

Removing Barriers and Promoting Gender Equity in Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

Fairhope Gumede ^{1*}, Vumile Mncibi ²

¹ Department of African Languages and Culture, University of Zululand,
KwaDlangezwa Campus, South Africa.

² Department of Political and International Studies, University of Zululand
KwaDlangezwa Campus, South Africa.

*Corresponding author: GumedeFN@unizulu.ac.za

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Abstract: Since the end of apartheid, the promotion of gender equity in institutions of higher learning in South Africa have been a critical element in initiatives directed towards the transformation of the countries higher education sector. While the countries higher education sector still embodies some structural, political and cultural elements of gender inequalities, there has been a huge improvement towards gender equity in the learning and staffing areas, with moderate improvement of gender equity in leadership positions. Within many institutions of higher learning, women enrolments surpass male enrolments, however many leadership roles in higher education institutions in the country dominated by men. Therefore, to unpack some of these structural and systemic inequalities and further promote more equity in the higher education sector, this paper will constitute a review paper that uses a qualitative approach. The paper will use the glass ceiling theory to unpack some of the factors that hinder the upwards growth of women in HEI's into leadership positions. The paper will use thematic analysis to unpack the progress that has been done to promote more equity in the higher education sector. The results show that limitations to the advancement of women in leadership positions in academia is often hindered by a variety of factors ranging from entrenched patriarchal attitudes, lack of mentorship, conflicting family-work life. The study finds that rectifications of the higher education system has been done by Department of Higher Education and Training through policy reformations that promote more gender equality, diversity and policy inclusion. The department of higher education system has also created a policy to address gender-based violence hinderance to women in academic spaces through the Post-School Education and Rating System. The study therefore recommends that more women development programmes alongside continued policy reformations fostering inclusivity and diversity in all academic sectors of higher education can promote more gender equality in all sectors and particularly leadership positions in higher education.

Key Words: Gender Equity, Policy and Institutional Reformations, Leadership, Higher Education, Women, South Africa.

Introduction

While gender inclusivity in the higher education sector remains a project of engagement for many higher education institutions, many women in the higher education space still constitute an underrepresented groups within certain areas of academics. This is primarily the case with the presence of women in leadership roles within academics (Hinton-Smith, 2024). Globally, women are considered to constitute the population group with the most enrolment, graduation and postgraduate qualifications. Between 2000 and 2018, women enrolment in higher education has been noted to surpass the enrolment of men, seeing an increase from 19% to 41%. On the contrary, while the enrolment rate of men in higher education has improved from an estimated 19% to 36%, the enrolment rates are relatively lower in comparison to their female counterparts (Meza-Mejia, Villarreal-Garcia and Ortega-Barba, 2023:2).

Regardless of the educational advancements that women have made over the years in the space of academics, many women are still behind their male counterparts in terms of leadership roles and obtaining competitive salaries in the higher education space. As further noted by Kela, Pillay, Fana, Zikhali and Muroa (2024) the absorption of women in academic structures has predominantly been seen in the lower levels administrative and teaching levels in most higher education institution, with women representation decreasing in middle-management leadership roles such as Heads of Department (HOD), *cum*, upper leadership positions such as such as the Dean, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor (Qwelane, 2021).

In South Africa, the advent of female underrepresentation is also present within many academic institutions. South Africa's historic apartheid era served as a referral point for the increase of social equity in South Africa's post-apartheid higher education system. In post-Apartheid South Africa, one of the earliest attempts to address injustices in the higher education system was the implementation of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, by the Department of Higher Education. This act served to assist transform universities into more equitable and equal spaces for South Africans (Office of the President, 1998). While progress towards gender equity has been made, there is still a gender gap that requires redress within the higher education sector for more gender inclusivity to occur. When looking at the space of public universities across the country, statistics estimate that approximately 20% of women occupy Vice Chancellor roles, 35% women occupy Deputy Vice Chancellors positions, 30% occupy the positions of faculty deans and 45 % of women make up the senior academic professionals' group primarily making up senior lecturers and 29% of women in professorship positions (Mangolothi, 2019, Pillay et al, 2024).

