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## Achieving gender equity in leadership of South African Institutions of higher learning: Is woman empowerment mission impossible in Universities?

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### Keywords

Academia, Gender Equity, Feminism, Higher Education, Women Empowerment

### Abstract

*Thus far achieving gender equity in the academic leadership of South African institutions of higher learning is a mission not clearly possible. The Commission of Gender and Equity is established in terms of the Constitution of the Republic South Africa, 1996 and is mandated to transform the South African public and private sector institutions in order to ensure a balanced representation of gender within the South African labour force. Such mandate seems to be making a little impact on promoting women to assume academic leadership of institutions of higher learning. This paper therefore would like to argue that while equity is required ideally in workplace environment, the realistic environments often dictate otherwise. The social and the political realities on the ground suggest a different scenario that resultantly keeps the status quo alive with women taking back seat in academic leadership of higher learning institutions. Since the argument in this paper is conceptual, data is conveniently obtained from literature and document analysis. Few women appointed in academic leadership in institutions of higher learning never demonstrated strong leadership endurance and are removed before their term expires. This paper therefore concludes that the achievement of women empowerment in institutions of higher learning is possible if it is strongly ability driven with a strong established support mechanism in place.*

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### Introduction

Gender equity in employment today is a global issue. Countries all over the world are worried about the overrepresentation of the male gender in employment positions. This is despite the fact that science claim that women are in majority on planet earth as compared to men. There are numerous arguments as to whether gender equity in organizations is generally applicable and possible without looking at the other natural causes and realities in the working environment. The general perception today is that equal treatment and opportunities between man and women is a must- without considering the consequences that may come with it. In South Africa legislative frameworks for gender equity have been in existence for more than two decades with constitutional institutions existing to foresee such implementation. A critical questions raised in this paper is whether women empowerment in institutions of higher learning such as universities in South Africa is an achievable mission. In addressing this important research question the paper will focus on a theoretical; framework (feminism), gender equity in international context, gender equity in South Africa, Gender equity in South African universities and challenges of gender implementation in universities.

### The feminism theory

The feminism theory is mostly associated with the fight for equal rights between men and women (Lay& Daley 2007). This fight has its origin in the political space which women believe men prohibit their rights to exists in the public space. The theory suggests that men and women are to be equally considered in social, political and economic contexts and that the two should participate on equal terms. The feminists' theorists were concerned about the

public/private divide between the role of men and women in politics. That is the practice in which men are believed to have been given a public space in politics with women being confined to the private space of existence centered on family and domestic responsibilities (Heywood 2007:12-13). The feminists 'theorists challenged the naturalistic held theory that assumes that the meaning of women social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology (Butler 1988). Their assumption is that "women" or "gender" is a historical situation rather than a natural fact. The oppression of women by man is seen as the historical natural system of existence. In fact one can assume that there is no a man or woman only human beings exists in the society.

Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* argued that the existing social relation of whatever kind is structured on basis of power relations between individuals in which the other one is a subordinate of the other. Therefore, arguing that human beings on earth are in a dominant-submissive power relation. To the feminists' theorists the relationship that existed in family set up such as husbands and wives, parents and children are equally power relations similar to relationship between employers and employees or between governments and citizens. However Kate Millet does not solely relate relationship of insubordination to husbands and wives only, but it may be argued that in general the feminists theorists view of life is that the current social structure is created by the patriarchal system and is biased in favour of men than women. To that extent Feminism go to the extent of criticizing heterosexism as a social structure system that favours man (Boundless 2015:4-5) against women, gays and lesbians. Hence women are said to be victims of the social structure that favours man against women in family, politics and the employment sector. Women are therefore considered to be lesser women beings with lesser potentials to lead and contribute significantly in life. This is the view that in modern society is challenged with the view to put women in the same competitive social order with men. This issue is visible throughout centuries in which the conflict between proponents of feminism and patriarchy remain persistent (Wadesango 2011).

