1

After controlling for pretest leadership self-efficacy, the effect of group was statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 446.59$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .653$. The effect size is very large. The pretest covariate was also significant, $F(1, 237) = 6.04$, $p = .015$, showing that pretest scores were related to posttest scores. Null hypothesis 1 is rejected. The evidence indicates that students exposed to the gender-sensitive guidance intervention recorded significantly higher posttest leadership self-efficacy scores than students who received conventional counseling, after adjustment for pretest scores.

Table 3
Pretest and Posttest Scores for Career Assertiveness

Group	n	PretestM	PretestSD	PosttestM	PosttestSD	Meangain
Experi mental	120	1.98	0.55	3.55	0.31	1.57
Control	120	2.02	0.52	2.11	0.48	0.09

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Mean gain was calculated as posttest mean minus pretest mean.

mean minus pretest mean.

Table 3 shows that the experimental group's mean career assertiveness score increased from 1.98 (SD = 0.55) at pretest to 3.55 (SD = 0.31) at posttest, representing a mean gain of 1.57. The control group's mean increased from 2.02 (SD = 0.52) to 2.11 (SD = 0.48), representing a mean gain of 0.09. The descriptive results show that the improvement in career assertiveness was substantially greater in the experimental group.

Table 4
ANCOVA Summary for Career Assertiveness

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2
Corrected model	124.810	2	62.405	382.62	< .001	
Intercept	98.452	1	98.452	603.63	< .001	
Pretest covariate	0.945	1	0.945	5.79	.017	
Group	121.104	1	121.104	742.51	< .001	.758
Error	38.655	237	0.163			
Corrected total	163.465	239				

Note. Dependent variable: posttest career assertiveness. $R^2 = .764$. Partial η^2 for the group effect was calculated from the reported sums of squares.

Test of Null Hypothesis 2

After controlling for pretest career assertiveness, the group effect was statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 742.51$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .758$. This represents a very large effect. The pretest covariate was significant, $F(1, 237) = 5.79$, $p = .017$. Null hypothesis 2 is rejected. The result indicates that students exposed to empowerment-focused therapy had significantly higher posttest career assertiveness scores than those in the control group after adjustment for pretest scores.

Table 5
Pretest and Posttest Scores for Institutional Leadership Participation

Group	n	PretestM	PretestSD	PosttestM	PosttestSD	Meangain
Experimental	120	1.85	0.61	3.28	0.42	1.43
Control	120	1.89	0.59	1.96	0.54	0.07

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Mean gain was calculated as posttest mean minus pretest mean.

Table 5 shows that the experimental group's mean institutional leadership participation score increased from 1.85 (SD = 0.61) at pretest to 3.28 (SD = 0.42) at posttest, giving a mean gain of 1.43. The control group's mean increased from 1.89 (SD = 0.59) to 1.96 (SD = 0.54), giving a mean gain of 0.07. The descriptive results therefore show a markedly greater increase in institutional leadership participation among students who received assertiveness training.

Table 6
ANCOVA Summary for Institutional Leadership Participation

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2
Corrected model	104.112	2	52.056	218.17	< .001	
Intercept	165.334	1	165.334	692.93	< .001	
Pretest covariate	0.782	1	0.782	3.28	.071	
Group	98.540	1	98.540	413.00	< .001	.635
Error	56.548	237	0.239			

Corrected total	160.660	239				
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Note. Dependent variable: posttest institutional leadership participation. $R^2 = .648$. Partial η^2 for the group effect was calculated from the reported sums of squares.

Test of Null Hypothesis 3

After controlling for pretest institutional leadership participation, the group effect was statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 413.00$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .635$. This is a very large effect. The pretest covariate was not statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 3.28$, $p = .071$. Null hypothesis 3 is rejected. The evidence indicates that students exposed to assertiveness training had significantly higher posttest institutional leadership participation scores than students in the control group after adjustment for pretest scores.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding revealed that gender-sensitive guidance significantly improved the leadership self-efficacy of female secondary school students. The experimental group recorded a mean gain of 1.28, while the control group recorded a mean gain of only 0.07. After the pretest scores were controlled, the group effect remained statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 446.59$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .653. The large effect size indicates that the intervention was strongly associated with the improvement recorded in leadership self-efficacy.

