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Being a Woman is not a Barrier to Achieving Successful Leadership in South African Higher Education

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Abstract

This research aims to examine and analyse some of the problems that women in leadership positions face in South African higher education. Women have been denied leadership positions in higher education. This became increasingly clear in developing countries such as South Africa. However, in recent years, there has been a great increase in the achievement of women in leadership roles in higher education.. South African higher education has undergone a gender stereotype reversal, largely due to an increase in women in leadership positions such as vice-chancellors, rectors, deans, and department heads. This study contends that being a female does not preclude successful leadership in South African higher education. A qualitative content analysis was utilised to guide this work when reviewing and analysing current scholarly literature such as articles, book chapters, and theses. To build a coding system and present the findings of this paper, the following themes were identified: (1) challenges women face in leadership positions in South African higher education; (2) *the* influence of patriarchy in leadership positions in higher education; (3) Influence of patriarchy in leadership positions in higher education; (4) Redressing the challenges faced by women in higher education. The findings of this paper revealed that being a woman is not a barrier to success in leadership, but they also highlighted that women continue to face basic problems in academic leadership. This article concludes by claiming that gender stereotypes, gender inequity, and discrimination against women in leadership roles are issues preventing women from achieving their career progression goals in academia.

Keywords: *Gender stereotype; Leadership position; South African higher education; Women*

Introduction

The necessity of achieving gender equality in South African higher education, as a significant component in the achievement of women in leadership roles is discussed in this article. The study was founded on observations that encourage gender equality in leadership roles in South African higher education.

It is appropriate to begin this study by noting that South Africa became a democratic country after apartheid ended in 1994. This means that, since 1994, higher education has been aimed on resolving and rectifying the inequities left by apartheid's brutal practises, notably in positions of leadership, particularly in leadership roles. While there have been some important moves in this direction, South African higher education has mostly maintained its leadership position. This is worsened by the fact that women's leadership position in general continues to suffer as a result of unequal representation in leadership roles between men and women in higher education institutions (Moodly and Toni, 2019; Mdleleni, Mandyoli, & Frantz 2021).

A study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016) demonstrates that gender equality requires an approach that “ensures that girls and boys, women and men not only gain access to and complete education cycles but are empowered equally in and through education”. In higher education, gender inequality has become a global concern, including in South Africa. According to a recent study conducted by academics, higher education in developing countries shows no increase in elevating women to positions of leadership (Mdleleni, Mandyoli, and Frantz, 2021; Phakeng, 2015). However, several studies have shown that women in leadership positions continue to battle to find support (Madden, 2011; Mdleleni, Mandyoli, and Frantz, 2021; Vinkenberg, Van Engen, Eagly, and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). Male standards are largely acknowledged as the ones that women must follow (Mdleleni, Mandyoli and Frantz 2021, p 124):

These barriers include, but are not limited to, the male dominant location of power in the workplace as well as systemic challenges within existing university structures. Women must adopt male standards of leadership, as women are often viewed as emotional and subjective; whereas men are viewed as rational and objective and if they want to be taken seriously, they need to act out of character.

Therefore, women continue to experience some key challenges despite the growth of women in leadership positions. Therefore, the main question is: *whether being a woman is a barrier to successful leadership in South African higher education?*

Scholars refer to rising problems for women in higher education leadership positions as a phenomena that deserves special attention,

especially in developing countries such as South Africa (Ahrens, Landmann and Woywode, 2015; Madden, 2011; Phakeng, 2015; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021; Shackleton, Riordan and Simonis, 2006). Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango (2009) discovered that gender inequity impacts women in leadership roles in general. However, women in leadership positions in higher education are the most affected by gender inequality and stereotypes in South Africa.

