
Women Leadership Experiences in Higher Education Institutions: The Context of South Africa

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Abstract - The percentage of women who have managed to climb the ladder to leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) has improved. This has been proven by the research that has been done on women leadership in higher education institutions in South Africa and ultimately to the rest of the world. However, the current status is that men still dominate leadership positions over their female counterparts in HEIs. In response to the ongoing underrepresentation, the researcher employed a documentation analysis method, analyzing documents on strategies that have assisted women leaders to navigate the challenges to leadership positions in HEIs. Hence, the aim of this qualitative paper was to present some of the alternatives that have been proven to be useful for women to advance to leadership in HEIs, drawing from the experiences of women who are already occupying leadership positions in HEIs in South Africa and ultimately to the rest of the world. Lastly, this paper discovered that mentorship and professional development for women played an essential role for women to advance to leadership in HEIs.

Keyword: Leadership, women leadership, higher education, experiences

1. Introduction

Although, statistics indicate that women are advancing to leadership, but the current status is that men still dominate leadership positions over women in higher education institutions, and this imbalance has implications for women's career progression, (Maki, 2015). Scholars around the globe have conducted research on factors affecting career progression of women, and they have identified a numbers of factors hindering women, such as issues of access and climate that influence career advancement, (Allan, 2011). Even though institutions have designed policies aiming at fighting issues of gender parities within workplaces, the ongoing underrepresentation shows that these policies are not effective enough as these issues still affect women's progression to leadership positions. In response to the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions, one has reviewed literature on the experiences of women who are already in leadership positions, describing their journey to leadership, especially what assisted them and how did they overcome the challenges that most women encounter oftentimes.

2. Methodology

This paper adopted a documentary study review and analysis method of reviewing existing body of literature and research related to women leadership. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating published documents- both printed and electronic, (Bowen, G, 2009:1). Since the paper seek to analyze the journey of career progression of women to leadership, the published literature from sources such as journal articles and reports was extensively reviewed to discover the experiences of women to leadership positions and the strategies that assisted them climb the ladder to

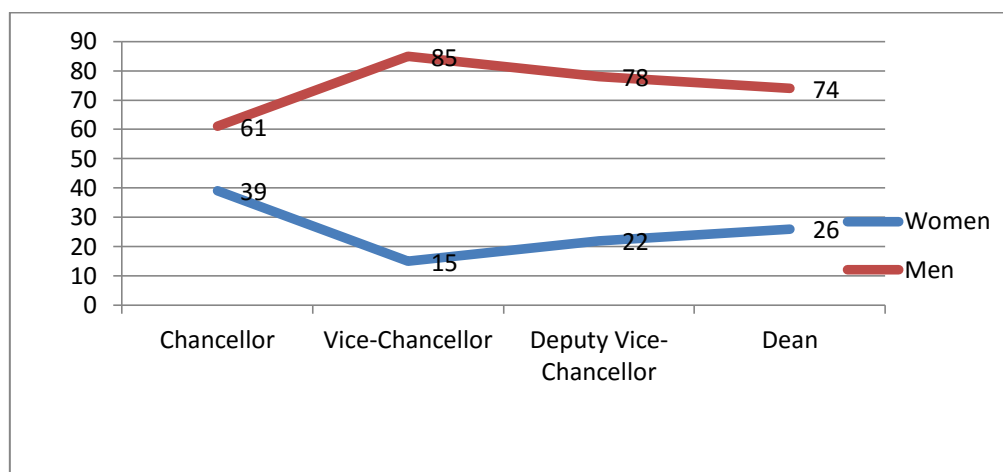
leadership in HEIs. Corbin and Strauss (2008), state that document analysis requires that literature be examined and interpreted in order to elicit the meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. Although, the strategies that have been described by women leaders in HEIs prove to have played a pivotal role while navigating their way to the top, but exploratory and case studies are needed as a follow up to empirically verify these findings.

3. Results and Discussion

Women leadership in South African higher Education Institutions

The graph below shows, there is a major disparity in number of women in leadership positions in South African public universities. Although, there are many women Chancellors than Vice-Chancellors, the main decision making role as Vice-Chancellor is still represented more by men than women. Women only constitute 15% of Vice-Chancellor roles in South African institutions.

FIGURE 1: Share of women and men in leadership positions in the 26 South African public universities, 2016.



Source: Bwasa women in leadership census, 2017

Comparing statistics on the status of women in higher education from the past 20 years up to now, there has been a progress of women advancing to leadership positions in higher education, (Awung 2015:44). This is simply because, both the South African government and institutions fighting for gender parity in the workplace, have developed legislative frameworks aimed at ensuring fair promotion and practice in the workplace, (Gabriela, Dan and Antonia, 2013:3). In 2017, Bwasa South Africa Women in Leadership Census did a survey on women leadership in higher education South African. The survey results concluded that male dominate women when it comes to leadership positions in higher education institutions, with men occupying 74% and women at 26%, (Businesswomen’s association of South Africa, 2017:77). These results indicated a drastic progress compared to 1998, where women occupied only 11% in leadership positions in higher education South African, (de la Rey, 1998). Although, there have been such progress in terms of women advancing to leadership positions in higher education South Africa, but these results are not enough as there still too much gap between women and their male counterparts. Williams (2017: 31), believes that equity has not been attained in South African universities. Williams conclude after conducting a study on factors affecting the progression of women in one of the South African universities.