Anwana and Kayode (2023) identified that studies have shown that the commonality of women being underrepresented in many leadership and advanced professoriate roles across the spectrum centres around factors such as entrenched masculine cultures, lack of mentorship and supportive networks, heavy teaching and supervision, administrative work, work bullying and conflicting work-life balance which obstructs the advancement of women in leadership positions in the academic spaces. Mangolothi (2019) further projects from an intersectional lense that African women further face the burden of racism, sexism and classism in many higher education institutions across the country that further creates a glass ceiling that limits their advancement into leadership and higher academic ranks in the higher education sector.

While extensive gender equity frameworks have emerged since the establishment of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1977, such as the National Gender Policy and the Department of Women's Strategic Plan of 2015, this review paper identifies a need to assess the success and loopholes of these present frameworks in addressing issues of gender equity for women in higher education and training institutions. This paper will therefore use the following research questions to address the problematics of the paper: (1) What progress has been made so far by the Department of Higher Education to foster more gender equity practices in the higher education sector to aid women advance into leadership roles, and (2)What advancements can the department of higher education undertake to further advance the representation of women in leadership and high ranking academic positions in South Africa?. Through addressing the problematics of this paper, the paper seeks to demonstrate that constant reform of policies and frameworks by the Department of Higher Education needs to continue to dismantle current systemic and institutional obstacles affecting the advancement of women in leadership roles in academics.

Literature Review

Literature Review

Overview of women leadership in higher education and training institutions.

Globally, there has been a notable increase of women enrolment in the higher education sector. This notable increase of women in higher education sector has often been conflated with representation of women in other spheres within the higher education sector. However as argued by Baxter, J., & Britton, D. (2001), increased female enrolment into higher education does not necessarily translate to higher representation or gender equity in other spaces in the higher education sector. This especially the case in some fields of specialties such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics sectors, alongside, leadership roles stemming from top management to middle management positions being occupied by men. In most university across the globe positions such as the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, faculty deans and heads of department are predominantly taken up by more men than women (Morley, 2013)

According to there have been improvement in some universities across the globe to incorporate more women into leadership positions within institutions in the higher education sector. *Times Higher Education* (THE) notes that in 2021, an estimated 39 universities out of 200 of the world's top universities were identified to be led by women. This

has been a small but present progressive step forward from 2019 which had 34 universities run by women (Schendel et al, 2021). From the present data, much of the universities lead by women have been located to be from the global North in countries such as the US, Sweden, Australia, Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Schendel et al, 2021). When looking into other regions such as countries found in the South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (to name a few), women leaders emerging in institutions are disproportionately leading smaller college institutions with fewer women leading big universities (Schendel et al, 2021).

In Africa, women underrepresentation in various leading institutions of higher learning is also a present phenomenon affecting the higher education landscape. According to Adamu (2022: 4), in 2021 approximately 4% of women in leadership roles within the public universities in Ethiopia were women. This is a great improvement in comparison to the complete absence of women in leadership positions within the higher education sector a decade ago. In Ghana, Ardayfio-Schandor identifies that women representation in the higher echelons of academic and administrative positions within higher institutions in the country remains low with women occupying only 9.5 percent of the very top leadership and managerial positions. In retrospect more men are argued to occupy most of the top managerial positions with women having more presence in the lower administrative and academic positions. In Ghana, out of the 15 present public universities present (excluding technical universities), Ghana has had only 3 female Vice Chancellors, one female vice chancellor and one woman serving as the chair of the university council (Anderson, Nonterah, Tayviah, Agyeman and Mohami, 2023:3).

