

INAUGURAL LECTURE  
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GENDER EQUITY AND EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP :  
'WHAT'S SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUBSTANTIVE EQUALITY GOT TO DO WITH IT?'

**Introduction**

The issue of women's under-representation in senior decision-making and leadership positions in organizations has been well-documented and continues to be a key area in gender and leadership research in all sectors of education including higher education. White (2003: 46) asserts that 'academic women at senior levels in universities have not achieved a critical mass, despite the existence of equity programmes in universities for the last few decades'. Reports, research articles and newspaper articles confirm this phenomenon. For instance, Alison Moodie, writing in the 2010 issue of *Advancing women in higher Education* remarked that 'Women academics are still losing out to male colleagues at South African universities and their situation hasn't changed much ...'. Others point out that universities 'remain a bastion of male power and privilege' (The 1990 Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top). Gender equity and equality in higher education management have been in the spotlight in South Africa in recent years. Universities everywhere are under a lot of pressure to transform in all aspects of their business. Although great strides have been made by universities to improve gender representation at senior management, middle management and professorial levels, representation of women in these positions at many universities is still disproportionately low. This is indicative of a gender leadership gap in higher education, and concomitantly, a loss in potential contribution to the growth and development of the higher education sector. Underrepresentation of the female component of the academic society in leadership means underutilization of available talent and intellectual capital. It also implies the perpetuation of gender inequality in higher education. It is a serious indictment on humankind that in a world predominantly populated by women, only a few of them are leaders in political, corporate and educational organizations; this despite equal opportunities legislation in various countries including South Africa. This begs the question: Can gender equality, but more importantly, gender equity – ever be really achieved?

Perhaps the questions that need to be posed are:

What are the main factors in gender equity and equality in higher education leadership? And

What are the implications of a commitment to social justice and substantive equality in the struggle to achieve gender equality and equity in higher education leadership?

## **Background**

As a starting point, perhaps it would be pertinent to paint a picture of the current gender representation patterns in higher education management against a backdrop of legislation or 'political will', and 'academic will'. In this context, mention must be made of legislation aimed at realizing the ideal of Section 9 of the Constitution of South Africa ( Act 106 of 1996), namely *The Promotion of equality and prevention of unfair discrimination Act 4 of 2000*, or the *Equality Act* which was introduced to 'give effect to the constitutional injunction requiring that national legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination' ( Liebenberg & O'Sullivan, 2001) by calling for the 'Prohibition of unfair discrimination on ground[s] of gender'. Also worth mentioning is *The National Gender policy framework* (South Africa's framework for women's empowerment and gender equality).

Subsequent to 'political will' is what I refer to as 'academic will' or the will of those bodies or organizations that play different roles in the higher education business. HERS-SA is a non-profit organization aimed at improving the status of women in higher education. CHE is an independent statutory body established by the Higher Education Act, number 101 of 1997. The academic will to improve gender equity in senior leadership in higher education was expressed very clearly by a declaration made at a conference organized by Higher Education Resources Services - South Africa (HERS-SA) in conjunction with the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the former Higher Education South Africa ( HESA) now called Universities South Africa ( USAf) and the Department of Education. According to a report by Karen MacGregor on *University World News*, April 13, 2008, the conference was held to 'explore how institutional cultures and gendered preconceptions influence the lack of women in higher Education leadership. It was also aimed to impact on institutional practice'. What was important about this conference is that it acknowledged that although great progress has been made in the area of women participation in higher education in terms of student access, a lot still has to be done to achieve gender equity in higher education leadership positions. A declaration was made calling on the department of education and CHE to 'promote the importance of equity at senior leadership levels.' Among others, all higher education institutions were called upon to 'commit to identifying institutional barriers to equity of participation and success in leadership and undertake innovative ways of addressing these impediments.'

One of the speakers at the conference reportedly remarked that 'universities should be at the forefront of efforts to achieve gender equity in senior positions, and according to another speaker, 'universities often stated commitments to equity in their vision and mission statements while continuing to measure success in terms of numbers.' This resulted in failure to understand how subtle forms of discrimination in

institutional cultures created barriers to women's success. Universities were urged 'not to ignore the wealth of women leadership available and that it was not only the task of university managers or broader society to effect change but that women themselves have a critical role to play.' Unsurprisingly, according to the conference, of 369 leadership positions surveyed in South Africa's higher education only 85 or 23% were occupied by women in 2008, and according to one speaker, this bias is also found among academic leaders, professors and associate professors. Although there are now more women in the deanship generally, there are still very few women at senior executive management level. For example, a survey this researcher conducted for an international collaborative research project in 2015 and part of 2016 showed that between 2015 and 2016, only 3 or 12% Vice Chancellor(VC) positions were held by women. When all senior executive management positions were taken into account, that is VC and Deputy Vice Chancellors(DVC), females occupied only 25% of those positions, while their male counterparts occupied 75% of senior executive management positions. These figures indicate that the gender gap at the most senior levels is still very wide. It also means that progress is slow.