As thus, this paper aimed at hearing the voices and the experiences of women who are already in leadership positions in higher education institutions.

3.1. Decelerating factors that affect women to leadership positions in higher education

3.1.1 Role of Conflict

When women are asked about one of the factors that affect their career progression, they often discuss the challenge of balancing workload and taking care of the family. According to Zacker (2004, as cited in Maki 2015:19), having to take care of the family and maintaining a career simultaneously is more like having two full-time jobs, and occupying a leadership position comes with too much workload. Hence, one of things that women who are in leadership positions experience is having to balance too much workload and taking care of the family at the same time. Possibly, it might be the same case in South Africa since in the past years working women were viewed as immoral and unfeminine objects of pity, until the South African government introduced a Bill of Rights in 1996 guaranteeing all citizens equal treatment and right to work, (Awung 2015:1). However, it is an undeniable fact that in South Africa, the stereotypes still exist even today, the workplace is actually a sphere of men.

3.1.2 Pipeline Problem

The history of South Africa has a strong influence in today's present situation. In South Africa there are more educated men than women, especially black women. Mathur-Helm (2005), states that women have always been in the second stratum of the society in the Republic of South Africa. During apartheid era in South Africa, women were not allowed to further their studies, only the few fortunate ones had an opportunity to go to varsity and obtain tertiary education. Even after 1994 when South Africa got freedom, but still there were other factors which puts women behind. Many scholars have written on these factors, (De Varies 2012; Moodie, 2010 and De la Rey 2009). These factors affecting career progression of women causes a scarcity of qualified women to occupy leadership positions in South African higher education institutions. For instance, in 2016, the department of higher education and training in South Africa, lamented saying that there is a huge shortage of female PhD holders and female professors in South Africa.

3.1.3 Mentoring

Research has proven that mentoring significantly contributes in the advancement of women in executive leadership positions both in public and private institutions, (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). According to Kram & Isabella (1985:111 as cited in Gipson, 2017: 41) mentorship is a relationship between two or more people in which the mentor is having sufficient experience and provides all kinds of support needed by the person who have insufficient experience but high potential to become a good leader. Mentoring is a key component for women pursuing leadership positions in higher education, because a mentor breaks a person out of his/ her comfort zone. Although there are other people to comfort the person aspiring leader in workplace but a good mentor will always be the one that encourages the aspiring leader to keep improving and pushes him/her into new experiences. Ballenger (2010), interviewed women on components, which contributed in their successful leadership experiences, and the women found mentoring from both outside and inside the work place as a major component. These results are inline with those of the women who were interviewed by Montas-Hunter (2013), they stated that mentorship played a pivotal role in their leadership career, which made them enjoy the experience. On the contrary, De la Rey (2009), explored women's perspective on women leadership in higher education institutions at one of the universities in South Africa, and majority women are in leadership positions stated that there is a lack of mentoring within the university, which makes it hard for them to perform in their designated tasks.

The findings of De la Rey (2009) are inline with the findings of Williams (2017), who also interviewed women who are in executive positions in one of the South African universities, Williams explored the challenges these women encounter, one of the women replied as follows:

“When a person gets in to a leadership position, the problem of mentorship becomes critical. Sometimes we have so much work to do that we don’t have the opportunity to help. We need to change that if we want to change the gender dimension or gender agenda of higher education institutions in South Africa. We owe it to ourselves and the next generation, because we need to create spaces that amplify the voices of those women on the margins of higher education.” Williams (2017:73)

3.1.4 Stereotyping/ Gender Bias / Discrimination

Eagly and Karau (2002), define gender stereotypes as culturally shared beliefs that dictate expectations about how both men and women are and how they are expected to behave. In South Africa, patriarchal legacy still remains, till today. As the researcher has mentioned above that, in the past, women were not allowed to work. The workplace was said to be a sphere of men and women’s job was just to take care of the family at home. Co’rdova (2011), state that, traditionally women have held roles inside home. Although the situation has changed today, but gender stereotypes are still visible in the workplace, particularly in South African higher education institutions, (De la Rey, 2016). In a qualitative study by Timmers, Williamsen and Tidjens (2010), even women who have successfully managed to advance to leadership in HEIs they mentioned experiencing gender bias as they were progressing in their career journey. Madsen and Airini (2012), in their study they pointed out how academic institutions are structured based on gender and the enforcement of patriarchal structure, and the devaluation of female faculty interest. This was to bring to our attention the naturally structured gender bias in higher education institutions. According to Haake (2010:3), women experience academic culture as being more masculine with harder career conditions and much completion, so they view the system as more suitable for men than for themselves. The aforementioned points serve as a proof that the women still encounter stumbling blocks when they are trying to advance themselves in higher education, which brings a necessity for an analysis on the journey of women who have managed to maneuver their way to the top in higher education institutions.