In South Africa, similar patterns of underrepresentation of women in top management positions in the country continues to shape the landscape of the higher education sector in the country. Since 2020, South Africa is considered to have had four vice chancellors and approximately 12 women in deputy vice chancellor positions in the 26 public universities present in the country (Macupe, 2020). In 2017, a further study was conducted which found that in leadership positions within higher learning institutions, women occupy 26% leadership roles, whilst men occupy 74% leadership roles (Khumalo and Zhou, 2019). Majority of women in the academic space in South Africa are attributed to be formed supportive administrative positions alongside lower teaching positions such as assistant lectures or lectures with representation of women in higher education. However, Macupe (2020), argues that in some cases women representation in leadership positions is conflated with women inclusion in all structures of academic resulting in an unclear picture of the true representation of women in higher education institutions in the country.

As argued by Ayers (2022) the need for women representation in leadership positions in the country and across the globe is more than just a need for increasing the number of women in leadership positions in higher education sector. elaborates that inclusivity in the country higher education sector can have financial and development outputs for higher education institutions. Women in leadership positions can aid with producing diverse decision-making policies that are inclusive to diverse population groups, introduce transformative leadership styles that can yield productive performances from staff and students and aid in bringing vitality in higher education institutions (Ayers, 2022).

Institutional culture and its impact on women progression into leadership positions in higher education and training in South Africa.

The institutional culture prevalent within universities play a pivotal role in determining the progression of women into leadership positions within academia. As explained by Seale, Fish and Schreiber (2021), the institutional culture speaks to the overall practices within an organisation. These practices are embedded in the core values, norms and rules (both written and unwritten, leadership styles and hierarchies, traditions, communication patterns and approaches towards issues such as change, diversity, inclusivity and risk.

As argued by Seale et al (2021), in many institutions across the globe, and applicably so in South Africa institutional culture varies based on many factors including historical foundations, corresponding government policies on equity issues in higher education institutions. However, in many universities across South Africa, Toni & Moodly, (2019) argues that a common thread of similarities in institutional cultures affect many women in acquiring leadership positions in the country. (Seale et al, 2021) notes that whilst different in nature in some institutions across the country institutional cultures experienced in the form of covert and overt racism, sexism and classism still serve as an overarching barrier that restricts the progression of women into leadership positions. This is particularly the case with black women in the country that have been affected by previous apartheid laws that restricted them from furthering their education, resulting in a phenomenon where women are not trying to catch up, causing a gap in women are readily available to take up leadership roles in the country (Khumalo and Zhou, 2019).

Patriarchal attitudes and bias stereotypes fighting the progression of women in leadership roles?

The prevalent literature on women in higher education sector shows that many challenges that still hinder the progress of women in the higher education sector is the presents of stereotypes surrounding competency that still prevails in many institutions of higher education and training (Shober, 2014). As identified by Ramohai and Marumo (2016), there still prevails an ideology embedded in patriarchal attitudes within the academic space that ascribes men to men better suited to undertake leadership roles than women. Traditionally, leadership roles have always been linked to masculinity, prescribing men to be competent to undertake leadership positions than women. Women have traditionally been seen to be better equipped physiologically and anatomically to be in more private spaces such as in the home and in the workplace. As explained by Crowley and Himelweit (1992), patriarchal ideas in the workplace tend to link womanhood with low way/ unpaid work marriage family, resulting in women being viewed to be better positions and compatible with lower management and teaching roles in higher education institutions. For women in South Africa, patriarchal attitudes can play out in both work and private spaces to restrict their upwards mobility into leadership positions (Dlamini and Adams, 2014).

The patriarchal attitudes that women face in the academic space at departmental, faculty or institutional level in many institutions within the higher education sector manifest in many ways. Some practices that have been identified have included exclusion from research supervision, bullying, limited access to knowledge production channels, deliberate reservation of mentorship opportunities to men, with male counterparts forming mentorship networks amongst themselves, manipulation of promotion criteria to promote men (Dlamini and Adams, 2014). All these attitudes can serve to prevent and deter the promotion of women into leadership positions (Dlamini and Adams, 2014). Causing either discouragement and disempowerment for some women seeking to advance into leadership roles in their departments or faculties.

