

PROJECT REPORT: CREATING SAFE SPACES AND STRONGER PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN IN MOLECULAR BIOSCIENCE IN NIGERIA

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

On 4th March 2026, a hybrid engagement was held at Kaduna State University (KASU), Nigeria, titled *“Creating Safe Spaces and Stronger Pathways for Women in Molecular Bioscience in Nigeria.”* The event marked International Women’s Day and addressed persistent structural and social barriers limiting the progression of women in molecular bioscience.

While women’s participation has increased at early and mid-career levels, significant gaps remain in leadership, driven by caregiving responsibilities, institutional constraints, and societal expectations. In addition, limited support systems for work-life integration, mentorship, and career advancement continue to hinder progression.

The event, with over 80 participants, created an inclusive platform for women at different career levels to share experiences and practical insights for advancing in molecular bioscience and related careers.

PROGRAMME AND SPEAKER CONTRIBUTIONS

The programme featured four expert-led sessions and interactive discussions focused on lived experience, institutional support, leadership, and skill building.

SESSION 1: LIVED EXPERIENCE, PURPOSE, AND RESILIENCE IN SCIENTIFIC CAREERS

Dr. Suzie Kuyet Zaky, Deputy Dean, Faculty of Life Sciences (KASU), shared how her early career followed societal expectations. She found purpose and career direction when she became aware of environmental pollution in her community, which motivated her to return to school.

She outlined practical strategies for balancing family and academic responsibilities:

- Maintaining structured flexibility in daily routines
- Setting clear boundaries between family time and academic work
- Adopting disciplined approaches to laboratory and research activities
- Letting go of perfectionism and focusing on sustainable progress

She also highlighted key support systems:

- Family support, particularly shared responsibilities with her husband
- Supportive lecturers who adapted learning and laboratory schedules
- Institutional support, enabling participation in research, travel, and professional development
- Peer networks that provided encouragement and shared learning

She rounded off with the benefits of a non-linear pathway:

- Personally: It strengthened her confidence, clarity of purpose, sense of direction and leadership with empathy
- Institutionally: It enhanced her contribution to KASU through mentorship, research impact, and grant value

SESSION 2: INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY INSIGHTS

Professor Helen Afang Andow, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Strategy, Innovation and Service Delivery) at KASU, brought a policy and institutional perspective to the conversation. She noted that university is a social institution that models equity and inclusion.

She highlighted key achievements at KASU, including:

- Women occupying 3 of 7 principal leadership positions
- A gender-sensitive framework embedded in strategic planning
- A student population of over 31,000, with over 43% female representation
- A renovated crèche supporting staff and students with caregiving responsibilities

Professor Andow also outlined several internal mechanisms that promote inclusive growth and leadership development, including:

- Requirements for impact-driven concept notes for leadership positions, ensuring that qualified individuals irrespective of gender are considered.
- Policies encouraging knowledge-sharing to build collective institutional capacity.
- Intentional efforts to mainstream gender representation in research and funding applications, including expectations for multidisciplinary teams with at least 40% female participation.
- Strong encouragement of interdisciplinary research, recognising its role in expanding opportunities for women across fields.

While acknowledging challenges such as limited funding and informal gender biases, she made the following strategic recommendations:

- Institutionalisation of structured mentorship programmes, building on existing initiatives such as KASU's mentorship centre.
- Introduction of women-focused research fellowships to support career advancement.
- Creation of flexible and responsive working conditions that reflect the realities of women balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
- Strengthening gender data systems and accountability mechanisms to track progress and inform policy decisions.
- Aligning women's participation in research with global priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SESSION 3. GLOBAL PATHWAYS, LEADERSHIP, AND REFRAMING SUCCESS IN SCIENCE

Maria Luisa De La Puerta Fernandez, a researcher and business woman, provided a global perspective on how structural and internal challenges, including societal expectations, underrepresentation in leadership, gendered perception of success, and self-doubt limit women from applying for opportunities they are qualified for. Using a “strategic game” analogy, she emphasised that success depends not only on available opportunities, but on how effectively they are navigated through intentionality, planning, adaptability, and confidence.

She also provided practical guidance on accessing international opportunities:

- Identifying funding across institutions, governments, and global organisations
- Starting with smaller grants and scaling progressively
- Building multidisciplinary collaborations
- Aligning proposals with policy priorities such as the SDGs
- Communicating research clearly to diverse audiences

She reiterated that increasing women’s participation is essential for building inclusive and sustainable systems.

SESSION 4: BELONGING, SKILL-BUILDING, AND THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP

Dr. Basira Kankia Lawal, shared her journey of navigating academic pursuit, family responsibilities and disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasised that beyond technical skills, success is shaped by soft skills:

- Strong belief, building resilience and hope
- Connectedness, enabling opportunities and collaboration
- Lifelong learning, supporting continuous growth
- Organisation, managing competing responsibilities

She also spoke on the importance of networking, mentorship, confidence and doggedness in driving career success.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT, DIALOGUE, AND REAL-WORLD REFLECTIONS

The event created a safe and dynamic space for participants to share experiences and engage in meaningful dialogue. Key discussions included:

- The challenge of balancing work and personal life, with emphasis on the need for both boundary-setting and institutional support.
- The role of allyship, with male allies engaging in conversations on how to better support women
- Addressing gender bias in leadership spaces, and strategies for responding with confidence and competence
- Practical guidance on strengthening research grant proposals and accessing opportunities

OUTCOMES, KEY INSIGHTS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dialogue delivered immediate outcomes and broader insights for strengthening women's career progression in molecular bioscience.

Key outcomes included:

- Increased confidence and mindset shift among women and allies
- Stronger peer networks and collaboration opportunities
- Greater awareness of institutional responsibility in addressing systemic barriers
- Shared experiences and open dialogue on career advancement strategies

Key recommendations:

- Strengthen institutional mentorship structures
- Expand women-focused funding and fellowship opportunities
- Promote flexible and inclusive working environments
- Encourage active allyship and shared responsibility
- Improve visibility and representation of women in leadership
- Support continuous capacity building and networking platforms

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