WOMEN WORKING AT UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA – A GENDER EQUALITY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The right to equality is a fundamental human right recognized in both international and local law. However, achieving gender equality remains a challenge in many countries. Women have historically been underrepresented in the higher education sector and continue to face barriers in achieving better-paid, higher status, or decision-making positions. The suppression of women's role in the higher education sector has been perpetuated by patriarchal systems and values, negatively impacting not only women's development but society as a whole. Gender transformation has become an important tool in promoting gender equality and improving development.

This paper reports on a study that examined how female staff in South African universities experience gender equality and gender transformation, and explores potential best practices for achieving gender equality in the sector. Exploratory research methods were employed and combined a literature study, a legal investigation, and an empirical investigation. The theoretical framework relied on the feminist policy analysis framework, examining gender transformation through the feminist lenses of critical theory and intersectionality.

Through a qualitative empirical approach, semi-structured interviews were held with 16 women employed at seven different public universities using a snowballing approach. Thematic analysis was used to condense the data into insights that could contribute to the research objectives. The research findings show that despite policies, regulations, and laws aimed at promoting gender equality, there is still a significant disconnect between policy and women's experiences in the sector. Women face challenges such as the negative impact of gendered division of domestic responsibilities, isolation, and barriers to their career paths. Although progress has been made in bringing more female students and personnel into the sector, women's representation in leadership positions remains a challenge. The study identified a lack of political awareness and implementation, a quantitative and contextless approach to gender change, and the failure to mainstream gender-sensitive approaches as significant factors contributing to the slow progress of gender transformation in higher education.

The findings and recommendations of this study provide a foundation for those engaged in or charged with gender transformation in higher education. The study calls for a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to gender transformation, one that acknowledges the diversity of women's experiences and promotes inclusive decision-making processes. The study highlights the importance of political will and leadership, institutional culture change, and mainstreaming gender-sensitive approaches to achieving gender equality in higher education.

Keywords: Equality, gender, transformation, higher education, university.

1. Introduction and problem statement

Achieving gender equality is a fundamental human right recognized in both international and local law. However, its application remains elusive, and women continue to face significant barriers in various sectors, including the higher education sector. Historically, women have been underrepresented in higher education, and even in the present, they are particularly underrepresented in better-paid, higher status, or decision-making positions. The suppression of women's role in higher education can be attributed to the historical, political, cultural, and religious advancements of patriarchal systems and values, which have a negative impact not only on women's development but on society as a whole. Gender transformation has emerged as an essential tool to promote gender equality and improve development, and many countries are adopting policies and practices to advance this goal. A report released by the South African Commission for Gender Equality in 2015 indicated that discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, disability, and socio-economic status persists and that unsatisfactory

transformation has occurred at management, staff, and student levels. David (2015: 10-11) and Akala (2018: 229) raise concerns about the slow progress of gender transformation in SA higher education institutions.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to report on a study that explored how female staff in South African universities experience gender equality and gender transformation. The study examines potential best practices for achieving gender equality in the higher education sector.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Gender equality is supported by international instruments such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Gender equality is defined by the World Health Organization (2002) as the absence of discrimination on the basis of sex in opportunities, resource allocation, benefits, and access to services. Gender equality is a tool to level differences between genders and involves equal conditions for realizing full human rights and contributing to economic, social, cultural, and political development, rights, responsibilities, and opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2015). Gender equality promotes equitable outcomes and representation for all genders, with the fight for equality recognized as a human rights issue in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948). Gender equity and gender equality are correlated, as equity leads to a certain level of equality. The World Health Organization (2002) defines gender equity as fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between men and women.

Equality is a core pillar of democratic societies and is often associated with non-discrimination. The right to equality is interpreted using two strategies: formal and substantive equality. Whereas formal equality focuses on equal treatment, substantive equality prioritizes outcomes, ensuring fair results and equal opportunities for marginalized individuals and groups. This should be reflected at "both a broad, structural societal level, and in instances of direct discrimination, as is regularly encountered in the workplace" (SAHRC, 2016: 24). According to Albertyn (2007), the concept of "substantive equality" recognizes inequality as the product of group divisions in politics, society, and the economy, and aims to level the playing field for everyone. It takes into account personal differences and aims to accommodate them in a reasonable manner to achieve equality of opportunity and outcome. The case of President of South Africa v. Hugo (1997) illustrates that a substantive equality approach fosters human development while addressing systemic inequality.

