

Women's Access to Higher Education Leadership: Where are the Role Models?

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ABSTRACT This paper presents a descriptive overview on literature and reflects on the lack of women in higher education leadership despite the development of educational policies and improved enrolments by women at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The enabling policies have not been matched by the number of women assuming leadership positions both inside and outside the Higher Education (HE) sector. Women in HE leadership are regarded as part of the teaching and learning environment that nurtures the development of leadership. The paper argues that part of leadership development includes being motivated by women who are already in leadership positions and who act as role models, inspiring women to career path towards these positions. The paper concludes that without these role models, access to HE will not necessarily lead to attainment to leadership in HE. The theoretical framework is based on the theory of social justice and critical theory of emancipation and equity.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 has been declared by the African Union (AU), as the "Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards Africa's Agenda 2063", with the 24th AU Summit ending with a vociferous call for this focus. This theme was continued in the 25th AU Summit held in South Africa with the Assembly adopting a declaration containing commitments to the promotion of access for women in various areas ranging from agriculture, through health, participation in governance, and education, amongst others. It concluded by committing to expediency in processes transforming these into results. This renewed commitment was towards the focus of women and women's empowerment is an ongoing discourse (African Union 2015). South African educational policies, such as the Education White Paper 3 (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) have facilitated access to Higher Education to formerly disadvantaged, including women. Section 3 of the National Plan for Higher Education specifically refers to prioritizing "increasing the representation of Blacks and women in academic and administrative positions, especially at senior lev-

els". Furthermore, the Ministry of Education expressed commitment to stimulating an institutional culture that promotes gender equity (White Paper 3). Institutions of higher education were, as early as 1997, encouraged to create environments that exhibit equity and support for women students and staff. Over the years there has been a steady increase in enrolment numbers (headcount) of Black and female students in higher education in South Africa with African enrolments reaching seventy-nine percent and female enrolments fifty-seven percent of the total by 2010 (CHE 2013: 39). When it comes to employment patterns, a survey conducted by Zulu (2003:102) revealed that the higher the position of responsibility, the less visible women become, and the lower the position, the more visible they are. The researchers' argument is that more than ten years after Zulu's survey, the situation has not changed much. White et al (2012: 294) assert that underrepresentation of women in higher education starts at the senior lecturer level. It is, therefore, the paper's assertion that in spite of progressive policies, women are still confronted with the challenge of not 'breaking the glass ceiling' when it comes to accessing leadership positions in higher education.

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Theoretical Framework: Critical and Emancipatory Theory

The basic notion and emphasis of critical theory is human emancipation through social change (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 284). In this

paper, the critical theory is used as a lens to analyze the university as a social institution that perpetuates societal norms such as patriarchy and the association of women and men with certain roles and responsibilities. This is in line with Creswell's (1998: 80) notion of examining social institutions through interpreting the meaning of social life and historical struggles of domination. Watson and Watson (2011: 68) refer to critical systems theory wherein emancipatory values are viewed as important when considering social systems where inequality of power exists in relation to opportunity, authority, and control. This analysis aims to revive critical consciousness as well as challenge the underrepresentation of women in management positions in higher education. Moreover, women themselves need to question approaches and structures that could possibly impede their progress towards these positions and start looking for, as well as act as, role models.

Social Justice

The paper is also framed in the theory of social justice. Rawls, the founder of social justice theory (1971), based his theory on a principle of fairness. This theory (though not perfect) has been the foundation for the development and evolution of various perspectives of social justice theory over a period of time. Rawls' concern is with how social goods are distributed not according to merit, but through equality. Rawls' first concern, therefore, is with the way the major social institutions generate and accordingly circulate fundamental rights and duties. Hence, the basic thrust of the criterion of need is that 'the demands and benefits take cognizance of the needs of the people' (John 2014: 12).

Though there is no clear agreement on the concept of the Theory of Social Justice, the United States of America has an extensive history of educators who have had issues of social justice as a focal point in their profession and who are strong supporters of its centrality in education in a society that espouses democracy (Hytten and Bettez 2011). These issues range from an appeal to educators to construct a social order that grounds 'education in a rich and participatory vision of democracy'. It calls for the creation of educational environments where those who were historically marginalized are

empowered and where inequities in the social structures and establishments are challenged. The educational milieu should also propose approaches and ideas towards the creation of a world that is more just (Hytten and Bettez 2011: 8).