South African higher education has been on the agenda of accepting and supporting gender equality since the end of the apartheid system. The increasing number of women in leadership positions in South African higher education has helped to reduce gender inequalities and stereotypes (Moodly and Toni, 2019; Potokri and Perumal, 2018; Kele and Pietersen 2015). This is attributable to an increase in the number of women in leadership position in higher education. However, there is ongoing debate over the challenges that women in leadership roles face in South African higher education (Acker, 2006; Moultrie and De la Rey, 2003; Moodly and Toni, 2019). Gender disparity has become a barrier to women's achievement in leadership roles in South African higher education (Acker, 2006; Moodly and Toni, 2019). According to Rosa and Clavero (2022), gender stereotypes have become a persistent issue in many emerging countries, notably in higher education. Despite the fact that education is regarded as a vital tool for achieving gender equality in South Africa, women in positions of leadership continue to face significant prejudice in higher education. Gender stereotypes in higher education are formed as a result of family, media, or societal attitudes (Islam and Asadullah, 2018).

Established in 1997 as Education White Paper 3, South Africa's higher education policy demonstrates disparities in access and possibilities for women in leadership positions (Department of Education, 1997, p 6):

This includes gross discrepancies in participation rates from students from different population groups, indefensible imbalances in ratios of black and female staff compared to whites and men and equally untenable disparities between historically black and white institutions in terms of facilities and capacities.

Gender equality in higher education, according to the White Paper, is a critical component of South Africa's development. Since the fall of

apartheid in 1994, addressing gender inequality has been at the heart of the struggle in South African higher education (SAHE) (Shackleton, Riordan and Simonis, 2006). Even though there is extensive literature on gender inequality in South Africa and worldwide (UNESCO, 2016; Shackleton, Riordan and Simonis, 2006; Phakeng, 2015), little attention has been paid to researching the challenges faced by women in leadership positions in South African higher education and the challenges the women experience in those positions. Hearn's (2004) inspired this study and found that leadership is unfavourable for women in higher education because men are over-represented in senior positions compared to women. Mhlanga (2013, p 38) agrees that "the top posts at the top of the academic hierarchy are filled by men from these disciplines". Women in leadership positions in South African higher education face obstacles to a successful career as a result of gender discrimination, hierarchy, and systemic inequality. Furthermore, Bellugiand Thondhlana (2019, p 960) point out that

South African higher education, riddled with legacies of prejudice, hierarchy, and systemic inequality, provides an example of the urgent necessity to engage critically with the ambiguities of negotiating change within the academy.

Given these concerns, it is critical to address the issues of gender inequality and hierarchical barriers that prevent women from obtaining leadership roles in higher education. Therefore, in this article, the researchers focus on specific questions emerging from scholarship on women in leadership positions in higher education, with special attention to South African higher education.

Research questions

The researchers create four essential research questions in this article to address and provide in-depth insight into the current dilemma that women face in leadership roles in South African higher education:

- a) What challenges do women face in leadership positions in South African higher education?
- b) How does patriarchy affect leadership positions in higher education?
- c) How do gender stereotypes affect leadership positions in higher education?

- d) What could be done to address the barriers that women encounter higher education?

Conceptual framework

This research is based on the conceptual framework commonly called gender equality theory or gender equality. The researchers employed the gender equality theory as a conceptual framework that was introduced by Brown (1970, 1975), Sanday (1973), Palgi et al. (1983), and Lesser Blumberg (1984). The gender equality theory gained popularity in higher education in the late 1970s when Brown (1970, 1975) and Sanday (1973) published academic work on gender equality and gradually grew as a critical theory for interpreting and analysing the issue of gender inequality in society. The gender equality theory was employed by the researchers to carefully explore and analyse the absence of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities in higher education (Archer, 1995; 2000: p 59–60; Winchester and Browning, 2015; Thelwall et al., 2019; Rosa and Clavero, 2022). This article looked at Archer's social realism (1995; 2000: p 59–60) to reveal how women are perceived in society. Several modern materialist theories emphasise the crucial role of equality in higher education and indicate that, while women perform intellectually, they struggle to advance in their jobs both inside and outside of academia (Winchester and Browning, 2015; Thelwall et al. 2019).