### **Gender equity in higher education: An international context**

Gender equity is a worldwide phenomenon and countries on the globe are sufficiently competing to be the best in implementing such in order to achieve the millennium development goals. This is the goal that has to be achieved in employment categories both in the public and private sector institutions. The higher education institutions are mostly affected by lack of gender parity because of the historical legacies of a biased afforded opportunity for girls and boys in attending formal educational institutions. Even today it is still argued in the global context that the achievement of gender parity in higher education cannot be achieved by simple policy measures put in place (Gosalbez & Marino n.d:18; Tickle 2013:1-7). There are contexts that should be taken into consideration which should be practical and befitting the imaginative ideas of policy makers and the society. The European Union which promised to lead by example in this regard is showing good progress of gender equality even in higher education. This is said to be linked to its binding legal directives on equal treatment in employment (Walby 2003:2-4; Walby 2004). Their achievement in research shows that in 2009 alone 33% of researchers in the European Union were women. In 2010, 46% of degrees earned in the European Union were women and in the same year it was also revealed that 44% of entry level academic researchers were women (Pain 2013:1). Rice (2015:1-2) argued that gender equality in the western countries is not fully achieved. The Norwegian University of Science and Technology has recorded an increase in masters enrolment by women at a rate of 60% from 2005-2013. Equity between man and women in science is however regarded as a fundamental right (Haugstads 2013:1-3) which must be observed and financially supported by governments. The Swedish government like

others developed policies for promotion of women in research and innovation (Keusu, Abrahamson & Ronnblom 2015) through a 60 million SEK to provide for gender equity projects. This was said to be a good initiative compared to the 1990's approach that was doubtfully women developmental as it only focused on increasing the number of women professors in academia. Such an approach which most developing countries are currently moving for is a threat to the academic meritocratic system.

In the United Kingdom (UK) financial rewards seem to be helping institutions of higher learning to comply with the gender equity requirements (Cheung 2014:1). It is however acknowledged that while the strategy assists in improving women in research, their seniority in academic position such as professorship stays at 16.5 % which is relatively lower compared to males. In Scottish universities women make a 45% workforce composition with only 28.8% being professors. The most progressive University in terms of gender equity is Queen Margaret University which has 40% of women as professors in their workforce (Common Space 2015:1-3). The UK also seems to be doing well in gender equity in relation to academic leadership. Indeed 14% of UK university Vice-Chancellors are women in comparison with India which only has 3% of women as university Vice-Chancellors (Machika 2014:1). On the same note women are said to be receiving higher than fifty percent of the PHD's awarded by American universities (Mason, 2011:1). But achieving parity with men on other aspects of academia such as ranks could still be difficult to be attainable in absolute terms. It may seem from literature on gender equality that worldwide it shows that figures are still far behind. International indexes show different gender gaps in universities worldwide. For example in Japan universities women constitutes 12, 7 % of the research intensive faculties (Assman 2014).

In Africa, Rwanda demonstrated to be the good model of gender equity in most spheres of the country's social life practice. Rwanda is ranked one of the top ten world country in terms of gender equality (Mwai 2014:1-7; Musoni 2014:1-7). The gender equity however extremely hailed in Rwanda, but it may seem it was heavily achieved in politics, business, health and primary education level (Masanja & Huye 2010: 2-14; Republic of Rwanda 2011). In other sectors such as higher education it remains skewed and that will take some time to correct as much as other countries are struggling to achieve that. Rubagiza (n.d: 1) showed that in the year 2004 there was no a woman in the top administration of the two major institutions of higher learning in Rwanda (National University of Rwanda and Kigali Institute of Science). On top of that in both institutions men complement more than eighty percent of the staff while women are less represented. Masanja & Huye (2010:1) argued that in Sub-Saharan Africa women are still lagging behind men in education especially in the field of Maths, Science and Technology. An attempt to correct this started many decades ago but the status qua is difficult to change. It should also be noted that in African universities gender equity is understood in differing contexts by differing African academics. Despite social limitations faced by African women in competing with men in academia; some male African academics regard gender equity as a western sponsored ideology aiming to erode the African culture (Association of African Universities 2006:1).