Hytten and Bettez (2011: 8) examine the theory of social justice in the educational context and reflect on various researchers and perspectives, in order to facilitate a more effective transformation towards social justice. The researchers offer five uses of social justice in education (although they do not claim these as the sole uses). Different understandings of social justice often influence the implementation of the theory into practice, ranging from perspectives focusing on the responsibility of the individual to those of institutions. This also spills over into the question of how social justice should be implemented, with views extending across challenging perspectives of how individuals should focus on actions that are collective by nature.

Of the five 'strands' of the social justice theory, as purported by Hytten and Bettez (2011) (though these are not declared as the only strands), this paper, within the South African context of cultural-historical inequities and injustices of the past, is based on the theory of social justice from a philosophical and contextual point of view. It draws on a philosophical tradition to question whether contemporary 'policies and practices are fair' in the light of 'oppression', namely, 'exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence'. This component has a philosophical foundation with extensive perspectives and beliefs around justice. It could range from viewing justice as the equitable distribution of resources, to creating environments valuing the cultural traditions of all and ensuring that there are equal opportunities in terms of competition to ensure the fair distribution of attainment across and relative to the population. The objectives, therefore, are inclusive of the definition of terms, distinguishing and categorizing, providing a foundation for claims, and sketching the consequences thereof.

Further to the above, the theory of social justice forms the framework for this paper, as it 'constitutes an inherent part of the conception of sustainable development' (Langhelle 2000). Langhelle (2000: 297) states that 'how the relationship between social justice and sustainabil-

ity is structured, has profound consequences for environmental and developmental policies. It affects not only the goals of development but also the priorities and strategies that follow from the concept of sustainable development'. Wehrmeyer and Chenoweth (2006) state that the responsibility for the 'successful implementation of sustainable development by society' places much pressure and responsibility on HEIs and thus faculty, to nurture individuals who are 'informed and educated about the interaction of environmental, social and economic issues, together with their relevance to the individuals' everyday activities and work'. This includes both men and women, who are able to address the inequities of the past and contribute to a healthy, functioning society.

From the foregoing, it is explained that the researchers found the principles of social justice and critical theory to be relevant theoretical lenses through which to consider the argument. It is the researchers' view that the notions of social justice that promote 'changing individual assumptions and perspectives and engaging in collective action' as referred to by Hytten and Bettez (2011: 8) and Langhelle's (2000) notion of sustainable development, are complementary to Watson and Watson's (2011: 68) emancipatory values (critical systems theory) used and applied in contexts where inequality of power exists in relation to opportunity, authority, and control. Inequality and uneven 'distribution' of opportunities in higher education leadership could be interpreted as unjust, hence the need for empowerment of everyone involved in higher education.

Statistical Analysis of Women Representation in Management in Higher Education

In her research on women in higher education (HE) leadership, Moodly (2015), found that despite women forming the majority of the South African population, and despite the country being more than twenty years into democracy and with a focus of policies and progressive views on women as equal members of society, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) have made little progress in terms of women in HE leadership. Moodly's research revealed that, 'twenty years into democracy, and despite the WEGEB (Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2013), amongst other policies and

support structures as set up by USAID (United States Agency International Development) and HESA (Higher Education South Africa), the current scenario indicates that there are currently only four female VCs out of twenty-three VCs (excluding the two universities in 2014, namely Sol Plaatje University and the University of Mpumalanga), at South African HEIs. This constitutes seventeen percent of the current number of VCs in post-merged HEIs. Statistically, the research reflects that men dominate in the majority of academic management positions at HEIs. She concludes that 'numbers in itself is not the goal. The goal is to provide positive role models for both men and women that reflect that women do have the capacity for decision-making and leadership and to break the glass ceiling'. Moodly states that the cultural and social constructs within organizations need to be critically examined and reconstituted on the basis of social justice, and that 'should we fail to redress gender equity (GE) in our own universities, how then do we instill a culture of equity and social justice within the students we claim to be preparing for a just society?'

White et al.'s (2012: 299-304) analysis of career trajectories of university managers in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom reveals a typical career path that is deemed to be incremental, that is, "course coordinator, head of school..." They also identified the underrepresentation of women in the positions of a Dean, which is the stepping-stone to that of Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. They further assert that the pathways to senior management continue to be molded on professional paths representative of men in academia rather than women. This can disadvantage women.