The gender equality hypothesis was used by the researchers in this work since it argues for equality in higher education for both men and women. Scholars believe that addressing gender inequality in South African higher education is critical (Moodly and Toni 2017; Moodly, 2021). Gender equality theory must be promoted because women work alongside males, particularly in higher education. Gender equality theory is important in this study because it aims to explain the significance of equality in South African higher education. The researchers used this theory to challenge the government's and higher education's oversight and funding bodies, higher education institutions, and other partners for the lack of promotion and opportunities for women to develop and play a greater role in leadership. The gender equality theory in this paper calls for action to transform gender-biased norms such as unequal domestic burdens falling upon women and biases in the assessment, recruitment, and promotion of women in higher education. As a result, the

researchers believe that gender equality theory should be applied to transform leadership in higher education in South Africa.

Methodology

For this article, the researchers used a qualitative research methodology with content analysis as the primary data gathering tool. A qualitative research methodology approach entails discovering and comprehending distinct subjects, patterns, and themes in order to expressly describe events (Krippendorff, 2018). Because this paper employed South African higher education as a case study, a qualitative content analysis was performed to ensure that the logic of the data corresponded to the argument and made a persuasive justification for this research. In this article, a qualitative content analysis was judged an important research tool to employ in order to establish specific texts, themes, or concepts within some supplied qualitative data. This article's main purpose is to identify essential content features and present them clearly and effectively for study (Stemler, 2000). The main purpose of this paper is to argue that being a woman is not a deterrent to successful leadership in South African higher education.

The content analysis also permitted the researchers to quantify and analyse the occurrence of, meanings of, and connections between particular words, themes, or concepts (Krippendorff, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is methodically going through transcripts and texts to identify how frequently various topics are mentioned and what is stated about each theme (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017). Therefore, qualitative content analysis was employed in this article because of its merits and ability to analyse text precisely. Qualitative content analysis is grounded on analysing the content under the guidance of the research question that the researchers developed (Stemler, 2000; Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018). Thus, in this paper, the main research question was: *What factors contribute to women's success in leadership positions in South African higher education?* This question provided an in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to women's success in leadership positions in South African higher education. Finally, the content analysis assisted the researchers in properly interpreting and presenting the findings of this work.

Limitations

The scope of this study was confined to qualitative content analysis, with a focus on the problems that women encountered in positions of leadership in South African higher education.. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other countries.

Contextualising the gender inequality in South African higher education

According to research, Women are increasingly taking on leadership roles in South African higher education, (Phakeng, 2015; Moodly and Toni, 2019; Potokri and Perumal, 2018; Kele and Pietersen 2015). On the other hand, gender stereotypes influence women in leadership roles in South African higher education. This gender stereotype in South Africa is connected to a lack of women in higher-level positions. The paper findings indicate comparable patterns that emerge from the literature reviewed to understand the challenges faced by women in leadership positions. This article's results were separated into four key sections based on the questions: (1) What challenges do women face in leadership positions in South African higher education? (2) What is the influence of patriarchy in leadership positions in higher education? (3) What is the influence of gender stereotypes on leadership positions in higher education? (4) What could be done to alleviate the obstacles that women experience in higher education?

Challenges women face in leadership positions in South African higher education

Scholars have identified some of the problems that women experience in leadership positions in South African higher education (Phakeng, 2015; Moodly and Toni, 2019; Potokri and Perumal, 2018; Kele and Pietersen 2015). In several studies, it appears that women must work twice as hard to occupy leadership positions in South African higher education (Phakeng, 2015) and those who succeed become recipients of toxic patriarchal treatment in hostile environments (Molotsi, 2016). In South Africa, higher education reform necessitates the adoption and implementation of policies that promote women to executive and senior management roles, among other things (Moodly and Toni, 2019; Potokri

and Perumal, 2018; Kele and Pietersen 2015). Despite progressive legislation, women continue to be underrepresented in executive and senior management roles in South African higher education (Moodly and Toni, 2019). Many of the problems in higher education are the result of poor leadership and the slow formulation and implementation of legislation to address gender imbalances (Gumede, 2020).