### **Gender equity in South Africa**

Like all other societies of the globe South Africa is heavily affected by the stereotyping that women are of weaker sex and can rarely make it in leadership positions (Albertyn 2009:165-207; Sebola & Khalo 2010; Louw & Kahn 2011; Mamabolo & Sebola 2014). The need for gender equity in both the private and public employment sector becomes a requirement. Gender equity in South Africa is enforced through the implementation of the *Employment Equity Act no.55 of 1998* which uses the Affirmative Action policy to balance the numerical inequity in the

employment sector caused by previous discrimination on basis on race, gender and physical abilities. The theory of the inability of women in managerial positions have been challenged from many angles and there is no solid evidence to suggests that women are incapable leaders in organisations except through biased examples of limitations which also failed men in similar circumstances.

Mahlangu (2008:51-52) indicated that the South African public sector departments showed to be overachieving in terms of set targets for women in Senior management Services. The national Department of Labour(RSA) (2013:9-10) showed that from 2002-2012, South Africa demonstrated a substantive progress in gender equity in top and senior management services positions in which women fairly benefitted. On top of that the country is ranked number four in terms of global scale of women parliamentarians (Mamabolo & Sebola 2014) performing better than the United Kingdom and the United States of America who are regarded as the champions of democracy. Olifant (2015:1-7) however argues that there is no likelihood of South Africa achieving gender equity targets as set out by the Millennium Development Goal. This is mainly because the position of South Africa as a champion of democracy is not stable in gender achievements. Its ranking on international index fluctuates up and down rather than being stable and progressive towards women empowerment. While in the public service chances are taken to put women into leadership position risking service delivery projects, in the private sector of South Africa it is often argued that such risk is not taken in absolute terms. And indeed most studies have argued that in the process of equating gender in the working environment most organisations have focused on numerical target for women other than training them to fit the positions that they are given. That happened to have compromised the ability of women in most South African public service departments. The lack of the country's instability as a champion of women empowerment lies in the fact that women are put into positions of power without proper fitness and support mechanism and when they fail to cope; they are removed and replaced by men again to the same position of power.

The Japanese Prime Minister, Abe Touting fell into the same trap in September 2014 when in his "womenomics" appointed five women who within a month were caught up in scandals that offered them options to resign. Sebola (2009) have argued that in the South African public service lack of service delivery have been causally linked to political appointments in which appointed equity based beneficiaries lack expertise, skills and knowledge in their areas of work. While we acknowledge the significance of equity but care should be taken that it does not undermine the credibility of the person it meant to empower.

### **Gender Equity in South African Universities**

Gender equity in South African universities can be considered a human resource equity nightmare. The 2007 HESA (Higher Education South Africa) Report showed that of the 26 Vice-Chancellors of South African Universities only 3 are women (Machika 2014:1; Shackleton, n.d). Women also continue to occupy a small percentage as registers, deputy-vice-chancellors and Executive-Directors at universities as compared to men. This figure shows that the country is still struggling to equate women and men in the South African academia. The three women Vice-Chancellors were Professor Irene Moutlana of Vaal University of Technology, Professor Nthabiseng Ogude of Tshwane University of Technology and Professor Cheryl de la Rey of the University of Pretoria. Professor Thoko Mayekiso would have been the fourth women Vice-chancellor on her appointment at the newly established University of Mpumalanga if Professor Ogude did not give up her post at the Tshwane University of Technology probably under the speculation of failing to cope with the students unrests in the campus. Prof Moutlana also did not have it easy as a woman Vice-chancellor and have consistently experience unrest from

students and unions. While concerns were raised about the urgent need for women empowerment through education, little attention has been paid on how the girls' poor educational experience negatively affected their learning outcomes (Barieya, Sanger & Moolman 2014:2).

