# TENACITY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: A HIGHER EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

# LWANDO MDLELENI, LINDOKUHLE MANDYOLI AND JOSE FRANTZ

**Abstract:** Countries have embraced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide. SDG 4 is the education goal that aims to ensure inclusivity and equity in education. On the other hand, SDG 5 aims to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. In the higher education sector, it is evident that although massive strides have been made to address gender balance there still seems to be gender inequality that is evident especially for women in leadership positions. 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. This article looks at the case for gender transformation and policies that advocate for social justice and gender equality in higher education. We then report on the current state of women leaders in the higher education sector and the continued challenges they face. In looking at possible solutions, it is important to understand the debate around gender dynamics and the argument of inclusion versus representation. As we continue to address the issue of gender equity in higher education, we must consider the context in which we place people, especially women and also be aware of the institutional culture and how it contributes to promoting or negating gender equity.

**Key words**: Higher Education; Development Education; Gender Equity; Gender Equality; Transformation; Social Justice; Gender inequality; and Women.

#### Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have clearly been articulated to highlight the need to address gender inequality and empowerment through SDG 5 and, specifically, to address gender disparities in education in SDG 4. In a recent UNESCO (2021) report titled 'Women in higher education: has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities?', there are still some key challenges despite the advances made. The report highlights that there has been a definite shift in terms of enrolment and access by females to the higher education sector. The report indicates that we need to realise that equal access does not necessarily mean that there are equal opportunities in all areas of society for women. One of the key areas highlighted is that at the senior levels of academia and decision making in higher education, women remain underrepresented. According to Callister et al. (2006), women have progressed well in terms of educational attainment. A report by Naidu (2018) highlighted that in South Africa with respect to universities in 2016 only 27.5 per cent of professorial posts were occupied by women and at lecturer level, women were represented by 56.6 per cent. Thus, while there are more women than men at lecturer level, the same is not true for more senior levels.

In South Africa, the struggle for social equality has always been at the root of the revolution for a democratic South Africa. The constitution of South Africa promises all South Africans a society founded on democratic values and social justice amongst others. Focusing on social justice, gender equality is one of the fundamental principles enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the South African constitution. The principle of equality not only upholds and protects women 's rights, but it also unambiguously forbids discrimination on the premise of gender (South African Constitution, 1996).

Likewise, the issue of gender inequality remains a present and persistent challenge in South African higher education. Higher Education Institutions have a social obligation to equip people with the intellectual dimensions necessary to pursue national development plans, but individual country data in Africa illustrates that women endure to be under-represented at all levels of HEIs (Forum of African Women Educationists [FAWE], 2015).

FAWE (Ibid.) asserted that African universities are often male-dominated. Gender inequity in HEIs is a persistent phenomenon in the continent.

This imbalance is a result of institutional frameworks, which, having largely been male dominated spaces, are not sensitive to the needs of women and consequently exclude women from decision-making spaces, significant roles and academic excellence (Zulu, 2016). Although policies to widen participation have been implemented in South African higher education since 1994, inequality of achievement persists in universities. A recent article highlighted that women are still underrepresented in the higher education sector in South Africa despite changes to laws and policies over years (Akala, 2019). Thus, the aim of this article is to engage with the notion of gender equality in higher education and to what extent transformation and equity has been implemented. The golden thread throughout this article is the issue of gender equality. Furthermore, the article looks at how development education (DE) can tackle gender inequality through implementing transformative educational approaches.

## The case for gender transformation and policies advocating for social justice and gender equality in higher education

Higher education in South Africa has undergone significant transformation within a policy framework that speaks of gender equity and has been the focus of policy-makers since the inception of democracy. During the apartheid period human rights were unequally enjoyed by a minority. Higher education adopted the apartheid ideology and segregated people along racial, social class and gender lines. However, with the post-1994 democratic dispensation, higher education went on a transformation trajectory which had the objective of redressing the injustice by opening up spaces that were previously exclusive to a particular race group, social class or gender type (Zulu, 2016).

Consequently, the focus of higher education policies paid special attention to redress and social justice. The White Paper on South African Department of Education (1997) on transformation in higher education aims to address past injustices that were intensified through race, gender, social class, disability and other forms of discrimination. Though we can revel in the

gains made to advance the position of women in South Africa, it is important to recognise that, more than two decades of democracy on, there is more that needs to be attained. In 1996, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), was established in terms of Section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Its intention was to endorse gender equality, development and attainment of gender equality. Yet, the CGE 2019 report shows that, even though the nation has managed to progress in attaining the goals of gender equality and transformation through numerous legislative and policy frameworks, the enactment of these policy and legislative frameworks, including enabling relevant state organisations to promote gender equality and equity, has been delicate (CGE, 2019).

