Women in Academic Leadership in South Africa: Conventional Executives or Agents of Empowerment?

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> Although women represent more than half of the world population, there is no country in which women represent half, or even close to half, of the corporate managers (Adler & Israeli 1994).

Introduction

In South African there is a conscious and deliberate political commitment to address women's issues and participation in political participation and other social institutions. This commitment is expressed in the social policies of the ANC led government and the policies that universities such as KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) have adopted to effect and enhance their gender and equity promotion programmes. According to South African Statistics (2003) the average number of women in senior management is about 24% across all the current institutions of higher learning. In the corporate sector, it is about 20%, and the majority of the 20 percent is Caucasian (The South African Business Woman, South African Women in Corporate Leadership Census, 2005). These statistics indicate that South Africa faces a challenge when it comes to the participation and visibility of women in leadership both in academia and the corporate sector.

The ANC quota system is a strategy that ensures women representation and participation. At present South Africa ranks 15th in the world with regard to the number of women in parliament. In 2004, close to

thirty percent (29.8%) of members of parliament were women holding substantive portfolios such as foreign affairs, health, mineral and energy, agriculture and justice (Gouws 2004). In academia and the corporate sector a similar pattern is emerging.

This study is engaged with the understanding that institutions of higher education are going through a stage of transformation and identity-construction for themselves in the context of the country's nation building agenda and their own visions and missions, which talk strongly to transformation and redress. Part of the transformation and redress agenda expresses itself through the demographic profiles of students, staff and women in management and governance structures. The University of KwaZulu-Natal is experiencing an increase of the female students registering at undergraduate levels between 2004 and 2005. The female student population increased from 43% in 1990 to 57% in 2003; male student population decreased from 57% to about 43% during the same period. The total student population has doubled during the same period from 14,065 to 29,000 in 2003 but the academic staff remains inconsistent with the student profile. The distribution of academic staff by rank and race (2002) show that there are 3 African full Professors, 0 Coloured, 21 Indian and 149 White, 17 African Associate Professors, 1 Coloured, 5 Indian and 83 White. The majority are white and male. The pattern is similar with Deans of Faculties, and Heads of School and nationally when it comes to student and staff profile the pattern remains the same.

A similar trend of increase of the number of female academic staff is not emerging at the same rate when it comes to female academic staff. In relation to scenarios such as these the Education White Paper 3 (1997: 19) states:

> Human resources development for the higher education system is particularly important. Unlike the changing student profile, especially at undergraduate programmes, the composition of staff in higher education fails to reflect demographic realities. Black people and women are severely underrepresented especially in senior academic and management levels.

In this presentation the term black people incorporates Africans, Coloureds

and Indians. The Ministry of Education in particular and the government in general, through policy frameworks and research, advocate that women in academia engage in the merger, transformation and change agenda. These policy frameworks and the transformation agenda pose challenges for women in academia, such as taking the initiative in defining the agenda for retention, promotion, access to postgraduate programmes, research and teaching and learning resources, defining the capacity building activities within the institutions of higher learning and addressing gender inequality.

The current policy frameworks (Education White Paper 1997; White Paper on Science and Technology 1996; National Plan for Higher Education 2001) are extremely friendly and enabling to measures and initiatives that provide opportunities and environments to redress inequalities experienced by female academics. Through these policies the Ministry of Education clearly supports measures that prioritise access of black (designated groups) and women students to doctoral and post doctoral programmes. This initiative and focus on postgraduate admissions should be undertaken with an ongoing critical analysis of the decreasing number of learners going through the Grade 12 level. The causes of this decrease can be attributed to a number of factors, including the high rate of young persons dying and loosing parents at a tender age because of HIV/AIDS related conditions. The Ministry of Education also supports the re-engineering human resource units within higher education to ensure that they are an integral part of transformation and promotion of equality (Education White Paper 1997; White Paper on Science and Technology 1996). In addition to the transformation and empowerment policies there is a merger imperative among and between institutions of higher learning. The mergers that are taking place (2003 - 2006) are challenging mindsets, cultures, established practices and power bases in institutions of higher education, demanding best practices in both academic leadership and overall institutional leadership. Mergers, like all change processes, can result in (a) organized resistance formations attempting to guard fiercely the practices of the past, (b) loss of privileges that came with past practices (c) attempts to maintain the culture of exclusion in all its forms such as the isolation of promising female scholars, and (d) passive mentoring and subtle non-transference of competencies and skills. Weiler (2001) and Jansen (2001) shed some light on the thesis of the 'enduring politics of ambivalence' and the 'putative cost

of reform', i.e. what presents itself as organised resistance to the transformation of higher education in South Africa.