3.2 Increasing the number of women leaders in higher education institutions

3.2.1 Professional development for women in Higher Education

Women are often not given the same opportunity as their male counterparts to attend professional development trainings, (Wood Dear 2016:49). As it is evident in the findings of different studies on what has assisted some of the women to succeed in their career path. Individuals with leadership potential are usually groomed at an early stage for a future position either through development programs or additional education. Mentorship has been consistently identified as a strategy to assist women who seek to advance to leadership. This means that, higher education institutions have a responsibility to train and provide professional development programs, which will prepare them to be leaders in future. These programs may also assist other women who are aspiring future leaders. Eddy and Ward (2015), state that professional development can provide opportunities to improve the skills such as interpersonal skills and be abreast about present issues affecting the industry and also develop a career profession plan. This means that, professional development is another strategy to develop leadership skills that will be of good use for women when climbing the career ladder. Inline with this, Jackson and O’Callaghan (2009) conducted an interview with 91 women who were college presidents to found out how many participated in professional development programs. The results from the interviews showed that 72.5% of the 91 female presidents participated in one or more professional development program(s).

This brings one to a conclusion that, professional development can assist women to enhance their professional skills and improve women's career. To the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, especially senior leadership positions, institutions should assist with professional development by identifying female candidates, and motivate and provide them with professional experiences that will support progression in HEIs.

3.2.2 Mentorship

Mentorship is a key element in the advancement of individuals. In a study of female college administrators looked at career paths, mentorship, professional development, and barriers to career advancement discovered that women who have been mentored are more likely to attain high level of career advancement than their counterparts who have not been mentored, (Smith et al., 2012). Park (2013), supports this by saying that even women with outstanding credentials find it difficult to advance to leadership of an institution when you don't have a mentor or a coach.

This implies that mentorship plays a vital role for career women's career advancement. Institutions have a task to ensure mentorship for career women who aspire to be leaders in the near future. This will not only assist in closing the current huge gap between women and their male counterparts when it comes to representation in leadership positions in HEIs, but this will also assist the institutions they cannot succeed without sustaining excellent and diverse leadership. In addition, developing potential future leaders through mentorship will improve the number of women leaders in HEIs, because they will be more women leaders to mentor other aspiring women since lack of mentorship is one of the chief reasons there is a lack of women in leadership positions.

3.2.3 Support in the workplace

When occupying a leadership position in an organization, support is very essential. In a study by Eddy (2009), women stated that the support within the workplace influenced the way they approached their leadership roles. This kind of support makes it easy for women to perform their leadership tasks. In addition, in a study that was conducted by Gill and Jones (2013) and Montas-Hunter (2012), women stated that the endless support from family and workplace has been a key influence in their success, and has made them enjoy the experiences and women in leadership positions. Campbell, Mueller and Souza (2010), assets that women in senior leadership positions often face attitudes and not receive sufficient support within the workplace, because they are considered not as good enough or committed compared to their male counterparts. Alvesson and Billing (2009:157), argues that leadership positions are more challenging for women than men. Women face problems such as communication on the job and lack of support from the superiors. In a qualitative study by Malik (2011), on the factors influencing the emergence of female leadership at higher education level in Pakistan, through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten women who are administrators. The study found that 60% of the respondents were not demystified with the level of support they receive in the workplace. In addition, these women further emphasizes the importance of support in the workplace. The aforementioned findings prove the essentiality of support from the workplace on women's career advancement. This implies that institutions should start providing support systems for career women, if they really want to see women advancing in a same pace as their male counterparts.

4. Conclusion

Mao Zedong once said, "Women hold up half the sky," emphasizing that women are as capable as men, and worth of equal status and opportunities. In any organization where both male and females equally participate, is it easy and quick to realize the set goals and objectives. The involvement of

females in leadership positions and decision-making improves the institutions' performance, because of one prominent reason, which is the style of leadership that women exercise in the institution, (Women Matter 2007:1, as cited in Havis, A. 2013:29). Women's presentations in positions of power and decision making is considered significant for four major reasons: for social justice that advocates for equity within institutions, for equity and parity that focus on issues of gender pay and opportunity gap; for enhancing the quality of leadership that can be facilitated by diverse practice; and lastly, for economy and business, as organizations with equality and inclusion are looked upon, (Burkinshaw, 2015). In addition, apart from the aforementioned major reasons, women leadership in higher education institutions is of paramount importance, because the more women occupying leadership positions, the more women will be motivated and mentored. Wood Dear (2016:49) and Maki (2015: 23), noted that one of the factors that affect the progression of women to leadership positions in higher education, is lack of mentorship.

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