Therefore it is against this background that my lecture is set. The lecture takes a critical look at the issues of gender equity and equality in Higher Education leadership from a social justice and substantive equality perspective. The main problem of concern is the issue of equity rather than equality and the focus of this lecture is therefore on the factors that constitute barriers for women in higher education leadership and the implications of a commitment to social justice and substantive equality in the struggle to achieve gender equity and equality in higher education leadership.

### **Concept definition**

Perhaps it would be pertinent at this point to unpack the concepts of 'gender', gender 'equity' and gender 'equality' as well as 'social justice' and 'substantive equality'. What exactly do these notions mean in general and in the context of higher education leadership?

I will go on to discuss how these notions are important in understanding the real conditions underlying the ostensible success in achieving gender equity and equality and how this veneer of success is easily removed to reveal the stark reality of factors which militate against acceptable representation levels of women in leadership positions in higher education. I will conclude this paper with recommendations for how an adoption of a substantive equality position can aid the successful implementation of gender equity and equality principles in higher education.

### **Gender**

Gender is 'a socially constructed phenomenon whereby certain personality or other social characteristics are connoted as masculine or feminine and are inaccurately assumed to be 'naturally related to the possession of a male or female body'( Green, Parkin & Hearn, 2001:191). In other words, gender (unlike sex) is socially constructed. It is a category people collectively agree to subscribe to as a concept ( Lorber

& Farrell, in Wilson 2001: 1). It is also suggested that gender is 'an integral part of structures of domination and subordination with women in a position of inequality' (Lorber & Farrell in Wilson, 2001:3). Gender and sex are quite different in meaning though they are often used interchangeably. Whereas gender denotes 'those characteristics, attributes, behaviours and activities considered by society to be appropriate for men and women', sex has to do with the biological differences between men and women – their being male or female' (Brewis *et al.* in Wilson, 2001: 1; Zulu, 2002: 27; Zulu, 2003:98). A person who is biologically female also has the feminine gender and conversely a biologically male person would have the masculine gender (Brewis *et al.* in Wilson, 2001: 1).

Equity and equality are commonly misunderstood to mean the same thing and are often used interchangeably when in fact they are different in meaning (Mann, 2014). Gender equity has to do with 'fairness and justice, impartiality and even-handedness' whereas gender equality has to do with equal or same treatment of men and women. Thus, fairness between genders, does not mean that everyone should become the same. It means that men and women should be given the same opportunities to succeed despite their differences. More importantly, fairness also means taking into account contextual factors, or circumstances that are unique to a group of people when making judgments about promotion, for instance. In the case of women in academia, consideration of women's specific contexts and circumstances would ensure that uniform application of criteria does not advantage one group at the expense of the other. This will be explained in detail in a later section.

### Gender equity

Drawing from the *National gender policy framework* (2000) gender equity is 'the fair and just distribution of all means of opportunities and resources between women and men (page xviii). Gender equality is 'a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potential; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development; and benefit equally from the results. Equality is understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality; not merely equality to men.' In the next section, the concepts 'formal equality' and 'substantive equality' are explained.

### Formal equality

Formal equality, is the traditional notion of equality based on a system of formal rules in national legal systems, and views equality as 'consistent or equal treatment' regardless of circumstances or difference. For instance, the first principle of equality in Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) provides that 'everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law'. The second principle provides that 'Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms', and more importantly the equality clause prohibits discrimination on various grounds among which is gender and sex. To give effect to this constitutional provision, the Promotion of

Equality and prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000( better known as the Equality Act) reinforces the prohibition of discrimination on 'ground[s] of gender'.

In Goldblatt's ( 2001:8) view, 'the right to equality and the Constitutional Court's interpretation of the right as entailing substantive equality can be used to place positive obligation on public and private bodies'.

