

5th Motsepe Foundation Gender Equality, Wellness and Leadership Summit
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Introduction

It is indeed a great privilege and honour to be invited to address you today at the 5th Motsepe Foundation Gender Equality, Wellness and Leadership Summit. We are meeting at this event in unusual times amidst a global pandemic and I urge you to continue following the social distancing and masking guidelines to keep yourself and others safe. I am humbled to be part of such of an illustrious panel and event, that is being attended by women who have incredible talent, phenomenal leadership abilities, and praiseworthy attributes such as resilience, humility, grit and courage.

As I set out to share some insights on women in leadership within a higher education context, I wish to preface this with my own philosophy that leadership is essentially an act of service, which marshals a totality of experiences, gained along the way in very diverse circumstances which then become a set of learned behaviours and ways of being - knowledge, skills, attributes - that one brings to the role. It does not matter, in my view, where your path has previously taken you or how long it took you to achieve your career aspirations. What matters is the capacity to use all the lessons to be the best you can be in service to those you are leading. In the words of well-known Nigerian author and feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *“Our histories cling to us. We are shaped by where we come from.”*

Despite the tremendous value women can bring to leadership in higher education, they are still under-represented in the sector in South Africa and on the African continent.

Representation of women in higher education leadership

Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA) reports that 43 percent of people with tertiary education in the continent are women and only 28 percent have formal sector jobs. The ESSA further claims that only 24 percent of the women work in the higher education sector in the region are female and only 2.5 percent of Vice-Chancellors are women¹. In the South African context, 23 percent of Vice-Chancellors are female - that is only 6 out of 26 public universities have women at the helm. This does not correlate with or depict a true reflection of South African demographics.

¹ Education Sub-Saharan Africa, 2020.

This is not in keeping with Goal 17 of the African Union Agenda 2063, which calls for accelerated efforts to close the gender equality gap. This is particularly pressing given that women and girls in Africa remain the majority of the poor, the dispossessed, the landless, the unemployed, those working in the informal sector, and those shouldering the burden of care.

Various challenges act as barriers to women occupying positions of leadership. I will speak to those that are most noteworthy in the higher education sector.

Barriers to women occupying positions of leadership in academia.

Most notably, women within academia are often confronted by patriarchy and institutional cultures that seek to marginalise and silence them. These can be understood as micro aggressions within university spaces² that have over time become accepted as being the norm and are treated as determining factors to what is recognised, misrecognised, inclusive or exclusive within academia³.

Patriarchy within academia is perpetuated by the dominance of what Ramnund-Masingh and Seedat-Khan term as the “boys’ network” that deems who and what is acceptable for women in academia. They argue that:

“...academics who align themselves and are in support of the boys’ network are awarded opportunities for sabbatical leave, research time, and considered first for promotions. The network has punished women who expect fairness and support from a research perspective...favoured female incumbents are supported and put forward for promotion. The demeanour of these successful and supported women was that of someone who did as they were told, someone who performed tasks without question, and someone who executed duties by sacrificing family and personal time. These appointments achieved success by surreptitiously supporting the old boys’ network”⁴.

These type of networks are an obstacle to women gaining access to positions of influence to bring about transformation in the sector. In addition to patriarchy, black women within academia face a double disadvantage through experiences of being isolated, ostracised and being perceived as tokens of transformation unworthy of the positions they occupy. This is especially the case within Historically White Universities where black women are subjected to othering, questioning and

² Keet, 2015. Institutional Cultures/Environments

³ Seale, O., Fish, P., & Schreiber, B. 2021. Enabling and empowering women in leadership in South African universities - Assessing needs and designing a response, p1-2

⁴ Ramnund-Masingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020. Understanding the career trajectories of black female academics in South Africa: A case study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, p63

challenging their own beliefs and of others, irrespective of their competence and talent⁵.

This is highlighted in the report by the Department of Higher Education and Training Ministerial Task Team (MTT) on the *Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics*. This report observes that sexism and racism remains a present reality within the sector and females are challenged by patriarchal institutional policies and traditions that do not address gender inequality and gender roles that are prevalent in South Africa today⁶.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, women within higher education have been disproportionately affected by having to balance family responsibilities with work commitments while working remotely from home. Women in academia gained more responsibilities such as an increase in workload, mothers have had to balance child care and home schooling with work commitments, women lecturers have been acting as support structures for university students who are anxious about their studies and the challenges of learning remotely. In trying to balance all these commitments, women in academia have had to work longer hours, which has inevitably taken its toll on their health and wellbeing⁷. These multiple commitments will act as a further barrier to the progression of women into leadership positions in higher education as a result of the negative impact these would have had on the time available to women to maintain their research productivity and outputs.

As I move to conclude, it is important to explore ways in which the higher education sector can improve the representation of women in leadership.