Lacking Mentorship

Some of the leading causes that have prevented women from progressing well into leadership roles in the space of academics in many South African institutions has been the lack of mentorship provision. Ntshonwana (2023) notes that once in the academic space, notes that many women especially young upcoming women lack the presence or access to mentorship opportunities from senior academics who can nurture their development in preparation for leadership positions. Access to mentorship is important as senior mentors can connect upcoming leaders in the academic space to others in the field. In some cases, Ramohai and Marumo (2026) supported by Anwana (2023) and Kayode notes that younger women with great potential bear the burden of being oppressed by senior scholars in position of power, through provision of excessive workloads, which limits and restricts growth.

Within some higher institutions in South Africa, critical mentorship networks (formal and informal) have also been identified to circle around male figures (Dyanti, 2024: 357). Many men in higher education institutions are identified to have access to opportunities that position them in spaces where they have more competitive advantage over their female counterparts in the academic space. This gap in mentorship is extensively present for women who are in mentorship and are seeking assistance to navigate their leadership positions and advance further (Dyanti, 2024). Such gaps in mentorship opportunities further serves to foster the inequality of representation in higher education institutions with women falling through the cracks and being limited to lower teaching level opportunities. Mentorship of women in higher education is a crucial tool to achieving gender equality in an institution and fostering organisational transformation (Ntshongwana, 2023).

Conflicting Work-Family Life

In conjunction to the institutional challenges that women must overcome in navigating dynamic challenges in the workplace, many women are face with challenges of balancing being a wife and parent and their jobs (Dyanti, 2024). For many women leaders in academics, the challenge of balancing and excelling at both work and home responsibilities is a huge burden on many women (Anwana and Kayode, 2023). In South Africa, women in leadership positions within higher education have reported that often there is an overlap of work and home life particularly with work duties spilling over into late evenings that are reserved for family time and weekends. Women in academics have noted to having to skip social family events and even children's school events to meet work deadlines (Dyanti, 2024: 356).

Challenges encountered in by women once in leadership positions.

The challenge for many women in the South African higher education space continues to exist post appoint to leadership positions in many institutions of higher learning. Seale, Fish and Schreiber (2021) highlights that more

often women are viewed in many to lack decisiveness in decision-making processes. This has often resulted in decisions of women leaders in higher education institutions having their decisions overruled or drowned by male counterparts in their departments or faculties. Scholars give an example that in other institutions male colleagues would even override the decision of a women colleague such as a head of department (HOD) and resort to getting input and decisions from male counterparts holding lower ranks in disregard of the authority that the female leader has in the department (Ramohai and Maruno, 2016). Zulu (2021) notes that this is particularly true in the white male and black female leader dynamics.

As framed by Ramohai (2019), in many cases decision-making of some women leaders tends to be met with resistance in some cases with women having to fight and compete with their male counterparts to have their ideas heard, and to be respected in their respective leadership roles. Ramohai and Maruno (2026) further argue that in some instances for a female leader to be heard by colleagues within their department or faculty during meetings or decision-making processes, a supporting input from their male counterparts or colleagues is usually taken into consideration as more important or valuable than that of the female leaders.

Theoretical Framework: Glass Ceiling Theory

Glass Ceiling Theory

The theoretical foundation of this paper is derived from the Glass Ceiling Theory. The glass ceiling concept is used to explain hinderances that prevent women and minorities from advancing to managerial positions in the workforce (Abbas and Ashiq, 2021). The glass ceiling theory therefore seeks to explain all the bias, discriminatory and unequal practices that individuals face which prevent them from occupying managerial positions in the workplace. The concept of the glass ceiling was first coined by Marilyn Loden during her 1978 speech. The concept of the glass ceiling phenomenon was further used in a book written by Gay Bryant in 1984, titled "The working women report", which further outlined things that prevent women from reaching their full potential and progressing into acquiring leadership roles in the workspace (Abbas and Ashiq, 2021: 1). The glass ceiling phenomenon often refers to the presence of relatively invisible barriers which prevent progress of individuals and especially women in the workplace.

