

THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN AND BARRIERS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

by Bernardete Mendes*



Abstract

In 1994, South Africa became a democratic state and focused primarily on advancing and protecting human rights; however, these rights had to first be constitutionalised. As a result, the South African Constitution was adopted in 1996 with fundamental rights under its Bill of Rights, which ensures that government can be held accountable for the protection of citizens' rights. One of the fundamental rights entrenched in the Constitution is gender equality, which aims at increasing access for women to the public sphere and opportunities. The right is supported by domestic legislation and binding international law instruments. There is, however, limited research on the lived experiences of women at various institutions in South Africa post the adoption of the various gender equality laws, prompting the question: are institutions implementing, practicing, and embracing gender equality? This article discusses the experiences of women and the challenges that they face in the education sector focusing specifically on tertiary institutions in the context of gender equality and women as staff.

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The article argues that although – legislatively – South Africa has committed to gender equality, by ensuring equal representation and access to opportunities for women, the challenges that women are facing in the higher institutions show that law is not enough to deal with gender equality: There is a need for government to focus on redressing the challenges that women still face in tertiary institutions.

1 Introduction

The transition from apartheid, an institutionalised form of racial segregation which enforced racial discriminations in all sectors of South Africa through policies and legislation, meant that change was inevitable especially in the sphere of human rights. The constitutional recognition of human rights through the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (the Constitution) in 1996 and the enforcement of such rights under the Bill of Rights, have allowed for social, economic, and political changes in the now democratic South Africa. One of the fundamental rights constitutionally enshrined in South Africa is to ensure equality as stipulated in section 9 of the Constitution. Section 9 stipulates that ‘everyone is equal before the law and has the rights to equal protection and benefit of the law’ and ‘equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms’.¹ This includes the elimination of unfair discrimination based enumerated prohibited grounds, such as sex, race, ethnicity, religion etc.²

When speaking about gender equality, concepts such as ‘gender’, ‘sex’ and ‘stereotype’ are important to define as they play a significant role in the discussion of gender equality especially in reference to women. ‘Sex’ refers to biological attributes in humans that are mostly associated with ‘physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy’.³ As such, although the normal categorisation is either male or female, this varies depending on the biological attributes. ‘Gender’ on the other hand refers to socially and culturally assigned roles and behaviours which are deemed to be appropriate to one’s ‘sex’ and as such, society defines what maleness or masculinity and femaleness or femininity are.⁴ ‘Stereotype’ is defined as a standardised mental picture that is very often held by a group of people and represents an oversimplified

1 Sec 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (the Constitution).

2 As above.

3 Canadian Institutes of Health Research ‘What is gender? What is sex?’ 28 April 2020 <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html> (accessed 13 September 2020)

4 C Zulu ‘Gender representation patterns in higher education management in South Africa’ (2003) 17 *South African Journal of Higher Education* 98.

opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.⁵ Therefore, both sexes may experience gender stereotyping because they have been socialised from a young age what is expected from them based on their socially ascribed roles based on sex.⁶ For example, girls must be less assertive, emotional and dependent;⁷ while boys should be assertive, rational and independent;⁸ and therefore it is not surprising that gender stereotypes influence the experiences that women and men face in various institutions.

Gender equality, defined here as 'equal access to opportunities for professional and career advancement, equal representation in high level academic and administrative positions as well as equal access to information and promotion opportunities for both men and women',⁹ is a global objective which is addressed domestically, regionally, and internationally in a majority of countries, including South Africa. Internationally, it started with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948. South Africa ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted in 1979 with the main objective of eliminating discrimination against women and ensuring that they are included in the public sphere.¹⁰

Moreover, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which South Africa is a member state, in recognising regional gender inequality challenges, established a SADC Gender Unit that organised a SADC Consultative Conference on Gender and Development in 2005.¹¹ South Africa also ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) in 2004 and domestically adopted the Employment Equity Act and other supporting policies to redress gender imbalances.¹²

5 Merriam Webster, Stereotype <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stereotype> (accessed 28 May 2020).

6 Zulu (n 4) 98.

7 As above.

8 As above.

9 Zulu (n 4) 98.

10 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation People Opposing Women Abuse 'South African shadow report on the implementation of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women' February 2011 https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/ZAF/INT_CEDAW_NGO_ZAF_48_10362_E.pdf (accessed 14 September 2020).

11 PG Mudiwa 'Addressing the issue of gender equity in the presidency of the university system in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region' (2010) 2 *Forum on Public Policy* 1.