This finding agrees with Hill, Corbett, and St. Rose (2021), who reported that gender-sensitive educational interventions strengthened female students' confidence to participate in competitive and leadership-oriented fields. Their study showed that gendered socialisation within schools can weaken girls' confidence and discourage them from seeking positions traditionally associated with authority. The present finding therefore supports the argument that intentional counseling can challenge the psychological effects of gender stereotyping.

The finding is also consistent with Osuji and Anyanwu (2022), who found that career-guidance interventions significantly enhanced leadership self-efficacy among in-school adolescents. Similarly, Raman (2025) maintained that gender-inclusive guidance expands the academic and leadership possibilities perceived by female students by removing implicit gender bias from instructional and advisory processes. These studies support the present result that female students are more likely to develop confidence in their leadership abilities when counseling directly challenges restrictive occupational and leadership stereotypes.

The result further supports Azeez and Babalola (2020), who observed that conventional guidance and counseling models in Nigerian public schools often leave gender-related structural barriers unaddressed. Conventional counseling may assist students with general academic and behavioural concerns, but it may not sufficiently challenge the cultural messages that present leadership as a predominantly masculine responsibility. The greater improvement recorded by the experimental group suggests that gender-sensitive guidance provided the students with the psychological support needed to perceive themselves as capable leaders.

The finding also aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which explains that self-efficacy is shaped by learning experiences, environmental support, perceived barriers, and expectations. Gender-sensitive counseling may have improved leadership self-efficacy by exposing the students to alternative leadership possibilities, challenging negative beliefs, and reinforcing their capacity to perform leadership responsibilities.

The second finding showed that empowerment-focused therapy significantly improved the career assertiveness of female students. The experimental group recorded a mean gain of 1.57, while the control group recorded a mean gain of 0.09. The ANCOVA result showed that the difference between the groups was statistically significant after controlling for pretest career assertiveness, $F(1, 237) = 742.51$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .758. This represents a very large intervention effect.

The result agrees with Akpan and Essien (2021), who found that cognitive-behavioural empowerment therapy improved career assertiveness among female secondary school students. Their finding indicates that structured psychological interventions can help female students challenge limiting beliefs and pursue careers based on their abilities and interests rather than gender expectations. The

current finding supports this position because the experimental group recorded a much greater increase in career assertiveness than the control group.

The finding is also consistent with Adimora (2025), who argued that empowerment-oriented interventions help female students resist social conditioning that directs them away from competitive, non-traditional, and high-status career paths. Adimora (2025) and Akpan and Essien (2021) found that cognitive-behavioural empowerment interventions produced substantial improvements in female students' career assertiveness.

The result further supports UNESCO (2023), which reported that increased female enrolment does not automatically produce corresponding levels of confidence, assertiveness, or participation in leadership-oriented career pathways. Although girls may have access to education, institutional and cultural pressures can still discourage them from expressing ambitious occupational goals. Empowerment-focused therapy may therefore be necessary to help female students recognise and resist these pressures.

The finding can be explained by the fact that empowerment-focused therapy addresses learned helplessness, low self-concept, fear of social disapproval, and passive acceptance of gender expectations. Through cognitive restructuring and guided reflection, the students may have become more willing to articulate ambitious career goals, defend their choices, and reject occupational stereotypes.

This result also agrees with Liberal Feminist Theory, which explains gender inequality as a product of institutional bias, restricted opportunities, and unequal socialisation. The improvement recorded by the experimental group suggests that career assertiveness can be strengthened when female students are helped to identify and challenge the social structures that restrict their choices.

The third finding revealed that assertiveness training significantly improved institutional leadership participation among female secondary school students. The experimental group recorded a mean gain of 1.43, while the control group recorded a mean gain of 0.07. After controlling for pretest scores, the group effect remained statistically significant, $F(1, 237) = 413.00$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .635. The effect size indicates that assertiveness training had a substantial relationship with the improvement observed in institutional leadership participation.

This finding agrees with Briggs and Horsfall (2023), who reported that structured assertiveness training increased female students' participation in school leadership and competitive student governance. Their study showed that female students became more willing to contest leadership positions after receiving training in communication, confidence, negotiation, and self-expression.