Several studies highlight the persisting hurdles that women in leadership roles in South African higher education confront (Phakeng, 2015; Moodly and Toni, 2019; Potokri and Perumal, 2018; Ramohai, 2019). Ramohai (2019) discusses the variables that cause women in administrative positions to resign from their jobs and leave academia. Women leave due to (1) personal reasons that include being underpaid, and (2) institutional reasons that include hostile institutional cultures underpinned by patriarchal practices that promote intimidation and undermining behaviour towards women in leadership. Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) study on the experiences of female deans in South African universities reveals that some of the challenges experienced include work-life conflict, discrimination and gender stereotyping, as well as lack of support in the form of financial resources, networking, and mentors. Similarly, Zulu's (2021) research on the trials and achievements of South African Black women academics finds that some of the obstacles women in leadership faced included feeling undesired in academia and having their leadership positions undercut by male colleagues. Furthermore, Monnapula-Mapesela (2017) contends that white women outnumber women of colour in higher education. Women in leadership roles are not widely accepted in higher education.

Recent statistics on the report by the Businesswomen's Association of South Africa (BWASA) (2021) reveal that women occupy 23.1% of vice-chancellor positions in South African higher education institutions, up from 15% in 2016 figures published in the 2017 Census. Even though decision-making remains predominantly in the hands of their male colleagues, it is good to see that women are gradually expanding their presence at the most senior levels of HEIs.

Bayaga and Mtose's (2021, p 457) study highlights that "leadership stereotypes, gender, race and ethnicity" influence women's promotion into an executive positions in South African higher education. According to the study, these effects cause women to have low self-esteem and to be hesitant to take on leadership roles in higher education (Bayaga& Mtose, 2021). Some problems that women in executive and

administrative roles in South African higher education experience, for example, hinder their personal and professional growth, further disempowering them from carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively (Ramohai and Marumo, 2016). According to Msibi (2020), the majority of the obstacles that women experience in leadership have nothing to do with their leadership ability and are instead gender-based. Because women's leadership abilities are undeniably strong, the conclusion is that the battle to accept women in positions of leadership in South African higher education derives from poisonous patriarchal structures and unfriendly cultural ideas.. This section contends that women continue to encounter basic hurdles in academic leadership.

Influence of patriarchy in leadership positions in higher education

Patriarchal norms exist worldwide, and their influences may be seen and felt in many aspects of society (Archer, 1995; 2000: p 59–60). Patriarchal ideology is not unique to leadership positions in South African higher education. Sholars such as Nash (2009) defines patriarchy as “an analytical concept referring to a system of political, social, and economic relations and institutions structured around the gender inequality of socially defined men and women”. Patriarchy is a hierarchical system of social institutions and social connections that allows males to occupy positions of power, privilege, and leadership in society. Dlamini and Adams (2014) highlight that patriarchy is an ideology that aims to justify male superiority over women while ignoring women’s leadership capabilities and potential. According to Toni and Moodly (2019), the effect of patriarchy creates unreasonable expectations for women in leadership roles in higher education, with women expected to exhibit masculine gender traits when they lead.

Ramnund-Mansingh and Seedat-Khan (2020: p 64) also find that “Women adopt male characters to endure and flourish into higher-ranking positions”. Similarly, Msibi’s (2020) case study on a government department in KwaZulu-Natal reveals that patriarchal norms influence women in leadership to think that they are less capable than their male colleagues and that every decision they make should be supported and approved by malemanagers. Akala (2018) further observes that patriarchal ideology fosters power disparities between sexes and perpetuates the myth that women have less intellectual and physical potential than males. According to some experts, one of the dangers of

patriarchy is that it justifies itself as an ideology (Bereng and Mutekwe, 2021; DeKeseredy, 2021; Musoni 2022). The argument has a severe impact on the social division of labour, notably in higher education, where women in leadership must compete with male colleagues who exhibit supremacist inclinations.