12 African Union 'Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa' 16 October 2019 [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-s-PROTOCOL TO THE AFRICAN CHARTER ON HUMAN AND PEOPLE%27S RIGHTS ON THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN AFRICA.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-s-PROTOCOL%20TO%20THE%20AFRICAN%20CHARTER%20ON%20HUMAN%20AND%20PEOPLE%27S%20RIGHTS%20ON%20THE%20RIGHTS%20OF%20WOMEN%20IN%20AFRICA.pdf) (accessed 14 September 2020).

Since 1994, the government has been aiming towards achieving gender equality and ensuring participation of women in different sectors in the country.¹³ This is not only for justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within the South African society, but also for economic development. This has definitely yielded positive results as comprehensive policy framework for higher education has been put into place and led to an increased participation for the previously disadvantaged individuals especially the women.¹⁴ In 2018, Professor Ahmed Bawa, chief executive officer of Universities in South Africa, stated that although women comprise 58% of the students in universities, compared to 42% being men, when one looks at the staffing, particularly at the top level, the story is different.¹⁵

In relation to staffing and gender representation in universities, 2016 national data from Higher Education Management Information System, indicates that out of 2 218 professors in South African institutions, only 27.5% are women.¹⁶ In addition, out of 2 131 senior professors, 39.5% are women; while at senior lecturer level, women account for 45.1% of 4 890 personnel.¹⁷ Yet, women make up 53.3% (out of 8 498) and 56.6% (out of 1 035) of the total appointments at lecturer and junior lecturer level.¹⁸

However, the figures, and the legislation, do not unpack the stories of the lived experiences of women as staff in institutions, particularly tertiary institutions. This article aims to uncover the experiences of women in tertiary institutions focusing on their roles as staff members as well as the challenges that they encounter within this space. Moreover, it aims to discover whether socio-cultural norms as well as gender stereotypes play a role in their experiences. The article begins by dealing with women representation in terms of employment in higher institutions and their experiences within the workplace focusing on the impact of socialisation and patriarchy. Thereafter, it unpacks the barriers or challenges that women face in advancing their careers in higher institutions; and concludes by

13 Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities 'South Africa's report on the progress made on Implementation of the Beijing platform for action' June 2019 <http://www.women.gov.za/images/Final-National-Beijing-25-Report-2014-2019--Abridged-.pdf> (accessed 11 September 2020).

14 S Badat 'The challenges of transformation in higher education and training institutions in South Africa' April 2020 https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodes_university/content/vc/documents/The_Challenges_of_Transformation_in_Higher_Education_and_Training_Institutions_in_South_Africa.pdf (accessed 28 May 2020).

15 E Naidu 'Universities body to probe gender imbalance at the top' *University World News* 27 July 2018.

16 As above.

17 As above.

18 BM Akala 'Challenging gender equality in South African transformation policies – a case of the white paper: a programme for the transformation of higher education' (2018) 32 *South African Journal of Higher Education* 226.

making recommendations on what the government and the higher institutions can do to deal with these challenges.

2 Women: Employment and representation in tertiary institutions

During the apartheid system, black women suffered 'triple marginalisation' due to their race, gender, and social class.¹⁹ The higher education system perpetuated exclusion, discrimination and gender segregation institutionalised by the apartheid system which ultimately meant that by 1993, research and teaching institutions were only comprised of 32% women.²⁰

Moreover, most of these women occupied either lecturer or junior lecturer positions whereas only 3% and 8% were professors and associate professors, respectively.²¹ The transition to democracy brought hope to South African women with the adoption of different international and domestic laws. These laws aim for gender equality in that, amongst other things, women are afforded equal opportunities as the male counterparts in accessing the public sphere such as tertiary institutions.²² However, this is not the reality in terms of the management and employment in tertiary institutions. In 2019, it was found that the management positions at tertiary institutions are mostly occupied by white men; for example, only 4 out of the 26 institutions are managed by women.²³ Two years before, the Council of Higher Education found that out of the 56 527 academic staff, only 13 531 PhD holders were women, whereas women made up 44,76%, 29%, 41% and 46% of senior managers, professors, associate professors, and senior lecturers, respectively.²⁴

Thus, we can see that women are still not adequately represented in leadership positions in tertiary institutions and it is important to try and understand the reasons behind that. Zulu argues that this is a result of taught socialisation patterns within society, as people learn from a young age the roles that society assigns to them based on their gender.²⁵ For example, while young girls are taught to be obedient, emotional and care-givers, men are taught to be aggressive and emotionally strong through expressions such as 'men don't cry' – and

19 Akala (n 18).

20 R Mabokel & K Mawila 'The impact of race, gender, and culture in South African higher education' (2004) 48 *Comparative Education Review* 396.