Gender equity is a national imperative in South Africa and this is pronounced as crucial in the constitution and supported by a gender equity legislative framework and legislative framework for women's empowerment. This, with the remarkable collection of equity legislation and policies is evidence of the priority given to gender equity in South Africa. However, the question that we are engaging with in this article is, has policy been applied effectively to achieve gender equity in higher education?

At the national level, the 1997 Higher Education Act provided for the establishment of institutional forums at universities to promote transformation; and a national oversight committee was established to oversee this work. Increasing female representation in all levels of higher education was seen as critical to increasing equality in the field of higher education and research. The uneven female representation in higher education is due to barriers that women face in the workplace. Progress towards gender equality in academia remains a pipe dream for many female academics where women are by far still underrepresented. Many obstacles remain in universities that, if adequately addressed, may pave the way for female academics to assume leadership positions.

Ramohai (2016) asserted that, as a nation, we have made momentous steps in progressing gender equity at all levels, and women have made important advancement in the workplace. There has been an important growth

in women employed in academic and administrative posts and overall there are more women than men working in South African higher education institutions (Ibid.). However, a fact sheet on 'Gender Parity in Post-School Education and Training Opportunities' published in 2021 by Khuluvhe and Negogogo specified that:

"there are more males than females employed in academic positions (i.e. as instruction and research staff); women remain at the lower levels; they remain under-represented in science, technology and engineering and in senior executive and leadership".

Gender inequalities remain in our universities and studies have demonstrated that in all parts of academia female staff remain excluded, sidelined, discriminated against and victimised (Sadiq et al., 2019; Kiguwa, 2019).

#### Women as leaders in higher education in South Africa

The full participation of women in leadership at all levels of decision-making is essential to unlocking transformational change (Sadiq et al., 2019; Kiguwa, 2019). It is the expectation that the SDGs will serve as a vehicle to guide different sectors to provide opportunities to support women to fully and equally participate in leadership positions. It is envisaged that if we provide women with the opportunities to become transformative leaders then they can build on their experience and impact other women leaders. If they open the way for more women to emerge as leaders, then progress towards eventual gender parity in leadership and decision-making will occur. A study conducted by Brown (2005) highlighted that women leaders are willing to serve as mentors for other women so that they can help them understand the role they seek to obtain and empower them to attain the necessary knowledge and skills for the position.

We are, however, cognisant of the fact that climbing the leadership ladder is not always easy for women (Ahrens, Landmann and Woywode, 2015). Literature in the global context highlights that women in educational leadership need to consider factors such as the sociocultural environment, historical, economic and political contexts. McNae and Vali (2015) in a study

exploring women's leadership experiences in a higher education context highlighted that women continue to face numerous barriers. These barriers include, but are not limited to, the male dominant location of power in the workplace as well as systemic challenges within existing university structures. Women must adopt male standards of leadership, as women are often viewed as emotional and subjective; whereas, men are viewed as rational and objective and if they want to be taken seriously, they need to act out of character (Vinkenburg et al., 2011). In most instances, women must fit into leadership positions that have been defined by and for males

Poltera (2019) highlighted that as we explore the role of women leaders, we need to consider the African context and culture differently from western countries and consider that mainstream leadership theories cannot be generalised to the African context. Poltera further highlights that there is a need to embrace the complexity and diversity of women in leadership positions. There is thus a need to understand women's leadership in the various contexts across the continent. As leadership is found to be contextual (Strachan et al., 2010) and situational (Harris, 2008), it becomes important for us to understand what the facilitators and the barriers are for women to become effective leaders. Strachan et al (2010), highlight that there is thus a need for contextual research so that specific strategies can be developed for women accessing academic leadership positions in developing countries. Research on regional differences would help provide a more accurate picture of the experiences of African women leaders (Amayah and Haque, 2017). More poignantly, an assessment of the complexity of gender dynamics in society generally and higher education specifically will help craft pointed strategic interventions.

### Gender dynamics: inclusion versus representation

An important subcategory of the general development of scholarship and policy frameworks dealing with gender equality and transformation is the inclusion versus representation dichotomy. In this section we outline the importance of viewing these two as distinct, but inextricably related categories in the gender transformation project. This is done to avoid conflating the two

concepts, at the risk of a stagnation of gender transformation targets in the higher education sector. Ultimately, the objective is to understand these two terms objectively and not in the normative way they are used to window dress the gender transformation agenda. Inclusion being the gradual, targeted and meaningful identification, equipping, support and prioritisation of capable women in the higher education sector. While representation means the ripple effect that meaningful inclusion has on changing the narrative of gender equity in the sector. In other words, more women being represented in strategic areas of higher education, increases representation and the reality for other young women to see the possibilities for the future.