Law and policy play a crucial role in gender equality and transformation in higher education. Drawing on the theory of law as a transformative tool (Langa, 2006; Kok, 2008), the interaction between law, policy, and the realization of equality for women in higher education practice can be explored and better understood. Employing critical feminist policy analysis, as advocated by Duncan (2007), allows for a critical engagement with the implementation of law and policy and its impact on the realization of rights in and through education. The authors argue that feminist policy analysis provides a framework for exploring how gender equality and transformation are influenced by law and policy, particularly those policies and laws that aim to bring about societal change, justice, and equality. This approach allows for a better understanding of the role that policies and law play in constructing gender relations in society and different environments in which people find themselves, as well as how law and policy can be employed to effect societal transformation (Kanenberg and Leal, 2019).

Whereas a transformative definition of the right to equality is needed, the implementation of gender equality and the law and policy that drives gender transformation should be supported by theoretical notions suitable for exploring gender equality and transformation issues in higher education. Specifically, the authors suggest that critical and feminist theories, intersectionality theory, critical race theory, and post-colonial perspectives inform understandings and implementation of gender equality and transformation.

Feminist theories, including those of Freire (1971, 1985) and Noddings (1986), are diverse, contextual, and contested. As Radtke (2017) notes, feminist theories are subjective, emphasizing social change, social justice, and equity to overcome the social structures through which women are dominated and oppressed. Critical feminist theories, like those of hooks (1989, 1994), oppose all forms of oppression levelled against women and are concerned with social change, social justice, and equity. These theories may aid gender transformation by helping policymakers, policy implementors and women working in higher education to understand the interplay between gender and equality.

Intersectional perspectives, as outlined by Crenshaw (1989), highlights the complex interplay of different social identities, including race, gender, class, and sexuality, and emphasizes the need to address

multiple forms of discrimination in higher education. This theory suggests that an understanding of the role and position of women in higher education must take into account the different contexts in which their intersectional identities take shape, as well as the ways in which those identities are shaped by specific places and times. Of particular importance in the South-African context is the long-lasting effect of apartheid and colonialism which influence racial identities and experiences. Critical race theory, as articulated by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Crenshaw (2019), provides a useful lens for exploring the intersection of race and racism with gender and sexism, guiding efforts to address structural inequalities affecting Black women in higher education in Africa. At the same time, post-colonial perspectives, including those of Mbembe (2001) and McEwan (2001), emphasize the need to challenge hegemonic narratives and promote diverse perspectives in higher education. As such, decolonization becomes and important objective in any gender transformation and equality agenda.

3. Empirical research methods

The study employed a qualitative empirical approach to describe and understand how higher education institutions respond to gender issues and how female staff members experience gender equality in their work environments (Creswell, 2013). Data collection and analysis were framed by interpretivism aimed at "understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation" as essential to "decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon" (Nickerson, 2023). For the purpose of this study, female staff members of public universities in South Africa were regarded as the population. Using snowball sampling (Ghaljaie, Naderifar and Goli, 2017: 2) by starting with an initial invitation and then asking existing study participants to recruit or suggest future study participants from their social circles, sampling continued until the data was saturated at 16 participants. Semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015: 492) were conducted with the 16 women employed at seven different public universities. At first, a Google Form gained consent and participant information and served as an invitation to the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted by means of online video calling (Zoom or WhatsApp). Care was taken to adhere to ethical protocols pertaining to informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, respect, and the principle of no harm. Thematic analysis (Creswell 2009) was used to condense the data into insights that could contribute to the research objectives. Methods suggested by Nowell, Norris, Whit, and Moules (2017: 3) were employed for increased credibility, transferability, dependability, and, confirmability. This included clear audit trails, and reflexivity practiced throughout the research process.

4. Findings

The research findings reveal a significant disconnect between policy and women's experiences in the higher education sector, despite policies, regulations, and laws aimed at promoting gender equality. A few participants (n=5/16) stated that they were ignorant of whether their university had any gender equality policies while one participant indicate her institution does not have such a policy. However, the majority of participants (n=10/16) indicated that their universities had gender equality policies. It is the responsibility of each higher education institution to ensure that their staff members are informed of existing policies and to monitor and evaluate staff awareness of policies. The lack of awareness among participants was concerning because gender transformation and advocacy for gender equality require staff members and society as a whole to scrutinize policies and practices that uphold gender inequality and discrimination (Rubery and Koukiadaki, 2016: 8). They cannot contribute to minimizing gender inequality if they are unaware of the policies.