21 Mabokela & Mawila (n 20) 397.

22 As above.

23 B Mangolotho 'Advancing gender equality in academia' 20 September 2019 <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-20-00-advancing-gender-equality-in-academia/> (15 May 2020).

24 As above.

25 Zulu (n 4) 99.

this ultimately leads to gender stereotypes in various settings, including the workplace. On the other hand, Alabi *et al* argues that this is the result of the patriarchal system which enforces socio-cultural norms, behaviours, and expectations on women.²⁶ This system domesticates women and views them as caregivers while men are assigned primary and predominated power.²⁷ Daniella Coetzee argues that women were only superficially included in the education system because, as one analyses it deeper, one will realise that it reinforces socio-cultural norms of patriarchy. This is seen as less women are promoted in academic profession and are assigned positions that fit their ascribed gender roles.²⁸

This is the reason that most women choose careers in higher institutions that are fitting to their roles as caregivers, for example administrative roles, and thus occupy the lower ranks. Therefore, gender-based roles are perpetuated in the workplace.²⁹ A survey conducted telephonically in all South African universities between March 2000 and 2002, found that women choose mostly administrative careers because of the flexibility of said career options.³⁰ In addition, the socio-economic disadvantages that apartheid caused still impact women's experiences in tertiary institutions. This is because, although one might have the experience, the lack of qualifications is a disadvantage.³¹ During apartheid, it was found that majority of women worked as domestic workers, and thus had experiences or were skilled domestically although it was lowest paid and lowest skilled job opportunities.³² Because segregation laws restricted work and educational opportunities, women were denied education and thus their chances of obtaining qualifications were limited, obstructing access to better employment opportunities.³³ A study found that out of 22 women interviewed, only seven had doctorates – which is considered a prerequisite for high leadership positions.³⁴

Moreover, even in the post-democratic South Africa, it was found that women (most particularly black women) are still viewed as 'outsiders' within tertiary institutions. This perception makes them

26 O Alabi, M Khan & A Abdullahi 'The lived experiences of postgraduate female students at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban, South Africa' (2019) 5 *Heliyon* 1.

27 As above.

28 D Coetzee 'South African education and the ideology of patriarchy' (2001) 21 *South African Journal of Education* 300.

29 Mabokela & Mawila (n 20) 398.

30 Mabokela & Mawila (n 20) 101.

31 As above.

32 J Nolde 'South African women under Apartheid: Employment rights, with particular focus on domestic service and forms of resistance to promote change' (1991) 10 *Third World Legal Studies* 203.

33 As above.

34 A Moultrie & C De La Rey 'South African women leaders in higher education: professional development needs in a changing context' (2003) 38 *Mcgill Journal of Education* 407.

less likely to express themselves or want to be seen.³⁵ Mabokela, who conducted qualitative interviews with 26 female academics employed in various academic institutions, found that women are reportedly given more teaching workload in comparison to their co-workers, sometimes having to teach twice in a day.³⁶

This therefore disables women from furthering their studies and even the likelihood of promotion as they are loaded with work and cannot invest in furthering their studies; this is tantamount to unequal competition with male counterparts for promotion.³⁷ It was further found that women as junior lecturers were denied study leave for any advanced degree purposes and through practices similar to these, women are still marginalised and discriminated against.³⁸ In addition, the participants were hardly involved in research activities as senior scholars opposed supporting junior rank staff.³⁹

The 'old boy network', is an informal system through which men use their positions or influence to assist those who went to the same school or university or share similar social backgrounds, as well as gender identity, also negatively impacts on women working in higher education.⁴⁰ In Mabokela's interviews, it was found that the mainstream journals were managed through the 'old boy network' and as such women's articles were mostly rejected as they were '... not receptive to the kind of work that women academics are engaged in ... research that is community based and written from a non-western perspective or research that is written from the perspective of gender'.⁴¹ But more than that, women had to prove themselves as they were always constantly being watched or observed⁴². Lastly, the participants also mentioned that the working conditions did not allow women the chance to equally compete with their male counterparts and 'the imbalanced group representation resulted in stereotyping and subtle forms of discrimination'.⁴³ Naicker, who focused on the historical experiences of women academics in the field of theology, recognises that maybe there should be an increase of women studying and teaching theology as means of dealing with exclusion and discrimination, especially in the theology field.