Another context that informs this presentation is that at this time in our history, academics must charge themselves with the mission and responsibility to create a higher education system that first and foremost serves the aspiration and needs of Africa, and participate in creating and engineering an educational tapestry that is rooted to the conditions of Africa (Makgoba & Seepe 2004). In post-colonial Africa higher education cannot be separated from the national development and social welfare agendas of individual African countries. Gendered and cultural inequities are some of the critical and fundamental social challenges that must be confronted by women as a force, if women are to be major players in higher education. Knowledge is a human construction that by definition, has a human purpose, and as such, cannot be sterile or neutral in its conception, formulation and development. The generation of knowledge is thus contextual in its nature (Makgoba 1997).

This paper takes the position that:

- women in academia have a substantive role to play in the change processes, management and decision–making in institutions of higher learning;

- women have potential and ability which can be translated into effective leadership;

- developing and enhancing women in leadership roles in institutions of higher learning requires a systemic plan, strategy and process that is driven by women in the academy;

- women should continue playing representative but more critically assume substantive roles especially when it comes to the fundamental purposes of higher education namely, research, teaching and learning contributing to what Evans (1999) refers to as human endeavour and the moving forward of the boundaries of knowledge. Women who excel in these scholarly activities serve as powerful role models.

- women must understand that when they assume leadership roles they will be confronted by hostility, isolation, lack of peer support, lack of mentorship, learning and interpreting the organizational culture on ones toes, understanding who is who in the organizational structure, power dynamics and alliances and sometimes harsh criticism from all genders, especially from women themselves. These challenges must not be an excuse for developing and living negative self-valuations or retreating from leadership responsibilities; the realities, challenges and expectations of the day in higher education, seem to require organisational hierarchies to be flattened, and less controlling and dominating styles of leadership. In other words, 'leadership should be an outcome of the necessary and reciprocal relationship among leaders and collaborators' (McMahon 2001:12). Women in leadership must be seen to be doing things differently, practicing the culture of inclusion, challenging the power status quo, rather than being co-opted into the dominant power structures, mentoring young up and coming scholars and adapting engaging leadership styles. If cultural patterns of dominance and hierarchy have kept women 'in place' then it is not enough to simply move some women up the hierarchy. Women assuming leadership positions have to challenge established patriarchal and hierarchical styles of leadership, redefine power relations rather than allowing themselves to be co-opted, navigate and take risks of advancing the transformation and reconstruction agendas;

- women are agents of transformation who must adopt a human rights and empowerment models of intervention and detach from the 'victim syndrome'. Part of this approach is initiating communication and dialogues with the male colleagues on communication as peers and equal partners in the leadership and governance structures of the institution, breaking the 'old boys network' rituals, gendered inequalities and the institutional transformation programmes;

- as Kerr (1995:103) asserts 'the modern university is a pluralistic institution – pluralistic in several senses in having several purposes, not one; in having several centres of power, not one; in serving

several clienteles, not one'. The tendency in South African universities is that the centres of power diversify and express themselves through male-male influential groupings, pockets of resistance amongst academics, which take racial or former institutions' (boys club) forms. Centres of power include schools within the institution, faculties, colleges, executive management, senates, and councils. Birnbaum states that governance and management within higher education must contend with multiple sources of control, unclear or competing missions, decentralized structures and constrained resources (Liscinsky, Chambers, & Foley 2001: 169). Gender mainstreaming and feminist approaches in this turbulent and dynamic pluralistic environment become essential. From the perspective of African feminism women have throughout history challenged oppressive gender relations (Mannathoko 1999). They continue to be better positioned to be part of the collective diverse leadership within transforming and merging institutions of higher education. They can no longer have the luxury of being seen as the 'fairer sex' but must define and position themselves as strong, powerful agents of change and development. In addition the policy frameworks protect women from becoming 'token' managers and leaders. Women are viewed as equal active partners in the changing climate and future of higher education.

- Women bring intellectual value to scholarship, research and to pedagogy.

Higher Education Policies and Transformation in South Africa

The Education White Paper 3 (1997) identifies five specific deficiencies in higher education in South Africa. These deficiencies provide imperatives for transformation and pose clear challenges to all, including women academics. This presentation confines itself to three specific deficiencies namely:

- 'There is an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity to students and staff along the lines of race, gender, class and geography. There are gross discrepancies in the participation rates of

students from different population groups, indefensible imbalances in the ratio of black female staff compared to whites and males, and equally untenable disparities between historically black and historically white institutions in terms of facilities and capabilities'.