### Substantive equality

Substantive equality, recognises context in the treatment of people. It recognizes that different groups of people experience different circumstances which are shaped by various contextual factors or inequalities. This therefore precludes extending the same treatment to everyone as in formal equality. In other words, policies and practices intended to address inequality may lead to indirect or systemic discrimination when applied uniformly without taking into account specific needs of certain groups of people such as women in this case. The notion of substantive equality then, recognizes that inequalities 'are rooted in social, economic and political cleavages between groups'( Albertyn, 2007:254) and 'acknowledges the complexity of inequality, its systematic nature and its entrenchment in social values and behaviours, the institution of society, the economic system and power relations.' It is therefore important, to get to the root of gender inequalities in the case of higher education leadership in order to address and eradicate them. Cooper (2001:126) says, 'It is only through a substantive approach that persons in a position of inequality can fully enjoy all rights and freedoms'. In order to achieve substantive equality, those who suffered disadvantage in the past, according to Cooper, are entitled to positive 'unequal treatment' in the present. The most pervasive gender inequality in many societies is the relegation of family and home responsibilities to women (Albertyn, 2007:261). This phenomenon has been cited in many feminist studies as the single most intractable barrier to women's advancement in their careers and therefore the root source of gender inequality in higher education. Substantive equality could act as a 'remedy to this systemic and entrenched inequality' (Albertyn, 2007:259) by taking into account the specific situation of women in family and home responsibilities. This is in no way intended to undermine the role played by men in the home and family, but rather to underscore the nuanced nature of this responsibility. In higher education leadership, madam rector, this requires that those responsible for drawing up institutional recruitment and promotions policies understand the context in which inequality occurs for women and identify the factors that affect their unequal progression in areas that are important for their equal participation in higher education leadership.

What about social justice?

This paper draws upon the political philosopher John Rawls' (1971) Theory of Justice which proposed that

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made

right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages by many (Rawls, in Berends, 2014:161).

The concept of social justice, according to Rawls (in Berends, 2014:161) “was based on the belief that historical inequities related to current injustices should be addressed until the actual inequities no longer exist...”

### **What’s social justice and substantive equality got to do with gender equity and equality in higher education leadership?**

Social justice and substantive equality are both concerned with inequities and inequalities in society and the need to focus on and dismantle structures of inequalities and disadvantage ‘among individuals and groups within and across societies’ ( Berends, 2014:159). In higher education, it is apparent that social justice and substantive equality can play a role in dismantling gendered institutional cultures and structures which disadvantage certain groups within higher education leadership. It is incumbent upon leaders for social justice to interrogate the status quo and unveil oppressive structures, policies and practices in their organizations and work towards social change ( Mthethwa-Summers, in Diem & Carpenter, 2014:13). Drawing on Mthethwa-Summers’ perspective on social justice discourse, higher education leadership preparation should provide leaders with the ability to ‘critically question the structures, systems and norms within [higher education] that pose barriers to advancement into leadership positions for academics, particularly women academics ( Mthethwa-Summers, 2014:13).

This brings us to the discussion of significant factors in gender equity and equality in higher education leadership and the implications of a commitment to social justice and substantive equality in the quest to achieve gender equality and equity in higher education leadership.

### **Factors in gender equity and equality in higher education leadership**

There are various persistent factors that militate against equity and equality of women in higher education leadership, but there are also ‘facilitators’ or ‘enablers’ as Morley reports in her (2015:8) findings from a large study on women in higher education leadership in South Asia. Many of the perceived factors are similar across countries, cultures and geographic location. Gendered organizational cultures and socio-cultural belief systems (Morley, 2015:8) are mainly responsible for the low numbers of females in higher education leadership in many countries. Discrimination and unequal power relations continue to obstruct women’s paths to promotion ( Machika, 2014). Institutions are perceived as ‘unfriendly and unaccommodating’ to women. Universities remain ‘bastions of male power and privilege’ (The Report of the Hansard Society commission 1990: 11, 68), thus making it difficult for women to enter into and hold positions of power and perform their leadership roles comfortably. The situation is exacerbated by the persistence of stereotypical attitudes towards women (and men) as leaders, resulting in resistance to female leadership by both women and men. This resistance is still a reality in many organisations and

continues to manifest in various overt and covert ways. Carli and Eagly (2007:129) believe that 'resistance to female agency is especially evident in people's perceptions of highly successful female leaders...women who succeed in male dominated professions frequently elicit hostile responses.' The fact is that the traditional notion of leadership as 'male' is still firmly entrenched in many people's psyches – both men and women, resulting in organizational practices not being as 'gender –neutral' as organizations would have us believe (Encyclopedia of Business.p5). Women generally tend to follow non-traditional career paths, and this militates against their promotion opportunities. Difficulty in accessing supportive networks for women, lack of suitable female role models and lack of formal mentoring programmes is often cited as an impediment to women's career advancement (Zulu, 2013: 762).