Women as Role Models – Leaving a Legacy

Internationally, the trend of a lack of women in leadership positions both within and outside of the higher education sphere seems consistent. This is prevalent in research by Barret and Barret (2011), Nguyen (2012) and Odiahambo (2011).

Although there are numerous reasons for the status quo, all point to a system wherein 'cultural and structural conditions and practices... create barriers to and opportunities for the advancement of women in higher education leadership... attitudinal and organization biases against wom-

en in higher education tend to exclude women from upper-level leadership positions' (Ballenger and Austin 2007, as cited in Moodly 2015).

According to Barrett and Barrett (2011), the disproportionate 'career progression' of women in the higher education profession is due to a number of factors, including how workloads are managed. Within the HE context, research plays a critical role in terms of progression, and if hampered, becomes a severe constraint. Barret and Barret (2011) cite researchers such as Parker and Taylor, whose research indicates that though academic work is dependent on administration, teaching and research, in terms of higher career progression promotions, research is still the cornerstone. Various 'interactive factors' such as 'interruptions in continuity of employment' and 'fractional contracts' 'can work to exclude or hinder research activity'. This is further exacerbated by the fact that numerous models for work allocation do not consider research. In addition to this, it is the expectation accepted that research is done after working hours and this can be difficult for women. Barrett and Barrett (2014: 141) also state that the absence of transparent practices leads to the possible unintentional and unknowing discrimination through allocating work types not linked to promotion for women. They quote research within the United Kingdom during the period of 2007 to 2009 that indicates that although women enrolment in HE is increasing (42.6% of academic staff is women), statistics indicate that 18.7 percent hold leadership positions. These figures mirror a similar trend in South Africa where statistics indicate that despite higher numbers of both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, as previously stated, few women hold leadership positions in South African HEIs.

Various researches have been cited by Barret and Barret (2011) to focus and expand on the 'pressures on all staff' and the generally almost accepted trend that evening and weekend work becomes the accepted norm for more than forty-two percent of staff. This has led to research focusing on the effect and magnitude of such circumstantial pressures on women. Do women adopt these masculine values, or resist them? Do women challenge practice as transformation? To what extent do structural and cultural factors mediate these pressures? Barret and Barret quote Poole et al.'s (1997) study that proposes that academic staff is not flexible, thereby perpetuat-

ing the status quo in that networks and structures remain as is and impede any progression and change potential.

Findings in PhD studies across the US, UK and Australia generally indicate that men graduate five years earlier than women at the post-graduate level, and that there is a sense of gendered stratification, given the roles of men and women in society. The notion is that women are not inclined to apply for leadership positions, though those that do are as equal to the task as their male counterparts. Confidence in seizing opportunities varies between older and younger females, while there is a seeming lack of networking and mentors for women.

Though diverse in perspectives, time does seem to be a recurring theme in many of the studies including the number of years taken to complete studies, and how research time is fragmented and whether that time for research occurs after working hours. How time for research is allocated, and accounted for, within workloads, given the perceived importance of research to career progression, might be an important element in terms of career progression for women.

The Vietnamese experience, as related by Nguyen (2012), also outlines the gap in women in higher education leadership. Research also reflects that in this southeastern Asian country, just as research in Western countries, women do not necessarily apply for leadership positions, with challenges mentioned almost mirroring the findings of Western countries as mentioned by Barrett and Barrett (2011) who have also cited other researchers.

Nguyen (2012) highlights the importance of empowering female leadership for two reasons, namely, 'not only in terms of achieving gender equity but also for organizational productivity and human capital development'. Nguyen (2012:125) states that 'researchers put forward a range of theories to explain the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions. However, the two most common are based on psychological and cultural theories'. Nguyen (2012) cites researchers and states that, 'from a psychological perspective, negative gender stereotypes regarding female leaders may critically impede women's leadership advancement', and 'from a cultural perspective, women have to face multiple cultural barriers in accepting leadership positions arising from the 'macro' socio-political level, the 'meso' organizational level, and the 'micro' individual level.

As in Westernized society, the traditional socio-cultural role of women, as well as the masculine character of the university setting, is mentioned by Nguyen as barriers that impede the advancement of women as leaders in higher education. Nguyen goes further to suggest, and cites various researchers, that due to these factors, 'as a consequence of the imposition of traditional male hegemony at the socio-political and organizational level, women's internalization of barriers may also contribute to their underrepresentation in management. Some examples of these barriers are a lack of competitiveness, a lack of confidence and a fear of failure'.