• The governance of higher education at a system level is characterized by 'fragmentation, inefficiency and ineffectiveness, with too little co-ordination, few common goals and negligible systematic planning, democratic participation and the effective representation of staff and students in governance structures is still contested on many campuses' (p.3).

• On governance and transformation the White Paper 3 (1997) states 'the transformation of the structures, values and culture of governance is a necessity, not an option for South African higher education. The transformation of governance in the national system and its institutions is therefore a fundamental policy commitment of the Ministry of Education' (p.19).

The White Paper acknowledges that despite the negative consequences of the apartheid legacy, some higher education institutions have developed international competitive research and teaching capacities. Currently four South African universities are, according to the Shangai Jiao Tong Institute in China, on the list of the best 500 universities worldwide. These are the universities of Cape Town, Wits, Pretoria and KwaZulu-Natal (*City Press* 2005). One of the principles that undergirds transformation is equity. This principle has to be understood and unbundled in the context of the major deficiencies outlined in the White Paper.

The transformation and higher education policies therefore require or speak to leadership that is informed by interdependence of people, promotion of collective action, and the competencies and motivation of all those involved. In addition, the mindset of the leadership must demonstrate a confident buy-in into the constitution of the country, the change policies, the human rights approach, the national and societal priorities and the vision and missions articulated in the charters of the institutions of higher education. The transformation and changes that are taking place in higher education

require what Faris and Outcult (2001) term inclusive and process-orientated leadership. This type/style of leadership suggests a high level of interaction with a range of situational variables, confronting gender and traditional leadership stereotypes, managing the collective intelligence of the institution, eliminating collective dysfunction, managing conversion and diversion of academic programmes, facilitating academic and administrative components of the institution and intra–disciplinary interaction to achieve harmony and engaging with the various constituencies within the institution and good governance practices. Overall, the authors agree with the view that institutions of higher education require less hierarchical leadership arrangements. This is not advocating for anarchy. This view is informed by the current reality that these institutions require leadership for change, innovation and development. The leadership capacities for a team player and change agent academic will require, amongst other things the capacities outlined by Faris and Outcult (2001). These capacities are collaboration, lifelong learning and diversified perspective.

Theories on Leadership and Behavioural Styles

The priorities of the higher education agenda outlined in the policy documents (White Paper 3, Transformation of Higher Education 1997), outdate the theories of traditional or conventional styles of leadership. The current change imperatives are development, equity and transformation. Transformation includes amongst other things, demographical, curriculum and pedagogical transformation, building new layers of academic and administrative leadership and management, reviewing recruitment and retention, promotion policies and organisational practices. Women in the academy are challenged to jettison the deficit and marginality mode of operation and take initiatives in driving the change and rehabilitative processes within the institutions of higher learning. This includes addressing racism and gendered inequalities.

Leadership in a transforming environment requires certain types of behaviour from the leadership. The leadership must assume active engagement and dialogue with the different constituencies in the university, such as staff and other unions, institutional forums, completing postgraduates, new and younger academics. Conversations with constituents

promote participative leadership. Conventional styles of leadership are immediately compromised by the very nature of the issues at hand. In addition principles such as equity, accountability, explicitness in what Yeatman (1995) refers to as a new form of contractualism, managing and leading by consensus. Teamwork, collective decision making and collective intelligence inform the transformative style of leadership. Theories of the 20th Century such as the military, trait and great man theories are put to test by the challenges of the time (Bass 1981; Faris & Outcult 2001). In the military theory the leader controls people, shapes their behaviour and sometimes their thinking and takes responsibility for their actions. In the traits theory of leadership leaders are perceived to be born rather than produced within social environments. With the great man theory leaders are perceived as those individuals who are endowed with the ability to lead. These styles share common characteristics namely, that leaders are male, people become leaders by ascription and through Darwinist kinds of methods, and that leadership is about control and dominance. A specific observation made by Stogdill (Bass 1990) is the insensitivity and deficiency of the trait theory to situational variables. We take the view that this deficiency is present in all these theories of leadership, varying in degree and intensity.

The Twentieth Century saw the emergence of other theories of leadership such as Behavioural, Contingency and Influence theories. During the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, we began to see new paradigms and models of leaderships, flattened hierarchy and non-hierarchical models. For example authors such as Komives, Lucas and McMahon, (1998) posit that leadership is relational, a process where people gather attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good. In their view leadership is process-orientated, inclusive, empowering, purposeful and ethical. Bonous-Hammarth (2001:38) suggests a social change model that

> seeks to develop a conscious and congruent person who can collaborate with others, who can become a committed participant in shaping of the group common purpose, who can help to resolve controversy with civility and be a responsible citizen.