One of the barriers that pervades all societies to a greater or lesser extent is that of family responsibilities. The Report of the Hansard society commission describes this barrier to equality as 'One of the most intractable barriers'(p. 20). Indeed it is, because every study ever conducted on barriers to women's advancement in all possible occupations which involve women cites women's home and family responsibilities as the main issue in career advancement. Family responsibilities are still largely relegated to women. As Zulu (2013:758) contends, 'This has its roots in enduring culturally defined gender roles and gender socialisation patterns that associate women with home-making, and nowhere is this gender-role distinction more sharply crystallised than in systems organised along patriarchal lines such as those of South Africa and other African countries'.

Research productivity of women generally lags behind that of most men who on the whole tend to be more prolific than women (Gerber, 2009; Prozesky, 2006 in Zulu 2013: 751). Yet, publication is an important criterion for promotion to the professoriate and to senior leadership positions in most countries, and to be research productive, an academic needs time, a commodity which is scarce for many young academics of child-bearing age still faced with raising a family, looking after a husband and the home.

**So, how can a commitment to social justice and substantive equality make a difference in the quest for gender equity and equality in higher education leadership?**

I would like to cite Albertyn's ( 2007:259-261) contention that ' the most pervasive gender inequality in many societies is the relegation of family and home responsibilities to women'-- and that 'substantive equality [could act as] a 'remedy for this systemic and entrenched inequality.' How can this be achieved in universities? A substantive equality approach would be to take into account the specific situation of women in family and home responsibilities when implementing policies and practices which impact on women's career advancement and prospects of participating in higher education leadership. Policymakers and implementers should apprise themselves of the literature on women and the factors which militate against their career progression. They should consider those factors which affect only women and not men. Those factors that apply to both men and women should be carefully analysed to

determine to what extent women and men are affected. For instance, universities apparently offer similar opportunities to all academics to be research productive. However, the overall rate of productivity has been found to be different for women even when the most productive women are taken into consideration. This is where hard questions should be asked about the equity or fairness of using the same criteria for promotion. If the number and quality of women in leadership is to increase, critical questions need to be asked about the status quo: is it favourable to women?

As White (2003: 57) rightly pointed out, 'maintaining the *status quo* in senior management' might result in senior academic women 'either separating from the institution by leaving higher education or remaining but contributing less and, therefore, under-utilising their capabilities'.

However, having more women in strategic leadership positions, according to Bilén-Green *et al.* (2008:1) 'provides greater understanding of pragmatic work policy obstacles, enhanced networking possibilities, and demonstration of a shifting organizational culture—all which can facilitate more equal participation of women within the academy'.

## **Recommendations**

Transformation in universities cannot be complete without attention to gender. Firstly, the quest for gender equity and equality in higher education leadership should begin with implementation of gender policies but this can be more easily facilitated through a gender forum to deal specifically with gender-related issues in the context of leadership. Such a forum should ensure the promotion of full participation of women in decision-making. This constitutes gender mainstreaming or de-marginalising of women's needs in transformation discourses. Gender transformation should not be about numbers but about quality as well. Structural and organizational impediments should be removed to clear the career paths for both women and men. Gender audits should be carried out to determine where women (and men) are concentrated or get stuck. Institutions could consider introducing flexible working hours particularly for women with child rearing responsibilities. Women should be encouraged to attend women only leadership development courses. Formal and informal mentoring programmes should be established to assist women in their professional and personal development. Women and men aspiring to leadership have been found to benefit from mentorship and mentoring programmes.

## **Conclusion**

Commitment to promoting gender equity and equality in higher education leadership is commendable. However, it must be supported with a concrete programme of action. Therefore adopting a social justice and substantive equality approach could facilitate and fast track the commitment made in 2008 to 'promote and monitor fair and effective representation of women on senior committees and external bodies to which the university nominates members or representatives.'

**Gender equity and equality in higher education leadership is an ideal for which we should be prepared to commit effort and resources as we transform our institutions.**

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