As further identified by Edirishinghe and Thalgaspitiya (2015), the barriers affiliated with the glass ceiling phenomenon can be divided into three mainstream categories. These categories comprise of individual barriers, organisational barriers and socio-cultural barriers. Firstly, personal needs may vary to encompass many things including things such as level of confidence, lack of motivation or work ethics, psychological needs, personal financial obstacles (Mbuli and Sibindi, 2023). Organisational barriers within the glass ceiling phenomenon speaks to things found within the work environment that can further limit or restrict career growth of an individual such as bias and discriminatory practices and policies, hostile working environment, lack of mentorship and support at work. Lastly, socio-cultural barriers can also be very diverse to include *inter alia* family relations and believe systems that interfere with the growth of an individual in the workplace (Mbuli and Sibindi, 2023).

Therefore, when looking into organisational factors limiting women into leadership positions, the glass ceiling factors are present but invisible barriers that comprise of the attitudinal and organizational culture of an organisation, that prevent women in organisation/institution and particularly women from advancing into senior management positions or leadership posit (Mbuli and Sibindi, 2023). Eileen A. Schulte (2011) notes that in an organisation or institutions the glass ceiling barriers act an informal policy within an organisation/ and or institute that creates limitations for women and minorities to get leadership positions within that workplace. Therefore, the glass ceiling phenomenon speaks to barriers in the workplace that are not necessarily attached to formal and legitimate obstacles that can prohibit the ascendance of an individual into a leadership role, such as formal educations or work experience, but rather to the attitudes and culture that an organisation holds which determines or restricts the ascendance of women and minority into leadership positions.

Within the higher education and learning sector, especially in South Africa, the glass ceiling barriers are a present thing for many women wishing to acquire some form of managerial or leadership position. Women in the countries higher education sector across must face a plethora of obstacles that create obstacles for advancement into leadership positions (Kela, Fana, Zikhali & Muroa, 2024). Some of the most common noted obstacles that prevail in some higher learning institutions comprise of factors such as male dominance, gender discrimination and bias, conformity to traditional leadership styles that place preference on male leadership, lack of policy reformations and implementations pushing for more gender equity, exclusion from pivotal training and funding opportunities, *cum*, decision-making processes that can aid with advancement to leadership roles. In other institutions issues of race and ethnicity also

comes into play at extensive intersectional factors used to drive discrimination against women seeking advancement into leadership roles (Kela et al, 2024).

Other glass ceiling factors intersecting directly with the organisational culture of institutions of higher education and training can be found with external institutions such as the department of higher and education training, which can create glass ceiling barriers through lack of follow-up on implementation of equity policies and pushing higher education institutions for foster more training and research funding opportunities for women and minority groups (Nalova and Ettang, 2021).

In South Africa Nalova and Ettang, (2021) notes that beyond the higher education and learning institutions, it is important to acknowledge that there are a plethora of external glass ceiling factors prevailing in many women's lives that interfere with their work progress and further cause obstacles for them at work. Work-family conflicts, patriarchal society beliefs derived from home, religious institutions and other social settings, alongside oppressive practices such as exposure to gender-based violence, financial oppression from outside social groups can disrupt the performance abilities of many women seeking to advance in into leadership positions in the higher education space.

Methodology

This paper used a qualitative design. The paper is a review paper and made use of different secondary sources to unpack issues of gaps and progress in gender equity practices within the higher education in South Africa. Particularly looking at the way women are limited/ and or given opportunities to advance in leadership positions with the academic spaces, *cum*, the progress that the department of higher education and training has undertaken to initiate policy reformation practices to improve gender equity practices in higher institutions in the country. The study made use of the thematic analysis method to analyse data collected across the different secondary sources. Data relevant to the study was then coded and put into themes. The strategies that the researchers used to code their data primarily constituted the deductive coding strategies. After engaging with the secondary sources, the researchers began to identify key patterns and ideas across the literature that addressed sought to address the objectives of the research paper at hand. The researchers also engaged with literature to find information gaps that had been underwritten about in the literature about equality issues in higher education. Thereon, the researchers systematically used the identified patterns and gaps to extract and further formulate words that would form the stepping stone in developing themes which were used for analysis section.