To effect change in South African higher education leadership, it is critical to face and solve patriarchy and gender discrimination.. Patriarchy and gender discrimination should not flourish or be encouraged in higher education. Male gender supremacy in higher education leadership positions is toxic, and women bear the brunt of its negative impact. Higher education should always emphasise accepting diversity, non-discriminatory leadership ideals, and equality in leadership positions.

Influence of gender stereotypes on the leadership positions in higher education

Gender stereotypes in leadership in higher education must be thoroughly addressed and addressed promptly, especially in South Africa. A clear message must emerge that women are capable of performing in the same leadership positions as men in higher education. Women should not be discouraged from pursuing their desire to be in leadership positions in higher education, especially if they are qualified, capable, competent, and have the necessary ability, knowledge, and skill to lead successfully in positions in higher education. The major goal of patriarchy in higher education was unavoidably to secure male domination and female obedience, which encourages gender inequity (Zulu, 2021). It is also important to note that, while women in leadership positions can contribute to higher education institutions, they are frequently subjected to prejudice and are victims of sexist and racial oppression (Zulu, 2021).

Women have the skill to lead despite gender stereotypes in leadership positions in higher education in South Africa. Among the women who have challenged and successfully achieved leadership positions in academia are Tshwane University of Technology Executive Dean, Nalini Moodly-Diar and University of Cape Town Vice-chancellor, Mamokgethi Phakeng. Women have effectively challenged gender preconceptions in higher education leadership roles (Phakeng, 2015). However, the rate of appointing of women into leadership positions in higher education is low, and simultaneously an increasing number of women are interested in furthering their academic studies in pursuit of leadership positions in

higher education. Furthermore, Phakeng (2015) demonstrates that fast development occurred when the number of African women PhD graduates jumped from ten in 1996 to 106 in 2012, a 960% rise.

The women entering the 'academic male-dominated management institutions' still experience forms of discrimination such as income differences. Because of the gender gap, women are frequently grabbed, groped, or pursued by males, making it harder to report abuse. People in positions of authority in higher education are still predominantly controlled by males rather than women, giving men an edge and resulting in cases of abuse collapsing and being pushed under the carpet (Dlamini and Adams, 2014).

The urgent employment of an increasing number of women into leadership would subvert the influence of gender stereotypes on leadership positions in higher education. This increase in women in leadership positions can only be achieved by women standing firmly together with other female academics (Phakeng, 2015). Solidarity with women in higher education leadership positions will invite them to unite, reach for, and make the most of every opportunity they have to stop gender stereotyping permanently in higher education. Women in leadership positions should not pander to men who still think they are superior and in charge. Men in higher education leadership roles should ensure that women do not infiltrate the academic environment to engage in reverse intimidation and bullying. Women are in leadership positions because women are also born to be leaders. Also, women aspire to break free from generations of poverty and illiteracy. Women want to practice professions and prove that they will not continue to be influenced by gender stereotypes in leadership positions in higher education.

Overcoming the obstacles that women confront in higher education

It is important to note that, while the terms equity and equality may appear identical, their application might result in radically different outcomes for excluded persons. However, in this publication, the researchers utilised equity to emphasise the significance of providing the same amount of resources to everyone, regardless of need (Bibi and Nabli, 2010).