This model seems to be informed by the conflicts, diversity and conversion, and sometimes creative tensions brought about by change and shared leadership. This in our view is the type of leadership that allows people to engage with issues of equity, merger and transformation – all very contemporary in higher education.

Challenges Facing Women in Leadership
The challenges facing women in academic leadership and management will be discussed under two headings, endogenous and exogenous factors.

1   Endogenous Change Factors
Endogenous changes are essential for creating the critical mass that is necessary for women to succeed in academia. This suggests an active and proactive involvement of women in their own mobility in the competitive and male dominated executive and management arena. The policies and guidelines on higher education (White Paper 3 1997) outline broadly the deficiencies, and what 'ought to be' in higher education. Some of the challenges facing women in academia are as follows.

Perception of the Changing Scenario in Higher Education
The manner in which women analyse, perceive and engage with the change processes in universities to a great extent, define their location and self-perception as stakeholders in higher education. In instances where we have programmes such as Gender Studies, who drives and defines those programmes, and how visible are they in the merger and equity agendas of the universities? Can women at universities talk about these programmes without stammering and hesitation? Are there specific programmes that talk to women in that particular university? Questions such as these and others will have to be addressed if women were to participate meaningfully in shaping the agenda of higher education.

Self-perception
The self that women, particularly women from South African designated groups present at the institutions of higher learning determine how they are

perceived by others within the system. The following guidelines could improve how women are perceived:

- Believe in yourself as a person and be able to do personal audits of strengths, and areas of personal growth.
- Be alive to the harsh realities of male dominated sub-systems, align yourself with those who are supportive;
- Whatever you do must contradict the negative expectations and stereotypes about women. In some instances the credit for one's accomplishment as a woman may be attributed to some other sources other than one's abilities or capabilities.

The Balance Theory as posited by Heider (1958) comes in handy especially when one looks at the legacy and the present state of gender/race relations in South Africa. According to the balance theory, there is strong inclination for people to maintain consistency, or balance, among elements of their cognitive system. It is therefore not surprising that when Black women display competence, ability, and acquire authority and power the skeptics give other rationales for this which will restore the balance by changing the attitude system. Some possible ways of making sense of these womens' achievements include rationalizations such as (a) they are different and exceptional, (b) they are imitating men or they internalized American habits. The list goes on. What these attitudes do is to restore the cognitive balance (well there are exceptions) and keep intact the stereotype. It is not unusual to hear statements such as the following in the academy when issues of transformation and equity are raised:

> 'we do not have black women who can take over';
> 'it's a pity we had Prof X but she left us – when in actual fact conditions were made deliberately unbearable for her';
> 'we cannot find black Africans'.

The point made here is that out there is a possibility of being confronted by people who refuse or deny the reality and are rigidly bound in their race and gender stereotypes. It is such perceptions that keep women in the margins – in some instances those who hold power are the same persons who hold such

views. Of course we cannot deny that such views or cognitive systems are held to perpetuate the status quo.

The active engagement of women in academic leadership must be a norm in the 21st Century not a result of co-option or leadership by default. Lucy Slowe (1930) once asserted

> black women come to college with several problems (a) inexperience in civic life affairs (b) a conservative background which foster traditional attitudes towards women, and (c) a debilitating psychological approach to life (cited in Reid 1990:158).

These are not helpful for a positive and dynamic self-perception. Given these experiences, one is persuaded by Bonous-Hammarth's (2001:35) social model of leadership which emphasizes a 'conscious and congruent person'.

Mentors

Mentorship is limited for women in leadership. However this should be viewed as an opportunity rather than an adversity. Women in leadership or management positions, should take a deliberate initiative in identifying and engaging our male counterparts and other women 'who have been there' to be our mentors. Given the historical profile of women in leadership there are very few women in South Africa who have assumed positions of leadership such as Vice-Chancellor, Deans or Registrars. This reality limits the critical mass for female mentors. The same can be said about women managers in the corporate sector (Deloitte & Touché 2001; Magau 2005; Naidoo 1997a; Statistics South Africa 1999; Surajnarayan 2002). Male colleagues in positions of leadership and management must not be alienated but be viewed as mentors, in a mutual learning curve. What has to be understood is that male academic mentors may not necessarily be skilled managers at universities in particular, but valuable partners in understanding and socializing women into the politics and culture of the organization, that is, influencing decision making processes and procedures, methods of gaining visibility in the organization or institution, stumbling blocks, norms, values, standards and history of the institution.