As noted by Smith and Noble (2014) researchers are not immune from bringing their own bias perceptions into their research work. Therefore, to ensure that the quality of data for the study was accurate and relevant for this research, the researchers instituted a series of practices to ensure that the research is as accurate as possible and carries limited bias. Firstly, the researchers triangulated information on gender issues in higher education across different sources to find similarities and differences of research. The researchers tried to engage with material from different disciplines to find overgeneralisations present, different perspectives and gaps brought in by authors from different disciplines about the topic. This help the researchers understand the shortages that were present in the material they were using for data collection and analysis and further assisted with redirecting researchers to other scholarship that would address these shortages. Furthermore, through the writing process, the researchers continuously engaged in continuous reflective practices and dialogues amongst each other about the read material and the observed experiences that the researchers had as women agents working within the higher education space to identify realities and generalisations made in literature used for analysis.

Findings and Discussion.

Present Frameworks for Addressing Gender Equity Issues in South Africa.

Since 1994, South Africa has made progress in advancing gender equity in higher education and training. This has been integral in the presence of both policy and legal framework that have been developed to enhance overall gender equality in the country and further promote equality in the higher education sector. From the legal frameworks, South Africa has a set of legal frameworks designated to advance gender equality in the country. One of the most important legal frameworks is section 9 (2) of the South African bill of rights enshrined in the South African constitution. The bill of rights is responsible for promoting gender equality in South Africa by prohibiting unfair discrimination treatment of all South African persons on the grounds of their gender, sex, pregnancy and marital status (Minister of Women, Children and People with disabilities, 2013). The bill of rights is further supported by equity acts such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000. This act serves to empower the Commission of Gender Equality to investigate and address issues of unfair discrimination executed on the aforementioned factors mention in the bill of rights (Commission for Gender Equality, 2018/19:5).

In addition to the legal frameworks, South Africa has additional acts which aid in further promoting gender equity in both work and private spaces. These extensive legal acts constitute acts such as the Employment Equity Act of 1988, Domestic Violence Act, Criminal Law Act. These acts all work together to ensure that South African citizens and especially women are protected from discrimination and violence in their work and private spaces (Commission for Gender Equality, 2018/19). While these legal framework put forward laws that seek to foster economic empowerment, political participation, social justice and reduce poverty for all citizens, prevalent gaps of implementations of these frameworks is still present and in need of further reinforcement through relevant institutional channels and the justice system as with challenges in equity and gender based violence still present phenomenon in South Africa. In directly addressing equity issues in the higher education sector, South Africa also has the Higher Education Amendment Act of 2016 which allows intervention of ministers to address and injustices and discriminations occurring within the higher education institutions in South Africa (Commission for Equality, 2018/19:8). Furthermore, South Africa has the 2023 National Development Plan on Education, Training, Innovation which inclusively seeks to increase the number of PhD 's that female university staff members must further promote their development into leadership positions.

Parallel to the legal frameworks, South Africa has a setlist of policies that further support the legal frameworks to enhance overall equality in the country. One of the most prominent prevalent policy frameworks that South Africa has includes the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment. The National Policy Framework for Women was initiated in 2000 with the intention to address different challenges that women were facing with the hope to provide solutions in the form of funding, programmes and employment opportunities. The National Policy Framework for Women speaks to identifying and addressing unfair gender relations, violence, poverty, HIV/AIDS, Accessibility to basic needs and resources, access to employment, economic empowerment, access to science and technology and political power. The National Gender Policy Framework seeks to establish clear vision and framework to guide the process developing laws, policies procedures and practices that will serve to implement and enhance gender equality for people in all spheres of government and also in the workplace, community and family life (South African Government, 2000).

The Implication of Gender Inclusion in the Legal and Policy Frameworks in the Higher Education Sector in South Africa.