Several measures might be taken to address the obstacles that women encounter in higher education, especially in South Africa. According to

Akala (2018), one important method to addressing women's difficulties is to develop policies that encourage access and equity for women in South African higher education. Since women were previously unable to make decisions and delegated authority, there is a need for the reorganisation of decision making and the delegation of authority to women in higher education to make decisions important for their departments (Akala, 2018; Phakeng, 2015; Mdleleni, Mandyoli and Frantz, 2021). Idahosa (2019) emphasises the need of university administration encouraging and supporting women in leadership to guarantee that women thrive in their roles. South African higher education must stay open to the expectations of women in leadership roles, as well as provide the infrastructure required for women in leadership positions to flourish in their professions and deliver excellent output.

Discussions

This research stated that being a woman is not a barrier to successful leadership in South African higher education. This essay argues that because South African colleges have chosen to accept gender diversity, the institutions must encourage gender equality in leadership positions. This piece also highlighted the numerous hurdles that women in positions of leadership face. These include a lack of support from the opposite gender. This could be attributed to the gender stereotype and the existence of patriarchy in leadership positions in higher education.

According to the findings of this study, policies in South African higher education were designed with the goal of promoting women to executive and senior management roles. However, this article raised significant issues and problems surrounding the practical execution of these rules.. The findings of this paper indicated that South African higher education, in collaboration with the necessary stakeholders, must guarantee that gender equality policies are implemented in higher education. The researchers believe that women have enormous potential to contribute to leadership positions in higher education. The intervention of university management, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders will promote gender equality in higher education.

This article's results are based on a review of the literature by experts who feel that women in leadership roles in higher education in South Africa confront a number of challenges. There is strong evidence that the challenges have not yet been adequately and effectively handled. Despite

research supporting women leaders, the findings revealed that women are rarely given leadership positions in higher education. This was also observed by BWASA (2021), which claimed that data show that while women are in positions of leadership, they are still underrepresented in executive occupations. Men continue to dominate top executive roles in South African higher education, resulting in women's marginalisation.

In this article, patriarchal standards were also identified as a substantial barrier to women's success in higher education. This article also highlights that patriarchy in higher education is a hierarchical arrangement of social institutions and social relationships that enable men to hold higher positions than women. This paper's findings indicated that there is a need to address the barriers that women encounter in higher education, particularly in South Africa. . The researchers strongly believe that this can be achieved by delegating authority to women in higher education to make important decisions for their departments and university.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings and analyses of this research, the following suggestions were made: Universities should implement equitable policies and goals to place more women in leadership positions such as heads of departments, deans, and vice-chancellors.
- Universities should increase emphasise the contributions of women in leadership positions.
- Universities should improve the representation of women in higher education at all levels.
- Universities should identify women who can contribute to the management level and mentor them as future senior leaders in higher education.

Conclusion

This paper discovered that the obstacles women encounter in higher education leadership roles are the consequence of a lack of promotion of the actual application of policies aimed at women achieving executive and senior management position. This article recognised that patriarchal norms that exist in higher education influence how women are observed

in higher positions. This article also found that it is important and necessary for South African universities to support women in leadership positions. This article emphasises the necessity for South African higher education to stay open to the expectations of women in leadership roles, as well as to construct the infrastructure required for women in leadership positions to flourish in their jobs and produce excellent output.

The use of core observations considerably impacted the framework of analysis of gender equality theory in the context of gender equality in higher education for both men and women. This article conducted a qualitative literature review that argues that being a woman does not preclude successful leadership in South African higher education.. In line with gender equality theory by Brown (1970, 1975), Sanday (1973), Palgi et al. (1983), South African higher education through university management and other relevant stakeholders must prioritise and promote equality in higher education.

Despite rules in existence, this essay looked extensively at the basic origins and influences of gender stereotypes, gender inequity, and discrimination against women in leadership roles in higher education. However, these policies are rarely implemented practically. This article found that patriarchal power still exists in South African higher education and contributes to challenges faced by women in higher education. This essay concludes by claiming that gender stereotypes, gender inequity, and discrimination against women in positions of leadership create difficulties for women in academics in achieving their career progression goals.

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