Nguyen, like Hill, later in this paper, also cites factors that would facilitate women gaining senior academic and management positions namely, 'personal factors, family support and mentor support'. The issue of mentors repeats itself, as in the case of Hill and Barrett and Barret. Women need role models to encourage their development and confidence as leaders within higher education. These role models and mentors need to be in the form of both male and female senior managers who support the advancement of women in leadership. Nguyen's findings indicate that personal characteristics play an important role in women's leadership potential, including the ability to demonstrate very strong personalities such as being self-motivated, independent and hardworking. In the Vietnamese context, as the social expectations of women as dutiful wives and mothers are so strong, appropriate policies and measures must be developed to lessen the time demands of women's domestic work and childcare so that women can invest as much time as men do in their career progress. At the same time, women should learn to take the advantages of the work-family interface rather than consider the work-family balance as a major concern (Cheung and Halpern 2010). Additionally, female academics must be aware of, and interested in, their career advancement. Without female academics' personal interest in, and commitment to their own careers, it is difficult to see how any of the other measures designed to promote their career advancement will prove fruitful. There is currently a far-reaching transformation process in the Vietnamese higher education system in response to creating a contemporary higher education system. This is inclusive of the role of women as leaders and managers.

Odhiambo (2011) in a Kenyan context also quotes research, indicating that 'although more women are now advancing to leadership positions in higher education, gender imbalance in higher education leadership is still a global issue because the progress towards equity has been very slow and uneven'. Odhiambo states that gender inequity in leadership filters throughout Kenyan society, inclusive of higher education. 'Despite almost 15 years of gender activism in Kenya, the country still remains greatly challenged with regards to women's ascendancy into leadership positions. For example, in political leadership, Kenya's parliament has only about ten percent women representation and this continues to raise concern'. 'It appears as if the problem women are facing is not in justifying their right to earn their place in leadership positions but in gaining access to those positions. Despite moves toward gender equality in many spheres, barriers to the entry of women into academic leadership persist' (Odhiambo 2011). As in other countries, women form the majority in the higher education context, but are underrepresented in positions of higher management.

Women and Successful Leadership

Despite the challenges as outlined, there are women who consider themselves as successfully having achieved in terms of a 'leadership legacy'. This is not to say that they have been members of management, but have been role models as academics within their institutions.

Hill (2013) conducted a study 'to understand the nature, antecedents, and support of generativity in the leadership of female higher education leaders in midlife'. She made 'nine key findings' about women and their leaving a leadership legacy. These included characteristics that promoted generativity, such as, age as in 'being in midlife', 'being a woman', 'positivity', their 'daily activities and responsibilities', 'having grown up in a particular moment in history', 'the experiences and teachings of childhood and early adulthood', 'faith or spiritualism', and 'a purposeful generative environment'. A factor that inhibited their generativity was 'competing demands on their time'.

Age, particularly mid-life appears as an important factor in leaving a legacy of leadership. Hill's research indicates that it is only as they get older that women think about the legacy that

they leave. This may be in line with research as previously mentioned that indicates that in earlier years women need time to establish themselves as scholars, mothers, wives, and with time, become role models for younger women. Being at an older age allowed women in the study 'to be more outspoken', as there was no real threat to their jobs, being closer to retirement. The women also indicated that they left a leadership legacy, in that as they were women, their experiences had left them more sensitized 'to the needs and plights of the students'. Being a mother limited or 'changed the amount of effort and time' women spent at the workplace, or in taking work home. Most women in the study agreed that their motivation for a leadership legacy came from within, as they grew older.

