

Barriers to Research and Publication Efforts of Female Academics: A Case of Selected Universities in South Africa and Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT This paper examined the barriers to research and publication efforts of senior female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities. The qualitative research approach was employed and semi-structured interviews comprising of 10 female academics with more than ten years of teaching within the university system were used as a sample and data were thematically analysed. It emerged from the study that the majority of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean Universities did little research and publication due to heavy teaching workload, lack of scientific training and unavailability of workshops and inadequate funding. Moreover, lack of confidence, ignorance and lack of collaboration among academics were other major barriers established by the study. The paper recommends that the career trajectory of females be enhanced by providing ongoing training on scientific writing, adequate funding and promotion of co-authorship.

INTRODUCTION

Research publication is recognised all over the world as an integral part of an academic career; not only is it a pre-condition for academic promotion and advancement universally, it is a hall mark of true academics (Gaidzanwa 2005; Santos 2016). However, research publication is viewed by most female academics as a barrier to their career development due to lack of exposure to a culture of academic research, different institutional demands, discipline differences and unfavourable evaluation of research output (Nielsen 2016; Turk et al. 2018). In addition, Muriithi et al. (2018) and Wight et al. (2014) cite lack of senior scientists, non-participation in scholarly conferences, language challenges, technological challenges, weak supporting infrastructure, heavy teaching and administrative loads and lack of funding as other challenges. Barrett and Barrett (2013) found that female academics were

given extra workloads, a practice that is usually discreet and undetected. The workload systems in some universities work as a disadvantage to female academics in improving their research publication and career mobility (Kataeva and DeYoung 2017). These barriers are further compounded by the fact that, research publications tend to be viewed in a gendered manner. Moreover, being disconnected from, or being superficially connected to, the network and mentoring system within academia is a mammoth task (Bhalalusesa 2010; Zvobgo 2015).

Undeniably, academic publishing is suffering at the hands of hegemonic institutions of inequalities that privilege preconceived ideals of masculinity and maleness over femininity and femaleness, disadvantaging women beyond mere publication; thus hindering the career trajectory of females and narrowing the doors to academic publications (Gaidzanwa 2005; Wagner 2016; Nielsen 2016; Payer 2017). For instance, in one university in Zimbabwe, male academics contributed eighty-three percent of research output and articles produced. If comparisons were to be made, the picture in South Africa is not at all different from the Zimbabwean situation. For illustrative purposes, in 2005 fe-

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male academics contributed only fourteen percent and thirty-seven percent of research output in their respective Universities, notwithstanding the fact that South Africa produces eighty percent of the basic research done in Southern Africa. On an international sphere, studies indicate that male academics publish eight percent more articles in refereed journals than females; for instance, in Japan ninety percent of highly productive researchers are male academics (Horta et al. 2012). Thus, it is critical that these statistics are kept in mind as they indicate how a dearth of published work by female academics impacts negatively on getting better salaries, advancement and most importantly, job security (Payer 2017; Turk et al. 2018).

Unfortunately, a majority of the female academics have remained consumers of knowledge in universities, instead of producing the knowledge (Benamer and Bakoush 2009; Schaber et al. 2017; Turk et al. 2018). As a result, pressure has been put on universities worldwide to lift their game on research output for female academics by having role models, regardless of gender, to act as mentors (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016). This will avoid a situation whereby the productivity gap widens and female academics continue being viewed as novices in their career trajectories or being omitted for reasons that have nothing to do with their research capability or output. Zvobgo (2015) and Abramo et al. (2016) advance that the productivity gap can be closed by identifying gender dependent environmental factors; personal factors; gender discrimination and family roles that condition the time devoted to research.