It is in actual fact the quality of women experiences and other factors that are specific to women and not men that will determine their future potential development and success and academia. Although universities often register a substantial number of potential graduates in PHD programme being men and women, only a small number of women registered in the programme often manages to finish the programme. Some have argued that women probably experience unique problems such as family responsibilities and less freedom than men in exercising their responsibilities. Men register in numbers that are more than women and their potential to complete the PHD programme are higher than of women. South Africa is even worse on equity issues because of its previous apartheid policy which created equity problems in terms of race. Thus bringing the problem that equity in South African context goes far beyond gender to cover even the racial prejudices that came with it. Table 1 below shows the doctoral graduates by gender and population from 1994-2009.

Year/ %	ENROLMENTS				
	Male	Female	White	Black	Total
1994	518	219	666	71	737
%	70.3	29.7	90.4	9.6	100
2000	572	400	674	298	972
%	58.8	41.2	69.3	30.7	100
2007	744	530	691	580	1 274
%	58.4	41.6	54.4	45.6	100
2009	807	573	697	675	1 380
%	58.5	41.5	50.5	48.9	100

Table 1: Doctoral graduates by gender and population group, 1994-2009

From the table above it is clear that men in the South African higher education register and graduate for PHD programme than women in South Africa does. However there is a significant growth in the number of both women and blacks that graduate in the PHD programme the number is still lower as compared to men and white minority groups that succeed in the PHD programme. This is mainly because it is believed that blacks and women in South Africa had policies and some cultural stereo typing that were perpetuated to undermine and cause their misfortunes in achieving such academic goals. Walters (1999) believes that the injustices of poor access to higher education by apartheid in South Africa can be easily achieved through a lifelong learning model. Indeed the disparity that continues with the successful graduate rate of many men than women cannot in any manner solve the problem of having less women to compete for academic leadership in senior management positions of South African universities. The legacy of apartheid and the patriarchal system continues to characterize the problems that are associated with women failing to achieve equal educational achievements with men in the country. South Africa produces the lower output of PHD per annum in terms of international comparison (Cape Higher Education Consortium 2013:5). It can however be argued that the country is working within the parameters of its National Development Plan which aims in 2030 to:

- Increase the percentage of PHD qualified staff from 34 to over 75 percent
- Have over 25 percent of total enrolments in higher education at post graduate level
- Produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million of the population

- Double the number of graduate, post graduate and first rate scientists
- Increase the number of African and women post graduates and
- Stimulate the creation of a learning and research environment that is welcoming to all and eliminating all forms of discrimination.

It is argued that in 2010 an improvement in doctoral graduations in South Africa showed progress (graduating almost 1 421). There has also been a satisfactory increase in the number of African graduates and women (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2013:5). On other hand Council on Higher Education admitted that strides have been made on equity, however, women academics are still losing out at male colleagues at universities senior level positions (Makhanya, 2013:2). Badat (2010:24) noted with concern that the statistics of 2006 have shown a significant point in South African universities that most of the Senior academics at Professor and Associate Professor level being mostly women are at the retirement age level. Thus, threatening the potential of women to take over leadership in academic level. Which therefore implies that while the shortages in gender equity for women is a problem there are also emerging problems that has nothing to do with cultural stereotyping and are not easily achievable.

### **Challenges of Gender Equity Implementation in South African Universities**

While gender equity in other sectors of South African institutions have been attempted with success, gender equity in academic circles remains difficult to attain in university senior management positions. A vast of literature exists and has dwelt on common causes of gender equity in workplace environments. Many studies have concluded that such challenges are but not limited to education attainment, social responsibilities between men and women in public space and breaks in for child raising by women.

In the South African high school environments women dominates the teaching profession however their number is extremely low in school management positions (Schmidt & Mystry 2014). The same situation occurs in South African universities that women are in majority at the lower academic levels than men at lecturer and junior lecturer level (Badat 2010:24). But went it goes to the positions of Senior lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor Level the men are in majority as occupants of such senior academic posts. Thus, giving male academics an advantage opportunity to be at management level than women in academia. This shows some traits of social anomalies in the academia which needs to be repaired. Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2006:2) however noted that women in higher education tend to be lower than male academics.