### Beyond affirmative action to gender equity

The higher education sector generally reflects the problematic gendered power relations in South Africa. The democratic era has – with an intention for redress and hastening social transformation – employed a number of policy frameworks to ensure a more just and equitable society; affirmative action is amongst the most contentious of these policies. According to Akala (2019: 3) 'affirmative action is a policy intervention that aims at redressing imbalances in areas such as education, workplace and political participation'. Reflecting on the general impact of the affirmative action policy, Akala (2019) concedes that although some gains have been made in the increase of the number of women in the sector, a lot still needs to be done. Compounding this bleak reality, is the rate of completions, successful migration from post-graduate student to academics and senior leadership positions remain imbalanced on the gender scale (Akala, 2019).

Strikingly, these efforts of the democratic state fall short of addressing some of the ubiquitous regressive gender imbalances, regardless of the amount of money and policy development invested in it (Nkenkana, 2015). Writing from a decolonial feminist perspective, Nkenkana argues the inextricable relation between social transformation and the emancipation of women (Ibid.). According to Nkenkana, the fundamental cause for a weakened gender transformation project in Africa is the global power structure. She argues that for Africa to make inroads on gender transformation, it needs to

reconstitute its society against and beyond the imagination of the problematic global patriarchal order (Nkenkana, 2015). Echoing a similar point, prominent decolonial feminist Maria Lugones locates patriarchy and its attended ills such as gender inequality within a matrix of the coloniality of power (Lugones, 2010). Essentially, viewing the problems of gender inequality as historically rooted in global power relations, and presently negotiated in the context of snail-paced gender transformation. As such, the interventions of Nkenkana (2015) and Lugones (2010) provoke a need to reconstitute and refresh the parameters of the debate on gender equity in higher education. To do this we must attend to the overt and covert power dynamics that give rise to gender inequality in the first place, and how they reproduce themselves in spite of a constitution as progressive as the South African one.

Appreciating the complexity of engendering gender transformation in the sector while existing in an untransformed - discouragingly slowly transforming - society, Sturm (2006) considers the challenges of those spearheading university transformation. Can universities transform beyond their society? Or must this transformation be in tandem? If so, what are the implications for the practicability of this process in the context of varying social circumstances? Sturm (2006) appreciates gender inequality as a structural problem embedded in the relations of power in society. This view resonates with the interventions made by Akala (2019), which reflect the possible reasons why the gender imbalances persist in higher education. Thus, thinking against the grain of policies that superficially increase representation, while not systematically creating the conditions for meaningful inclusion, is important if we are to have better prospects of gender transformation in higher education. Essentially, there needs to be an unsettling of a hegemonic view of gender relations in higher education. But who is to do this, and what gives them the authority?

### Inclusion, representation or both?

An asymmetrical power relation is implicit in the whole process of 'inclusion'; who gets to include, from within? This is an important question, not because answers to it are immediately accessible but because it recognises that the

problem is an imbalance in power. As a way to understand the relationship between exclusion and representation, we look at a policy and legislative instrument of gender quotas that originated in the Latin American region (Htun, 2016). Addressing gender imbalances in public service, Argentina introduced the quota system that saw seats legally be reserved for women (Ibid.). This increased the participation of women in politics, and the gender quotas grew became a global phenomenon (Ibid.). However, it is also noteworthy that the imbalance remained in terms of general decisions and policy direction, with the men citing the inexperience and lack of capacity of the beneficiaries of a gender quota (Ibid.). This brings us to the idea that representation does not always mean inclusion, while the inverse also holds true.

Thus, a joined-up rather than distinct reading of these two concepts is helpful to drive us closer to gender equity. A balanced and careful implementation of policy that ensures inclusion and representation with equal significance avoids the typical window dressing that normative patriarchal notions of inclusion usually entail. Without representation you cannot engender confidence and belief in young women that they deserve and can be stakeholders of consequence in higher education. Whilst, without inclusion, you cannot have the representation to begin with. Exacerbating the challenge of inclusion, the South African case presents an intricacy in that its historical race configuration, which persists today, demands us to examine race and gender in close proximity.