According to Alrashidi (2017), though some universities have healthy incentives for academics who are research active, these incentives however tend to exclude female academics “unintentionally” due to lack of tangible research output. Moreover, the productivity of an academic is strongly associated with his or her reputation, visibility and advancement in the academic structure. Thus, research output is the crux of an academic profession and an essential requirement for career advancement (Payer 2017). However, the working conditions of the female academics, especially in developing countries, may hinder them from producing tangible results. A study by Kataeva and DeYoung (2017) in Tajikistan indicated that most female academics did not publish because they did not own office space

to perform research activities and they lacked mentorship. These views may account for the reasons most papers are rejected. Likewise, the high rejection rate of research manuscripts is also one of the reasons why female academics fail to publish and are unable to develop their careers (Baker 2016; Alrashidi 2017). Summers (2001) posit that the rejection rate of manuscripts by internationally renowned research journals averages around ninety percent. These views are also echoed by Albertyn et al. (2007) who state that in South Africa, 73 accredited journals unanimously agreed that the rejection rate of research manuscripts was exceptionally high. One would therefore ask, where does this leave the female academics that are already compounded with numerous challenges with regards to their career development in universities?

The above bring us to the reasons why career development of female academics has been associated with stress anxiety, fear, frustration and a sense of disillusionment with their career path (Finnegan and Hyle 2005; Pienaar and Bester 2012). These scholars further endorse that lack of acknowledgement from the universities’ personnel and management that the existence of tension between research publication, teaching and family life is the cause for burn out and occupational stress among female academics compounds the status quo. Given this backdrop, the majority of female academics finally exit the academia without being promoted, let alone publishing (Fotaki 2013).

According to Chinyamurindi (2016) in understanding the career development processes of groups such as females, current concentration should shift to identifying those factors that may retain and sustain individual career development in a demanding context such as universities. Maluleka et al. (2016), Tarusikirwa (2017) and Muriithi et al. (2018) subscribe to the view that it is high time research collaboration among academics (females) is promoted because it holds massive potential such as networking, sharing of resources, enhancing productivity, overcoming intellectual isolation and achieving research goals. However, the extant literature shows that female academics are cited less in referred journals and tend to be under-represented in sole author positions (Scharber et al. 2017).

It can be noted that barriers to research and publication by female academics stem from a number of factors (Hemmings and Russell 2010;

Baker 2016). Therefore, interventions that begin from the known to the unknown should be implemented within universities. It is against this background, therefore, that the paper seeks to advance an understanding of the complexities surrounding research output of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities. The study was guided by the following main research question.

Research Question

What are the barriers to research and publication efforts of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research methodology was used as it remains the most popular in building gendered understandings of how people in professional and familial relationships strategize to integrate different aspects of their lives and to gain astute responses through deeper probing (Naidoo et al. 2011; Rubin and Babbie 2016). Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were employed as data collection techniques. A sample of ten female academics were purposively selected from two universities to reflect diversity across faculties. In addition, the selection was based on the number of publications that the participants had and the number of years they had served within the university system. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data according to instrumentations used to collect data. This involved working with the data, organising, breaking them into manageable units, coding, synthesising and searching for emerging patterns (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Rubin and Babbie 2016). Female academics from both institutions were given identification codes to ensure anonymity during data collection and analysis. Ethical clearance was obtained from both universities under study and informed consent was sought from the participants. Thus, university X represented South Africa, with participants P1- P5 and University Y represented Zimbabwe with participants P6 – P10.

FINDINGS

In an attempt to establish the barriers that affect research and publication efforts of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean

universities, a number of themes emerged. These are discussed in the sections below.

Disjuncture between Research and Publications Efforts by Female Academics in Universities

The importance of publishing within universities as a form of career development cannot be over-emphasised. It is a pre-requisite and is used as one of the main tools for promotion. The participants were asked to indicate the barriers to their publication efforts and participants P1, P2, P5 and FGP1 from University X indicated that they felt they lacked enough training on academic writing. While they stressed that training was available, they were quick to indicate that it was not adequate. Furthermore, they explained that they had very good researchers (male and female) in their University but it was very rare for them to co-author with them unless one had expertise in their area of study. The remarks below are from participants in University X.

P1 disclosed:

I do not think that the training that the University gives on academic writing is enough because they keep repeating the same programmes every year and they tend to forget that not everyone can just wake up and be a writer and publish, we need new ideas from them so that our papers can be accepted in international journals. In this University, male academics are researchers and females are teachers. If you see yourself being roped in, then you must be exceptionally good in your area(s) of study.