Since the formulation of the diverse gender equity laws and policy different sectors in South Africa including the higher education sector has experience progressive institutional, governance transformations. Each year, the Commission for Gender Equality takes up transformation hearings at selected universities, with the aid of the director-general of the Department of Higher Education and Training to identify policy implementation practices of employment and gender equity. Such hearings not only serve to observe and monitor policy implementations but further seek to drive for solutions and methods in the form of development programmes and fundings which help can further bolster higher education institutions to continue to promote practices of employment and gender equity in all structures within their institutions (South African Government, 2000)

Through monitoring of equity practices in higher education institutions, many higher education institutions in South Africa been moving towards promoting gender inclusivity in leadership positions (South African Government 1994). This can be seen with institutions that have undertaken the promotion of having female Vice Chancellors such as the University of Zululand, which has been under the leadership of Professor Xoliswa Mtose, The University of Cape Town that was lead by Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng from 2018-2023, the University of Mpumalanga that was under the leadership of Thoko Mayekiso from 2014 to date and Professor Sibongile Muthwa form the Nelson Mandela University, who has held the position of being a Vice Chancellor from 2018 to date University of Mpumalanga (2014). Many other institutions have followed to have female deputy vice chancellors such as the universities and *inter alia* University of Fort Hare, Mangosuthu University of Technology, University of Free State, University of Witwatersrand. As of 2025 there is an estimate of 12 women deputy vice chancellors in 30 positions held across the 26 universities present in the country.

Beyond the policy implementations have produced numerous development programmes from both the Department of Higher Education and Training and from institutions. Some of the big national development programmes that have emerged to develop women alongside male counterparts in the space of academics have constituted programmes such as the New Generation of Academic Programme (nGap) carried out by the department of Higher Education and Training, the Future Professors Programme, Thuthuka Mentoring Programme (Buccus and Potgieter, 2023; Msimango and Motala, 2023). While the call for more gender representation is important in higher education institutions in South Africa, gender representation is more than a call for increasing number of women in leadership roles. Women in higher

learning institutions have the capability to promote sustainable development, bring in more diverse decision-making practices in an institution, help create policies that are more inclusive and equitable. Furthermore, the advancement of young female academics is reliant on the presence of senior women who can support and mentor the into leadership positions. Furthermore, having women in leadership positions enables higher learning and education institutions to address systemic barriers created against women from historical laws and policies in this country and helps institutions improve the overall organisational culture of higher education institutions (Morley, 2013, Sokani, 2024)

Conclusion

The paper discovered that women in higher education sector face diverse barriers in their attempts to advance to high levels of leadership. Many women in the higher education space must navigate diverse obstacles in the workplace associated with the culture, policies, and the absence of mentorship, patriarchal culture alongside conflict family-work life. The paper identified that these barriers also referred to as invisible barriers slow down, demotivate and can even disempower women from striving for leadership positions in the higher education sector. In trying to rectify the challenges faced by women in the workplace and integrally in higher education sector, the paper identified that the South African government has a plethora of legal and policy frameworks that seek to advance gender equity in the workplace. Many of the equity policies seek to ensure that women can advance and progress in the workplace and integrally in the space of academics to promote female academics and position women in a better place to take up leadership positions therein.

The paper further discovered that through the Department of Higher Education and Training programmes for development of women have also been devised from policy frameworks to foster further empowerment of women in leadership roles in higher education sector. The paper therefore discovered that the promotion of more women in higher education institutions served more than statistical purposes for advancing the number of women in leadership positions but also served to initiate overall transformative styles of governance in South Africa's higher education institutions (Msimango and Motala, 2023).

Recommendations

Institutions should implement and enforce comprehensive gender equity policies, including measurable targets or quotas to ensure balanced representation in leadership roles. Leadership development programs tailored for women such as mentorship schemes, training workshops and career advancement support are critical for building a strong pipeline of female leaders. Cultural transformation within institutions must also be prioritised by addressing entrenched gender biases, promoting inclusive work environments and ensuring flexible family policies. Furthermore, continuous funding opportunities through provision of research grants can be provided by the Department of Higher Education Institutions.

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