35 L Johnson and K Thomas 'A similar, marginal place in the academy: contextualizing the leadership strategies of black women in the United States and South Africa' (2012) 14 *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 156.

36 R Mabokela 'Reflections of black women faculty in South Africa universities' (2002) 25 *The Review of Higher Education* 185.

37 As above.

38 Mabokela (n 36) 191.

39 Mabokela (n 36).

40 Zulu (n 4) 99.

41 L Naicker 'The journey of South African women academics with a particular focus on women academics in theological education' (2013) 39 *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 325.

42 As above.

43 Naicker (n 41) 327.

However, beyond understanding the experiences of women staff in the tertiary institutions, one also needs to understand the daily challenges or barriers that prevent women from succeeding in leadership or management positions in tertiary institutions.

3 Barriers and challenges confronting women in higher education

A study in India found that women did not excel in high positions primarily because of work-stress related to their male counter parts and balancing between their academic and household duties.⁴⁴ This is because of the dominance of men in the workplace and patriarchy. Due to social and culturally assigned expectations on women, they are always put in circumstances where they have to make choices between their responsibilities towards family or advancing their careers.⁴⁵ As a result, when women choose the former, they miss career opportunities and decrease their cumulative work experiences, thus impeding their career advancement.⁴⁶ This refers back to the social and cultural influences of patriarchy which reduce women to mostly reproductive labour.⁴⁷ More than that, it is important to acknowledge that academic institutions also play a role in gender inequality through their practices, particularly in terms of research. The academic field has a competitive culture which is seen especially in single-authored research papers where most women cannot participate and thus are not represented due to the limited research involvement.⁴⁸ Holmann, who studied the gender gap in science, found that authorship positions associated with seniority and prestigious journals have fewer women authors, and that men are invited to submit papers at double the rate in comparison to women.⁴⁹ Moreover, professional autonomy and lack of equal opportunities at departmental levels also contribute to gender inequality.⁵⁰ Bain and Cummings add that the probability of women being included in high ranks are also affected by their limited experiences and scholarly productivity, a result based on the duration of employment within the higher education.⁵¹

44 N Gupta & A Sharma 'Women academic scientist in India' (2002) 32 *Social Studies of Sciences* 901.

45 As above.

46 N Boshoff 'The representation of women academics in higher education in South Africa: progress in the pipeline?' (2005) 19 *SAJHE* 359.

47 This refers to all household activities and care giving roles performed within a household. See CBE Meléndez 'Unpaid Reproductive Labour: A Marxist Analysis' (2013) *Emerald Group Publishing Limited* 131.

48 Boshoff (n 46) 374.

49 L Holman, D Stuart Fox & CE Hauser 'The gender gap in science: how long until women are equally represented?' (2018) <https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.2004956> (accessed 12 September 2020).

50 Boshoff (n 46) 374.

Zulu argues that women advancement is influenced by either extrinsic or intrinsic factors. The above-mentioned barriers would mostly fall within the extrinsic factor in that they are external factors that ultimately influence women advancement, such as one's role with an organisation and the fact that culture influences women's leadership roles as they are believed to be followers where men are leaders.⁵² Intrinsic factors are instilled through socialisation, such as women being taught to be submissive and emotional.⁵³ Therefore, women might lose on employment opportunities if employers choose to hire people with aggressive and competitive characters in a society governed by traditional social norms.⁵⁴

Thus, there is a need for improvement on the experiences of women in the tertiary sector and this cannot be through representation by numbers alone. There's a need to ensure women's full participation in academic activities and to be given equal opportunities within the organisational culture and practices.⁵⁵ This can be through gender main-streaming which is 'the systemic integration of equal opportunities for women and men into the organisation and its culture and into all programmes, policies and practices into ways of seeing and doing.'⁵⁶ This can include raising awareness about gender equality and gender monitoring while training the employees.

4 Conclusion

It can thus be concluded that the experiences of women in higher institutions, as well as the challenges that they face in advancing their careers, is perpetuated by socio-cultural norms reinforced by patriarchy. Although nationally legislation and policies – which notionally and formally require redress and equity – are in place, these frameworks are not self-enacting; they require proactive enforcement and ongoing development, re-development and implementation of (further) redress strategies which instil equitable socio-cultural norms and which aim to eliminate discriminatory barriers to women accessing and occupying tertiary and other institutional spaces.

51 As above.

52 Zulu (n 4) 103.

53 As above.

54 Zulu (n 4) 103.

55 Boshoff (n 46) 375.

56 Boshoff (n 46) 375.