In line with the above, P2 explained:

Well, writing a paper is not an easy thing you know.... There are a number of factors involved, if you have not been schooled in scientific writing it is always going to be difficult to write a publishable paper, which is what I think we are lacking as female academics.

The senior academics in University X also added that there was no miracle to overcome barriers to publication besides enough training, and having a mentor or role model who has tested the waters of publishing. In this regard, P5 explained:

It is not easy to make a break though, and that is the biggest barrier you can have when you start out as an academic, one needs lots of coaching to be able to come up with an academically sound paper and having someone

who has published a lot, besides research and publications is about space, which we do not have.

The above comments draw attention to the fact that University X needs to come up with more workshops that target the different needs of their academic staff in scientific writing. However, it was established that not all female academics at University X agreed that lack of training, absence of role models and rejection by publishers were the barriers to publication efforts by female academics as the following section indicates.

Lack of Commitment and Sincerity on Publication Efforts by Female Academics

Some the female academics had a different perspective with regards to research and publication in their Universities. As such, Participants 3 and 4 from University X and 6, 7 and 10 from University Y felt that lack of confidence and commitment among female academics was the major problem. Below are the views of participants from University X and University Y.

P3's views were as follows:

I think for female academics it is a matter of being afraid..... that fear of saying I am a woman and I have to write and produce a paper is affecting our career development. The university is doing everything that they can to help us, in fact they are so very serious about research because it increases its rankings among other universities. It is us who are not serious and committed; high teaching workloads will always be there, we just have to be committed and confident that we can publish, I think we are just nervous to fly our wings.

P5 also emphasised how it was important for female academics to be confident and committed to their research and publication efforts. The participant said;

I would say we are our own barrier when it comes to research and publications. We are not sincere in this issue, there is that element of looking down upon ourselves With research you need to be bold. There is lack of seriousness; how come some junior academics, and even students for that matter, are publishing?

The participants from University Y echoed their colleagues' sentiments and articulated their views as follows. P6 commented:

At this University (Y) research is extensively promoted and, seriously, why female academics are not writing papers I don't know. Despite retreats organised for scientific writing they just do not ask around, some have very good masters degrees and can publish from them but they do not ask how.....there is need for female academics to be inquisitive.

In the same vein, P7 echoed:

We can put the blame on this and that, but these days there are numerous organisations funding research by female academics; so, really it is up to us to apply to such organisations and get the opportunities.....I believe a bit of laziness has crept into us. Also, the glue that holds the University and its staff members together is research because on one hand you develop your career and on the other hand the university also grows..... the university has to come up with plans because we are running the risk of academic suicide and burnout, the tasks we do are so mundane that we do not have anything to motivate us.

Likewise P10 stated:

Let's put the issue of funding aside because we all know it will be a long time before it is solved. I believe the problem is ignorance.....I was ignorant on the issue of research until I started my PhD and that was when I was educated that I could pull out papers from my thesis and publish. It is the ignorance of what is going on out there.

The preceding comments from Universities X and Y show that the barriers to research and publications are aggravated by lack of self-confidence and passion in learning how to research and publish. Instead, female academics seem to doubt their capabilities before they have even put an effort because, from the above, it seems both Universities are doing everything to promote research and publication among its academics. For instance, at University X the employment policy shows that it is the duty of the University to provide training and re-training and progression programmes for academics.

Participants P8, P9 and FGP2 from University Y felt that lack of funding surpassed everything and undercut all the efforts that their University was making to promote research and publications. P8 was of the opinion that:

Even if the University does give us research seminars and workshops it is of little use because everything is about money there is no funding.

The following was highlighted by P9:

The issue of funding is a thorn in the flesh; I have papers just sitting because I do not have the money to send to the publishers. We are given US\$200.00, equivalent to slightly over R2000.00, towards research but it is a drop in the ocean. It does not suffice at all because it is meant for stationery, communication and when I need to go and collect data I end up using my own money.

