

## **POLICY BRIEF**

### **PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Gender equality in higher education is of late getting increased focus and attention. Focus on gender equality in higher education reflects growing concerns that women in higher education are not getting equal treatment as their male counterparts. In the higher education sector there is less visibility of women in leadership positions, especially in key leadership positions like university vice chancellor and registrar.

Despite improvements in gender related matters in education, gender inequities are not fully addressed in the field of higher education. In 2007, only 24% of professors and associate professors in South Africa were women (Moodie, 2010). This number remained unchanged from 2004 when only 25% of females occupied the same positions. By the year 2009, South Africa had only 3 female vice-chancellors out of 23 vice-counsellors in the country and occupied only 5 of the 23 registrar positions in all universities in the country (Council on Higher Education Statics, 2009). This is without doubt a disturbing trend which takes place in the backdrop of more women now entering the field of higher education than before. In order to reverse this trend, there is need to elevate more women to positions of power in higher education. More attention is needed in terms of promoting female representation in higher education.

The brief proposes the following strategies

- Motivate women to seek leadership positions
- Confirm and affirm the status of women in the workplace
- Empower women in leadership skills
- Create networking opportunities for female academics
- Promote an all out advocacy for women academics

#### **CONTEXT**

Increasing female representation in all levels of higher education is seen as critical to increasing equality in the field of higher education and research. The need for equal opportunity for both men and women has consistently been affirmed by world bodies and national governments as paramount. For example, the 1995 UN platform for action adopted a 50-50 gender balance in all areas of society with particular emphasis on full participation in decision making. This was against the backdrop of unfair workplace practices that excluded women from decision making positions. If women are to enjoy equal opportunity in the workplace, such declarations need to be enforced in all areas including in universities. This is more important today in the light of many women now working in higher education than before. Due to the culture of excluding women in positions of power in higher education, many women do not see

the need nor the immediate benefit of seeking such positions. Rather, they just choose to work as lecturers or middle management positions like heads of department and deanship positions.

The uneven female representation in higher education is due to barriers that women face in the work place. Some scholars maintain that women might have shattered the glass ceiling in terms of gaining access into certain positions, but barriers still exist (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) and they manifest in different ways (Moorosi, 2010). That women experience more obstacles and often lag behind men in terms of career progression in higher education is not by chance. Some researchers claim that their experiences more often than not are influenced by personal, organizational and social factors (Moorosi, 2010: 1). These factors as a result force women to make choices between what could be good for them professionally against what is good for them personally. Equally important are institutional structures and cultures that too often exclude women or create unnecessary boundaries that they perceive as insurmountable and unattractive (Meyerson & Fletcher, 1999). Personal, organizational and social factors are usually woven so deeply into institutional structures and cultures in a way that is insurmountable for women to overcome. The time has come to promote gender equality in higher education and to remove the barriers to the recruitment and promotion of women academics to leadership positions in higher education.

### **Assumptions**

*Women are emotionless and weak.* Very often, women are seen as cold, insensitive and not as strong and as firm as men when it comes to decision making. This often results in both men and women not taking them seriously. More sadly, even though in most cases women outnumber men, rarely do they support their fellow women to occupy positions of power as they do men.

*There is general belief that women are demanding, be it at home or in the workplace.* This often culminates in female workers preferring to work with male leaders than female leaders who they perceive as more sensible, approachable and able to listen to them.

*Given a choice between careers and family life, women prefer family life to careers.* This has always been a fascinating comparison given that women enter careers to make a living just like men, not to mention that men also have families. The idea that women bear the sole responsibility of caring for families absolves men from their core responsibilities as parents. There is need to assign equal responsibility to both parents so that neither is short changed in terms of progression because of an ill perceived belief.

*There is no gender parity problem since women outnumber men in all most all workplaces.* This is a misconception because although it is true in almost every quarter of the education sector there are more women than men management in

every sector fails to reflect the proportion of women in the workplace, and more so in academia.

*Women's rights are protected because government pass act that pledge to protect women's rights.* The idea that the existence of an act of protection will translate to equal opportunities for all has thus proved farfetched. Women still experience discrimination and unfair treatment despite guaranteed protection by law. There is need to ensure that the law is applied proportionally in order to protect women's progression chances in the work place.

*Men are better candidates for leadership positions.* The general consensus is that men are better decision makers than women. The belief extends even to women who general respond positively to male bosses, support them than they do to female bosses. However, this has never been proven to be true. Having women leaders has the potential to unleash the flexibility and creativity needed to advance universities. It will allow workers to experience different leadership styles and perspectives. There is need to have a diversified leadership to advance differing views in the workplace.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

*Motivate women to seek leadership positions.* Active participation by female academics in all areas of their jobs will culminate in an interest to even play leadership roles in universities. This could be done by inviting female leaders to give motivational speeches to assure women that being a leader is an area they could venture into and excel. This could encourage women to also aspire to be leaders as well as to believe in themselves.

*Confirm and affirm the status of women in the workplace.* In the light of an assault criticism of women in general and women's leadership capabilities in particular, it has become imperative that the status of women in universities be affirmed and confirmed as equally important as men. Criticizing women for every move they make has the potential to discourage them from aspiring for higher office.

*Empower women in leadership skills.* Any job requires adequate training if those doing the job are to excel. There is need to extend leadership training to more female academics in order to give them the skills and power needed to lead.

*Create networking opportunities for female academics.* Networking has been regarded as an opportunity laden event. Opportunities for female academics to meet and share issues that affect them need to be created.

*Promote an all out advocacy for female academics.* It is important to recognize that if attitudes towards female leaders are to change, men have to get involved. It cannot just be women who advocate for female leadership in universities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Progress towards gender equality in academia remains a pipe dream for many female academics where women are by far still under-represented. Many obstacles remain in universities that, if adequately addressed may pave way for female academics to assume leadership positions. These revelations show that women still have a long way to go to reach gender balance in higher education. Taking academic power to gain equality is an important step for women across higher education institutions in South Africa. The discussion above support that such moves may be a step in the right direction. These issues have implications for the context within which women operate at work. It calls for varied and more subtle forms of mediation strategies. Basically in such a gendered environment, unions should intervene such a way that both women and men become empowered to be active participants that can also help them in the fight for gender equality. And that will enhance the chances of them overcoming gender bias.

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