The finding also supports Anani (2019), who observed that student leadership positions in many West African schools are commonly divided along gender lines. Boys are more frequently assigned positions involving authority and decision-making, while girls are directed toward supportive or domestic roles. Assertiveness training can help female students resist such informal role allocation by equipping them with the confidence and communication skills required to seek senior leadership positions.

Daodu and Elegbede (2023) similarly found that female students encounter socio-cultural intimidation that limits their willingness to participate in visible leadership activities. The present result suggests that assertiveness training can reduce the behavioural effects of such intimidation by helping students express their opinions, defend their rights, manage interpersonal pressure, and participate confidently in school governance.

The finding may be explained by the practical nature of assertiveness training. Leadership participation requires more than internal confidence. Students must also be able to speak publicly, negotiate, communicate decisions, manage disagreement, and resist intimidation. The intervention may therefore have helped the students translate their leadership intentions into observable participation in institutional activities.

The pretest covariate was not statistically significant for institutional leadership participation, $F(1, 237) = 3.28$, $p = .071$. This indicates that the students' initial participation scores did not significantly predict their posttest scores after the group effect was considered. The significant difference at posttest was therefore closely associated with participation in the assertiveness-training intervention.

The findings collectively demonstrate that gender-inclusive counseling was associated with improvements in the psychological and behavioural dimensions of girls' leadership aspirations. Gender-sensitive guidance strengthened confidence in leadership ability, empowerment-focused

therapy improved the willingness to pursue ambitious career paths, and assertiveness training increased readiness to participate in school leadership structures.

The findings support the central argument of the study that conventional gender-neutral counseling may be inadequate where female students experience gender-specific barriers. A counseling programme that ignores gender stereotypes may unintentionally leave restrictive cultural beliefs unchallenged. Gender-inclusive counseling responds more directly to these barriers by addressing students' beliefs, aspirations, communication skills, and participation.

The results are consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory because they demonstrate that self-efficacy, career goals, and leadership behaviour can be influenced by environmental support and structured learning experiences. They also support Liberal Feminist Theory by showing that leadership inequalities are not fixed outcomes but can be reduced through deliberate educational and counseling interventions.

The results should nevertheless be interpreted within the limitations of the quasi-experimental design. The study used intact classes and did not randomly assign individual participants to the experimental and control groups. Consequently, the findings provide evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention among the sampled students, but they should not be generalised without qualification to all female secondary school students in Rivers State or Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study examined the effect of gender-inclusive counseling approaches on leadership self-efficacy, career assertiveness, and institutional leadership participation among female secondary school students in the Port Harcourt Education Zone of Rivers State. The findings showed that students who participated in the structured intervention recorded considerably greater improvements than those who received conventional counseling.

The ANCOVA results also showed significant group differences in all three outcome variables after pretest scores were controlled. These findings suggest that gender-sensitive guidance, empowerment-focused therapy, and assertiveness training can contribute meaningfully to the development of leadership confidence, career-related assertiveness, and active participation in school governance among female students.

Within the limits of the quasi-experimental design, the study concludes that counseling programmes designed specifically to address gender stereotypes and confidence-related barriers are more effective than conventional, gender-neutral counseling for strengthening girls' leadership aspirations. The findings apply primarily to the sampled SS2 female students and should not be generalised to all Nigerian secondary school students without further research.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Integration into school counseling programmes: Secondary schools in Rivers State should incorporate gender-sensitive guidance, empowerment-focused counseling, and assertiveness training into their regular counseling programmes.
2. Training of school counselors: The Rivers State Ministry of Education and relevant education boards should organise specialised training for school counselors on gender-responsive counseling, leadership development, public speaking, confidence building, and career assertiveness.
3. Structured leadership development activities: Schools should establish programmes that provide female students with practical opportunities to lead, participate in debates, coordinate projects, contest student leadership positions, and contribute to school decision-making.
4. Transparent student leadership selection: School administrators should adopt clear and merit-based procedures for selecting or electing student leaders. Gender stereotypes should not influence the assignment of senior leadership positions.
5. Monitoring and evaluation: Schools implementing gender-inclusive counseling programmes should periodically assess changes in students' leadership self-efficacy, career assertiveness, and institutional participation.
6. Further research: Similar studies should be conducted in other education zones and states, using larger samples, longer intervention periods, follow-up assessments, and, where feasible, random assignment to determine whether the effects are sustained and applicable to broader populations.

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