Relating to the above aspects, it can be deduced that lack of funding is, to a certain extent, creating some form of pressure for these academics as they realise that it may be difficult for them to be fully fledged academics without any research publications.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that there was lack of scientific training and training workshops. Moreover, though the participants appeared to be keen about research, too much teaching workload and administration seemed to be barricades to their efforts. Lack of adequate training and scientific writing skills is in line with the submission by Taylor (2013) who maintains that heavy emphasis on teaching and a lack of strong research background and training in an institution are the major problems that can hinder research publications. Dominico and Jones (2006) and Muriithi et al. (2018) further suggest that the paucity of research inclined female academics, coupled with heavy teaching loads keeps academics busy such that research ends up taking last preference.

Research and publication efforts were also derailed by the fact that institutions did not promote co-authorship between academics regardless of gender. However, most academics do not value co-authorship because it is ranked very low by some institutions with regards to their career trajectory. Interestingly, an earlier study by Baker (2008) indicated that lack of co-authorship in developing countries promoted lack of collaboration and facilitation of better quality work through exchange of ideas by academics. Therefore, it can be implied that the universities understudy appeared to undermine the issue of knowledge sharing and creation between female and male academics. Meanwhile, Muriithi et al. (2018) argue that academics who study abroad find it easy to collaborate with others due to the

exposure to active research environments in developed countries. Maluleka et al. (2016) and Tarusikirwa (2017) buttress the fact that universities need to tap on pockets of good practises from other universities in developing countries. These may include guidelines and strategies to promote research, research collaboration and research on how to assist female academics to enhance their research output and close the leaking pipeline.

Some senior female academics indicated that commitment and passion for research were missing among female academics. The extant literature highlights that female academics do not liaise with or seek assistance from other academics who may be having the same study interests as theirs, as most work in isolation. Cobb-Roberts (2011) and Murithii et al. (2018) advance that it is not about the lack of commitment, instead the topics that are often valued by other academics usually do not mirror the interests of some academics. As a result, most of them tend to give up before they have even made an effort because their research efforts tend to be marginalised. Chitando and Mateveke (2012) opine that research in Africa can only flourish if there are sufficient researchers, at junior and senior levels. Unfortunately, according to Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) (2010), one of the Zimbabwean universities had a vacancy rate of forty-five percent senior academics. This means that promoting research, especially among junior academics in Zimbabwe is difficult as there appears to be a dearth of senior lecturers to act as role models and mentors.

It was further revealed from the study that the female academics were not taking advantage of the training that the universities offered because some females viewed teaching as a calling and enjoyed it more than research. These findings are in line with Hassan (2011) who submits that female academics are viewed as being less concerned with research, or as underutilizing institutional resources earmarked for research purposes. However, Baker (2016), Marine and Martinez-Aleman (2018) and Muriithi et al. (2018) are at variance with the above and argue that some universities have research training programmes for their academics. However, the problem is that female academics tend to be much more involved in teaching. Hence, they have less time, energy and commitment to invest in

their professional development and this can lead to them being less scientifically productive as compared to male academics.

Further, the research output of female academics was hindered by severe lack of funding. The participants stated that they had to use their own resources to collect data for research papers and this had incited lack of interest among other academics. Taylor (2013) states that central to the success of research and publication in a university is adequate and stable funding. These findings are also in line with findings by Nieuwoudt and Wilcocks (2005) and Tricco et al. (2017) who also confirm that lack of research outputs from female academics is due to lack of organisational and financial support.

CONCLUSION

Universities can promote more robust solutions and policies for helping female academics towards research publications. As this paper has shown, there are a number of factors that bar female academics from engaging in effective research. The study concludes that female academics experience challenges such as lack of adequate scientific writing workshops, co-authorship inadequate funding, lack of conducive organisational culture that promotes networking and formal mentoring, and lack of commitment and sincerity from female academics to publish.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Steps need to be taken by African countries and universities to create a dynamic environment that will promote assertiveness, build confidence and attract female academics to take up research and develop their careers. The study further recommends that there be ongoing scientific writing workshops that assist female academics increase their research output. There is need for redress on barriers encountered by female academics such as funding, lack of mentorship and shunning of co-authorship. The study also recommends that female academics should have a positive approach towards research output, which would help in their career development and increase their chances of getting promoted to leadership positions.

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