Women who presently occupy management positions can play a mentoring role. The female executives can establish a system and create

spaces for conversations with other female academics on management models in merged institutions. Considering the culture of subtle alienation and isolation that has developed over the years in some institutions, senior female executives can, where new and vacant posts exist at different levels of management, take deliberate conscious steps to recruit and headhunt females. The search for women leadership and management in academia remains a challenge essentially for women who are already in leadership and management positions.

Research undertaken in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s proves that mentors are identified, perhaps as the most important factor in the career success of women (Fagenson 1989; Gold & Pringle 1989; Limerick & Haywood 1992; Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh & Bonous-Hammarth 2000). Findings in studies conducted by Korn and Ferry (1994) and Maloney (1994) on women in executive leadership in universities and the corporate sector, showed that about 47% of women executives in Australia had mentors, 86% of whom were males. These findings show that women are faced with a challenge of making a breakthrough in a domain that is dominated by males. According to Powell (2000) mentors contribute significantly to their proteges' career success and satisfaction.

Networks

Women are aware of the benefits of networking within the institution and outside the institution (endogenous and exogenous networks). However, very limited time and effort are invested in these areas. Up and coming women managers in academia get caught up in the day to day administrative, management and change processes within the institution. Mergers are the current activities that overwhelm both men and women in management positions. There is less integration into research and professional networks, which are important activities for mobility and recognition in institutions of higher learning. Participation in meaningful social networks is an added limitation, given the tendency to be excluded from the 'executive circle', intentionally or unintentionally. The point made here, is that women leaders must be alive to these realities, be more assertive and take the initiative to generate their own brands of networks within and outside the academy. One cannot be prescriptive, but simply highlight this reality and present it as an

area of challenge for women in leadership. Black women in particular have to understand the difficult of establishing networks which will be their support and mentoring subsystems (Reid 1990).

2   Exogenous Change Factors

Institutions of higher education are part of the larger social, historical and economic environment in societies. The gendered inequities, and racially different status positions inherent in higher education in South Africa are consistent with the positions found and being addressed in other sectors. The South African National Census (StatsSA 2001) shows that women constitute 52% of the total population, 41% as percentage of the employed population, 14.7% executive managers and 7% as directors. The corporate sector has developed deliberate interventions to redress the status of women executives (Magau 2005).

The African National Congress government has put in place policies, legislation and guidelines within which public and private institutions, including institutions of higher education, develop their equity and transformation programmes. Some of these are the Employment Equity Act 1995, and The Education Act 1997 amongst numerous other documents. These policies and frameworks are exogenous factors that can be utilized as powerful tools for self-reflection and assessment. They require a mindset that is willing to implement and review progress within specific time frames in the life of an institution. Getting constructive feedback, no matter how brutal it is, is one way of growing in the transforming/change management environment. Policies therefore are exogenous change guidelines that assume that people at the workplaces will take responsibility to develop plans and initiatives to implement the required equity imperatives.

There is evidence that exogenous changes through legislation have been successful. They do not necessarily give preferential treatment to women purely on the gender basis; they put into the consideration qualification and merit (Rindfleish 1995). Exogenous factors are another form of transformation space which can be utilized by women to influence their status in higher education. In South Africa, the exogenous changes are in place and institutions are taking positive steps to implement the policies which clearly require specific outcomes and accountability. At the

University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) for example, faculties and schools develop clear Equity Plans as part of their Business Plans

The national educational imperatives, the regional development agenda and principles outlined in the white papers and national strategies require collective and collaborative strategic plans, institutional frameworks and interventions. This therefore suggests less hierarchical leadership and leadership for transformation. Leaders and managers within academia must take the initiatives to develop a conceptual and theoretical understanding of leadership styles and /models that can work in a transforming and collaborative environment. The danger of not being a reflective leadership is that women and others who come from the designated groups may easily get co-opted into the old dominant culture of leadership and management. The merged institutions face a contradictory advantage – the leadership within must drive the transformation and equity agendas. The advantage is that leadership from within are familiar with the institutional dynamics and organisational culture; the limitation is that the leadership within, may not necessarily be the best drivers for transformation, particularly if they have been primary benefactors from the old institutional regime.

Conclusion

Women in the academy make contributions in teaching, administration, student support, all of which are important functions. However, considerations for tenure, promotion and leadership positions require research productivity and assertiveness to assume leadership that is empowering and transformative. The combination and strategic combination of the endogenous and exogenous factors can make women in the academy successful agents of transformation and empowerment .

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