Up to so far countries cry foul play inherent in the patriarchal origin of the society and attempting to solve the problems only from the patriarchal tendencies which should be discouraged while ignoring other factors that would continue despite patriarchal practices imbedded in our social cultures. South Africa like other countries would like to implement the equity policies in universities without considering the real issues of the academic environment. In this paper I argue that there are challenges of implementing the equity policies to benefit women in leadership of institutions such as Universities and such could be alleviated if the following challenges are considered: Appointment of feminists than “women”, Male dominated students leadership and trade unions, Strong support base for women leaders by councils and Board, Academic business versus other business organizations.

#### **a) Appointment of feminists than “women”**

Feminists are by definition women who believe that their public space is limited in favour of men who accords themselves opportunities that keeps women at a subordinate level. To an excessive level feminists criticizes heterosexism as a system of attitudes that is biased and

discriminatory to favour male- female sexuality which subordinate women even worse in that sexual relationship (Boundless sociology 2015:5). In South Africa such women are characterized by prefixing their talk in public gathering by “Up with women” and “Down with Men”. Most feminists are emotionally angry with men in all respects (at home and at work) and will mostly push for women agenda even if it is not convincing. They are mostly quick to pick up on male chauvinism in practice than other women. On other hand there are women who appreciate and understand patriarchy and its practices. Such women believe in their physical limitations as women and understand that those limitations naturally subordinate them to men. Such are women that are mostly fortunate to achieve than feminists in education and are the ones that are often affirmed in leadership positions for equity purposes. When the going get tough in leadership, they are likely to act women and withdraw from positions of power. In that instance they give power back to male counterparts. In South Africa, Council on Higher Education have also noted with concern the losing out of female colleagues to male colleagues in senior management of universities (Makhanya 2013:3).

The Vice- Chancellor at the Tshwane University of Technology Prof Nthabiseng Ogode resigned in 2010 after serving only two years of her five year contract in which the Union (NEHAWU), students association and some academics were campaigning against her leadership capability (Makhubu 2014:1). The post was later given temporarily to a male counterpart Prof Lourens Van Staden. The Vice- Chancellor of Vaal University of Technology is still surviving by luck in the sense that she was found to have awarded a tender unethically and irregularly and was recommended to be fired (Macupe 2013:1), but the council retained her and extended her contract for the next three years despite NEHAWU calling for her dismissal. The Council argued that she was not corrupt but rather being ignorant and negligent in the awarding of the tender. Cheryl de la Rey in the University of Pretoria is enjoying her academic leadership because the university is predominantly white and the white community in South Africa rarely goes for removal of leaders in academic positions. Prof Thoko Mayekiso at the University of Mpumalanga may expect peace because the University is still at its infancy stage.

#### **b) Male dominated student leadership and trade unions at universities**

South African universities are dominated by male leadership in student structures and trade unions. These structures which should be the first to be transformed are responsible for the removal of academics in leadership positions when they are of the opinion that the interests of their members are not fairly attended to. In most student leadership structures of the universities in South Africa, women are mostly considered for non-influential positions such as secretaries with their duties limited to minute taking. Such practice continues even in the trade unions within the universities. It may seem the agenda of women empowerment is not fairly shared with these structures within the universities. The women empowerment agenda should be an all stake holder university affair.

Most women leaders have not failed in academic leadership of senior management because of their incapability, but simply because the system that put them into positions failed to support them in times of organizational crisis. In South African universities male leaders in academic positions were either removed on paid contract to the end or have endured the period of the contract while women ultimately resigned before contract expiry when an amount of pressure is difficult to handle. It can therefore be argued that only if the unions and students leadership can be made to understand a shared responsibility of women empowerment in leadership of universities is then that women can have a long stay in academic leadership.

**c) Strong support base for women in leadership positions by the University Council**

The most important support in leadership position that a person require than financial incentive is a simple advice from mentors. South Africa is said to be not doing good in providing full support system to its beneficiaries. Thus far the South African government focuses on implementing policies to the satisfaction of the international conventions they signed for than considering the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy achievements. More financial resources are put into policy implementation (Phillips, Moos & Nieman 2014) without necessarily investing in follow up and support on women that are being empowered. The placement of women into leadership positions of universities cannot be an equity solutions if there is no a sound strong support base system to keep the women capable in positions of leadership.