It is also argued that women have the necessary abilities to be good leaders, and in some cases, have an advantage over men in this regard. From a social justice and a critical and emancipatory theory perspective respectively, the advantages of women leadership abilities over those of men is not the focus of this paper. What is important is to look at the contexts in which women appear to have achieved success in leadership. Situational theorists of leadership 'contend that the appropriateness of particular types of leader behaviors depends on the context' (Eagly 2007: 2). In other words, depending on the situational context, and the type of leadership style required, certain behaviors may be more effective than others. These behaviors are directly associated with typical male or female characteristics, in terms of a stereotypical approach. Stereotypical female qualities include, 'cooperation, mentoring and collaboration' (Eagly 2007: 2), which may be appropriate in particular contexts and organizations. Eagly purports that it is in these contexts that women are viewed as successful leaders, where stereotypical female qualities are required in terms of leadership. These contexts include contemporary organizations in which 'accelerated technological-related growth is experienced, with increased organizational complexity directly attributed to globalization.' It would appear that the changing context of organizational environments, as influenced by technology and globalization, has demanded a change in leadership style from the traditional highly authoritarian style stereotypically associated with men. Despite this supposed advantage

that women may have, women are still at a disadvantage, as the statistics reflect.

Taking an example out of the corporate world, this imbalance can still be explained by the 'old boys' network', where males tend to group together after meetings and this can be both a conscious and unconscious bias (Groysberg and Connelly 2013). It is conscious in the sense that women are deliberately excluded due to a male-institutional culture, and unconscious where women are unintentionally or unknowingly excluded, based on the influence of a male-institutional culture.

DISCUSSION

Internationally, as well as in South Africa, there has been overwhelming support and commitment to the promotion of gender equity, with a focus on women, in almost all spheres of society. There has been a tremendous increase in enrolment by women at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels within higher institutions, with statistics indicating that there are more females than males enrolled at the undergraduate level, and a steady increase in enrolment of females at the postgraduate level. These enabling policies, facilitating access to HE by women, have not been matched by the number of women assuming leadership positions both in and outside of the Higher Education sector. Current statistics reflect far lower percentages than the equity target as envisaged by the government in the infant years of democracy. This paper reflects on the lack of women in HE leadership as role models for women accessing HE and progressing through the system towards HE leadership career pathing. The paper argues that part of leadership development includes being motivated by women who are already in leadership positions who act as role models, inspiring women to career path towards these positions. This is argued in a social justice and critical and emancipatory theory context, towards addressing the inequities and imbalances of South Africa's past, but also towards sustainable development. A healthy, functioning society requires that all of its citizens contribute equally to issues, including environmental and socio-economic matters. Women internationally, as reflected in the literature, have been impeded by social and cultural factors, and have not fully advanced through the leadership ranks to emerge as equal partners

with their male counterparts in shaping a healthy, functioning society. The traditional socio-cultural roles of women have left women themselves questioning their leadership abilities. Generativity, as described by Hill, has strongly featured in women who have viewed themselves as role models. This strongly suggests a continuum along which women develop, towards becoming role models and leaders. Implementation of policy in order to nurture women as role models and leaders, should take cognizance of this continuum of generativity in order for a more meaningful impact to be achieved in nurturing women as leaders.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that without role models, access to HE will not necessarily lead to attainment of leadership in HE. The literature review indicates that this is a worldwide phenomenon, with research in Eastern, African and Western societies addressing the lack of women in leadership roles within educational institutions, and in particular in Higher Education Institutions. The question may arise as to what is the significance of this research. The researchers of this paper argue there is response in terms of the theoretical framework as based on the theory of social justice as well as critical and emancipatory theory. This is the basic notion of human emancipation through social change and the philosophical tradition to question whether contemporary policies and practices are fair in the light of oppression, namely, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

The paper concludes that despite the increased enrolment of women in undergraduate and postgraduate studies at HEIs, working conditions still hamper the promotion of women. Research reflects that there may be a lifecycle that women experience, given the decisions that they make based on roles and expectations as life partners, wives, mothers and so forth. It may be that this lifecycle has to be accommodated within the HE environment. Rather than be punitive and hamper women's growth towards leadership, the HE environment should be cognizant and accommodating of various forms of lifecycles that women experience. The teaching and learning environment in HEIs may be maintaining the status quo through not addressing lead-

ership and equity in terms of university ethos and which may be embedded, amongst others, in policy, curricula and scholarly activity. The intermittent research productivity, management of workloads, and underrepresentation of women in places of power can be considered as some of the major contributing factors to the limited number of women leaders in higher education in South Africa. Role models, both female and male, are needed not only to serve as examples of career progression and support systems for younger women, but also to serve as a way of enhancing the implementation of policies.

LIMITATIONS

The paper was limited to a descriptive review of literature on women and higher education leadership. It is not based a critical review of literature, nor is it based on empirical research as carried out by the researchers.

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