The nature of social contradictions in South Africa are complicated by the unique historical circumstances. Colonialism had a gendered, classed and racial impetus to it. Explaining the genesis of racism in South Africa, Magubane (1996) argues that racism stems from the economic drive of colonialism to conquer a people so that they can take their land and force them into labour. This logic can apply to gender, but not without gaps, that the domestication of women's labour as 'duty' and not seen as work is what prioritises the contribution of men in society, and relegates women in the social hierarchy. Moreover, the apartheid state in South African brought a new dimension to race relations, which have a direct implication for gender

inequality. For instance, the stark racial categories in South Africa meant that black, coloured, Indian and white women did not experience gendered oppression in the same way (Littrell and Nkomo, 2005). Looking at the American example Conaghan (2000) argues that feminist movements and proponents of gender transformation should guard against essentialist positions that view the subordination of women, across all races, as a homogenous experience. She argues that the varying social hierarchies within the racial contours of women meant that a nuanced approach to gender transformation was needed. Indeed, in South Africa this is true; owing to its history of gender, class and racial discrimination. Hence, we maintain that while all women are oppressed, some are more oppressed than others. Thus, a gender transformation process must attend to the historical imbalances of women's oppression as well. Ultimately, gender equity in the higher education sector of the South African context must pay attention to the race question, not to embolden its problematic existence as a social category, but to acknowledge and address the social stratification it has imposed on our present reality.

## Advancing the agenda for gender equity through development education

Development education (DE) principles have unswervingly underlined the significance of encouraging the voices of the marginalised and ensuring that those that are directly affected are heard and understood (Andreotti, 2008). Skinner, Blum and Bourn (2013) assert that development education can be viewed as an education of global justice, because its interrogative and critically shrewd nature unavoidably advances a yearning amongst learners to bring about positive social change.

DE as a pedagogical method has a potential to address the challenges of gender inequality in the higher education setting. A gender-responsive pedagogy addresses this by assimilating gender into the content of teaching and learning including curriculum design and approaches to assessment (Chapin and Warne, 2020).

Chapin and Warne (2020) suggests that DE addresses gender related injustices through delivery of gender responsive pedagogy that speaks to social

norms and power imbalances, in the case of higher education this can be achieved by working with faculties to build an awareness of gender stereotypes and biases in their teaching and learning, and, from there, explore new practices.

DE espouses a pedagogical approach that permits us to contest our own norms and come to understand problems from wide-ranging positions. It affords us an opportunity to acquire knowledge that can be used to challenge social exclusion and discrimination and to aid us in promoting progressive social change (Kumar, 2008).

#### Conclusion

The South African constitution serves as a scope for stimulating gender equality in the country. Numerous policies have been pronounced to safeguard gender equality and equity in higher education. Gender inequity is one of the fundamental factors for stifled progress, particularly so in higher education and women have a massive contribution to make in the area of higher education. However, their role continues to be constrained, undervalued and misapprehended as they continue to be regarded inferior to their male counterparts (Mhlanga, 2013). As academic leaders, we have the opportunity to change perceptions and we have a duty to create an enabling environment for future women leaders.

Data from the Council for Higher Education (2017) shows that of the 3,040 senior managers in higher education, only 44.76 per cent are females. Female academics formed 29 per cent of professors, 41 per cent of associate professors and 46 per cent of senior lecturers. However, at the level of lecturer and junior lecturer, the majority were women. Subsequently, this data highlights two fundamental issues. Firstly, it shows that although women make up the mainstream of the staff, their representation at executive levels is relatively truncated.

Secondly, these statistics overlook the realities and lack deep interrogation and understanding of the higher education environment that women work in, which remains conducive for systemic gender prejudice. This has resulted in the failure of higher education to implement transformation and address the way in which gender injustice remains persistent in higher education. We need to guard against this becoming entrenched during the pandemic as the pandemic has illustrated starkly the inequities that still exist.

To conclude, as a pedagogical process, DE is a mode to initiate and respond to transformation. It allows us to take a proactive obligation to promote conducts and behaviours that can change organisational cultures and norms. Owing to its long history of instigating transformative educational methods with an international breadth, DE can make a strong contribution to achieving gender equity in higher education.

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**Lwando Mdleleni** is working at the University of the Western Cape as a Senior Researcher in the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Innovation. He is particularly focusing on Social Innovation and Development. He holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Institute for Social Development in the University of the Western Cape.

**Lindokuhle Mandyoli** is currently a PhD candidate at the University of the Western Cape, in the department of Political Studies. He currently holds a fellowship with the Centre for Humanities Research, a critical Flagship in African Humanities; where he is pursuing his research on hegemony and ideology in the postcolonial state.

**Jose Frantz** is the DVC Research and Innovation at the University of the Western Cape. Her primary research focus is in the area of health professions education and faculty development, University of the Western Cape.