There are critical reality issues in leadership in which men are highly experienced to put and remove people in leadership. That could be a stage that South African women in academia are not yet at. South African women have long been inducted in political leadership positions which they are really coping and succeeding and knowing the rules of the game and survival techniques in the world of men. Academia in South Africa is still male dominated and women leaders are likely to find themselves as being few among men with experience in the same leadership position being occupied by an equity beneficiary. Most university Councils did not sure sympathy with women in university leadership when they are in managerial crisis. Their cases were treated on same par with their male counterpart. Hence women in leadership suffered the same fate as men in leadership positions. Indeed the university councils need to put a strong support base mechanism when putting women in such positions of power. The lack of support that most women fails to get from the system when in leadership positions makes others that qualifies to be afraid of applying for leadership position even if they qualify.

**d) Academic business versus other business organizations**

Gender equity in South African universities has been over emphasized at the expense of the university business on other hand. Often policy enforcers have emphasized on wanting to see women being affirmed in university positions despite lack of experienced and ready women to take academic leadership in such positions of power. Many equity studies in South Africa have complained about the organizations compliance to equity on balancing numeric than efficiency that would emanate from those numbers (Mello 2008; Wessels 2008; Habib & Morrow 2006:18). The business of academia is different from other businesses. It involves effective teaching, research, community engagements and management. The academic business is the most critical because it requires people to fit the profile in order to be employed. The South African academia has been and is still suffering from skills shortage and the problem is global. Sebola & Khalo (2010) have argued that in the South African academia universities still are failing to attract staff into taking academic positions and such positions are rejected by applicants irrespective of their gender. Moreover private companies and public sector companies pay better for women in their organizations than the universities do. It can therefore be argued that many capable women wishing to take leadership positions may opt for an unchallenging career in the public sector than controversial academic career in which they have to face students and labour union unrests on daily base.

Some South African universities still continue to operate in favour of the university business than set gender policies. The University of Cape Town (UCT) is rated the most pretigious, progressive research and teaching institution in the country. But as at 2014 the academic staff complement is still 83 % white males (Nieuwoudt 2014:2). Shackleton (n.d) mentioned that in the case of South Africa, the more prestigious the institution the lesser gender



equity. These by implication mean that gender equity is likely to be associated with university that lacks effective teaching and research direction. It is presumed by researchers that prestigious universities such as University of Cape Town requires at least 382 years to reflect the national demographics while the University of Pretoria requires at least 371 years (Higher Education and Training Committee 2013:5). The Vaal University of Technology only needed 10 years and is left with only seven years to do that. It can be argued that for now both the government and the university councils are not sure of balancing the numerics at the expense of academic business of the universities. It is indeed the universities that are doing good in research which are victims of non-compliance. And indeed studies have confirmed that social realities are not making women to be available to excel in management as men can be at some times. Women often have responsibilities that have compromised their potential to achieve academically and often have little to focus on management functions. Most women that cope in this stressful management environment are forced to abandon other important activities of their time. Mathabe (n.d:5) noted that after 1994 the number of female students enrollment increased while male figures declined but the worrisome fact that most female students do not register for post graduate programme. The answer as to why such is happening is not known. The assumption could be that women are satisfied with that first level achievement or that unlike male students they are required in organizations to feel the inequity gap and therefore there is no need for them to further their studies.

### Conclusion

This paper argued that gender equity in South African institutions of higher learning such as universities cannot be achieved unless a strong support base for women in leadership positions is put in place. This assertion which I made in this paper has received little attention in gender equity research in South African universities. Many studies of equity in the continent and the country have mostly focused on how the patriarchal system compromised the development of women in achieving education rather than looking at the patriarchal system and other related causes as a cause of such misfortunes for women. In academia literature also revealed through other studies that the business of academia is unique as compared to the manner in which equity principles can be achieved in the public sector organizations than in academia. It is clear from other perception in South African universities that the more women in leadership position the lesser the prestige of the university in research agenda. Those are issues that need further research and attention.

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