Improving the representation of women in leadership in higher education

While progress has been slow, more women are occupying positions as deans and deputy vice-chancellors and this will create a wider pipeline of candidates for vice-chancellor positions. However, many senior women academics, deans and deputy vice-chancellors have indicated that they would be reluctant to take on the role of the vice-chancellor because it is perceived as overly managerial, administrative and political. There are many other reasons why women are not put forward or do not apply for more senior positions in their workplaces, including that they tend to underestimate their abilities⁸.

⁵ Prah, E. and Maggott, T. 2020. The role of feminisms in building a transformation framework for institutions of higher learning in South Africa, p527

⁶ DHET. 2019. Report of the Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics, p32

⁷ Bugan, D. 2020. New study probes COVID-19 impact on women academics

⁸ Muthwa, S. 2018. 16th HER-SA ACADEMY: Women in Leadership

Elena Witzeck recognises that *“we don’t need to change women; instead, we need to change the system”*⁹. Higher education institutions must work towards being gender-sensitive and inclusive by decisively identifying and addressing the root causes of gender inequality and discrimination, whether it is overt or subtle. In doing so, dedicated efforts need to be made to mainstream gender-sensitive pedagogies and content in university curricula. In addition, gender imbalances in decision making structures within higher education institutions (HEIs) need to be addressed to ensure that women leaders are in positions of influence and authority to bring about much-needed changes such as cultivating affirming, inclusive institutional cultures and policies, practices and systems which signal a zero tolerance for any forms of gender discrimination and exclusion¹⁰.

Patriarchy in all its manifestations must be addressed within universities to ensure that inequality is not perpetuated in any form. This can be achieved through applying a feminist perspective in conceptualising and reimagining the higher education sector to dismantle the structural elements that promote the oppression of women. Prah and Maggott¹¹ correctly observe that *“...for South Africa to move towards a project of epistemic emancipation, careful attention needs to be paid to learning how to unpick the entanglements of patriarchy within a democratic South African project.”* If we hesitate to do so, the transformation of universities will remain nothing but a pipe dream.

Attention also needs to be devoted to programmes that develop women in leadership, such as that of Universities South Africa the Women in Leadership (WiL) programme. This programme seeks to advance and empower women by addressing issues that challenge women in leadership within academia to enhance their access to the executive suites of higher education institutions¹². Furthermore, we need to replicate these programmes at institutional level to ensure that we significantly broaden the pool of talented women for leadership positions at all levels.

I would like to close with a few words of advice for women already in leadership and those who are aspiring to be leaders borne out of my own journey to leadership.

⁹ Witzeck, E. 2017. Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

¹⁰ Husu, L. What does not happen: Interrogating a tool for building a gender-sensitive university- Chapter 13, p166

¹¹ Prah and Maggott. 2020, pp. 530-531

¹² Seale, et al., 2021, p. 3

Concluding words of advice for women in academic leadership

Women in leadership positions in academia must be principled, ethical and be driven by long-term goals to inspire those who aspire to become leaders. The seeds of impactful leadership lie in honest, frequent personal reflection to focus our attention on the level where leaders have the most advantage, namely, the space of thinking and feeling, the stories we tell ourselves and others, and the unwritten rules that shape our thought patterns and conduct¹³.

We need to encourage more women to enrol for higher qualifications, especially the PhD, since this a minimum requirement for most senior positions. As we do so, we must also create the conditions for women to complete these qualifications in minimum time through enabling conditions such as sabbaticals and reduced teaching loads.¹⁴

Lastly, women must establish and build networks or supportive communities of practice, including mentorship programmes to ensure that women leaders learn from each other's experiences and strategies¹⁵. Such mentorship and networking should be focused on creating social change focused on career development and organisational success¹⁶.

As women in leadership, we need to be mindful of the incredible influence we have as role models for the younger generation of talented women who are looking for examples of success that inspire them to achieve their full potential in spite of the challenges and adversities they may be experiencing. As symbols of hope for these young women, we need to reach back and be willing to share our experiences of overcoming the hardships and challenges of the journey to leadership. In the words of Michele Obama, *"Don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own."*

I would like to reiterate my thanks to the Motsepe Foundation for placing their trust in me to share my insights as part of this panel.

¹³ Muthwa, S. 2018. 16th HER-SA ACADEMY: Women in Leadership

¹⁴ Mangolothi, B. 2019. Advancing gender equality in academia

¹⁵ Sealo, O., Fish, P., & Schreiber, B. 2021. Enabling and empowering women in leadership in South African universities - Assessing needs and designing a response, p7

¹⁶ Mate, S.E., Do, T., & McDonald, M. 2019. The barriers and enablers to career and leadership development: An exploration of women's stories in two work cultures, p860

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