Women face challenges due to the negative impact of gendered division of domestic responsibilities. Although no direct question during the interviews addressed work-life balance, the issue arose, with utterances from participants indicating their experiences with work-life balance, including "men and women are not the same" (n=3/16). The study found that women face challenges due to the negative impact of gendered division of domestic responsibilities, not only when they get home but also because mothering can extend to the workplace for some. Women, especially, have different requirements and degrees of commitment outside their professional lives, and university regulations need to reflect this. For example, they may require more time off work to care for ill children, and possibly less energy and time owing to being overworked with housework. To better support women throughout their careers and maintain more women in the workforce, employers can alter how they view employees who also provide care for others, especially those who look after elderly parents. Policies regarding job protection, access to family leave, and day care options can play an essential role (Baluta, 2014: 229-230). This view is supported by Acker and Dillabough (2007: 313), who note that the 'gender binary and its normative characteristics (e.g., female motherhood versus male-oriented achievement cultures) remain at the heart of

many women's issues, putting a brake on any too optimistic concepts of agency that unavoidably accompany social change.'

One argument made about research involving females is that they are not a homogenous group but individuals with different intersecting identities and contexts (n=5/16). There have always been multi-level and overlapping types of discrimination in the higher education sector. When developing measures and strategies to combat discrimination against women, all overlapping forms of discrimination must be taken into account.

The study's findings highlighted the isolation that some participants (n=4/16) experienced because they dared to speak out against equality or discrimination. For some participants (n=2/16), the discrimination was perpetuated by other women, and had to do with their age because they were younger. Gender inequality is not always visible, and people who experience it as well as those who support it and marginalize others based on their gender may view it from different angles. It can be challenging to prove when there is gender imbalance, and it is frequently easy to doubt why there was discrimination (International Labour Organization, 2017). Participants found themselves isolated and left out due to the lack of tangible proof.

Participants (n=8/16) recalled facing barriers to their career paths. A legal framework promotes equity in the workplace, ensuring that all employees receive equal opportunities and fair treatment from their employers, and protecting workers from unfair treatment and discrimination. Non-compliance with the law was cited as one of the factors that constrained women from fully participating in the higher education sector (Participant 9). Furthermore, the study's results reveal that another reason limiting women in universities is the perception that women are incapable of undertaking any management work, and some are made to feel incapable of doing it (Participant 12).

Women's representation in leadership positions remains a challenge. According to Manzi and Heilman (2021: 257), even though the number of women in top leadership positions remains low, the visibility of the few women in these male-dominated positions is sometimes thought to foreshadow the closing of the gender gap, leading many to conclude that women are finally "shattering the glass ceiling". Participants indicated that they saw more females/women in both staff and student positions (n=8/16) but warned that women should not be seen as tokens (n=2/16) or checkboxes, but rather as contributors.

This study reveals a significant disconnect between policy and women's experiences in higher education, with some participants unaware of their university's gender equality policies. Women face challenges due to gendered domestic responsibilities, career barriers, and perceptions of incapability in management roles. Employers must alter their views to maintain more women in the workforce. Women's representation in leadership positions remains a challenge, and they should be seen as contributors, not tokens or checkboxes. To address these findings, the paper concludes with recommendations.

5. Recommendations

The goal of promoting gender equality in the higher education sector is an ongoing and complex process that requires a multi-faceted approach. In this study, the experiences of women working in the sector were examined to identify barriers to gender equity and to propose recommendations for improvement. The recommendations put forth are intended to serve as a starting point for meaningful change in the higher education sector, creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all genders.

The following recommendations are suggested based on the findings of this study. Firstly, women should actively seek personal support mechanisms such as mentoring, coaching, or joining networks. Secondly, women employees must advocate for gender-related policies and familiarize themselves with existing policies. Thirdly, while access to higher education is improving for women, comprehensive support initiatives are necessary to ensure student retention, success, and continuous representation in higher education as employees. Fourthly, gender equality must be incorporated as a crosscutting problem throughout any organization, including the higher education sector. Fifthly, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) must formulate national policies that address gender equality and provide clear definitions for key terms like "transformation." Finally, legislators must understand that gender inequality is maintained through institutional practices and that legislation alone is not enough to bring about transformative change; changes in behavior and attitudes are also necessary. Whereas legislative requirements for transformation tends to be quantitative in nature, attention must also be given to the real issues as experienced and raised by women who work in higher education.

By implementing these recommendations, higher education institutions can work towards promoting gender equality and addressing the challenges faced by women in the sector. This will not only benefit women, but will also lead to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive higher education system.

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