Women in Senior Positions in South African Higher Education: A Reflection on Voice and Agency

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Abstract
For decades, the entrance of women into higher education spaces and senior positions has been obstructed. Particularly for women who finally break the glass ceiling to occupy senior positions, the challenges they face to execute their responsibilities successfully in such positions have been insurmountable. This paper explores these challenges as reported by 14 women academics and administrators in senior positions at one South African higher education institution. Drawing from the women's narratives and employing the standpoint theory as a lens to analyse data, the study highlights that women in the position of power at the institution face obstacles pertaining to voice and agency needed for them to develop professionally and personally in their positions in higher education. The findings show that the obstacles that these women face include gender stereotypes of women as home carers, questions around their leadership styles and exploitation by their male colleagues in similar positions.

Keywords: Women, higher education, voice, agency, leadership positions, standpoint theory

Background Introduction
Across higher education internationally and in South Africa, women have been reported to suffer and face huge challenges in terms of gaining access into

higher education spaces. Reports and studies in the area of gender in higher education point to the underrepresentation of women in global higher education (Thaman & Pillay 1992; Adusah-Karikari 2008; Badat 2010; Dominguez-Whitehead & Moosa 2014: 266). The slow entrance of this constituency into the higher education spaces has been linked to the ideology that men are more suited than women for academia (Ramphele 2008). In some parts of the world, research indicates that discourses that highlight the stereotype of women as nurturers who have a place in the home still seems alive and barricades the way for the majority of capable and competent women to gain access to the academy (Odejide 2007; Tsikata 2007). In an opening speech at a conference held in Cape Town, South Africa, Ramphele (2008) raised a concern regarding the struggles that women in African higher education institutions and specifically in South Africa face regarding their entrance into higher education institutions. She re-emphasised that higher education discourses had to be strengthened around women as deserving to be in the academy. She indicated that institutional cultures were still awash with gender-based constructions, which contribute to keeping women out of academia and particularly in leadership positions.

Some other factors that seem to influence institutions to give less recognition to women in academic spaces could be the cultural stereotypes that still exist in higher education. Such stereotypes include the biologically based assumptions that highlight the differences between men and women (Rudman & Glick 2008). For example, women are characterised as being gentle and kind, traits that are considered weak in the patriarchal society. Men on the other hand are considered aggressive, bold and strong (World Bank Report 2014). These traits have always been used to pit men against women and render the former as suitable to hold social roles and masculine careers such as lawyers and CEO positions. In some cases, even blue-collar jobs like construction, which needed physical strength, were all fitted into masculine job categories (Gabriel & Schmitz 2007). Women needed to stick to their nurturing roles such as wife, mother and homemakers, which linked well to their constructed kind and gentle character. These differences between men and women became so entrenched in the cultural and institutional systems that even to date the clusters act as barriers towards the access of women into the organisations since they are seen as belonging to the home **(**Green, Ashmore & Manzi 2005**)**. This is particularly true in the case of academic positions. The *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa* document (DHET 2014)

indicates that there are 45% teaching positions are occupied by women. While this statistic might paint a picture that women are well represented, the DHET further shows that this percentage consists mainly of women in junior positions within South African higher education institutions. These are positions that are not regarded as highly influential in higher education (Gabriel & Schmitz 2007).

It should be noted though that despite the debate on underrepresentation of women in higher education and specifically in the teaching section, some scholars believe that higher education institutions have made noticeable strides in ensuring that they open doors for women to join the academy, in academic and administrative positions. This being the case though, the concern for the same scholars is that while institutions are improving in opening physical access for women, there are no growth strategies put in place by the same institutions to ensure the development of these women and their success to occupy positions of power (Morley 2005; Bishop 2006; Le Feuvre 2009). Kloot (2004) asserts that higher education institutions perceive women as unqualified for these positions. These institutions seem to regard leadership as a male feature in which women do not have a place (Still 2006). McKinney (2009) and Jamali, Sidani and Kobeisi (2008) also refer to this challenge when they point out that there is a glass ceiling that deters women academics and administrators to access leadership positions in higher education. This glass ceiling is described as 'obstacles and [barriers] that prevent competent women from advancing in higher education' (McKinney 2009: 121). The barriers are seen in the semiotics in institutions which, when critically analysed, bring to the fore hegemonic discourses, which regard males as more befitting than females to be in academia. This situation leads to higher education institutions being male dominated in top management in the case of administrative staff and senior lecturers as well as professorial positions in the case of academics. Riordan and Potgieter (2011) and Barnes (2007) have noticed that especially in African higher education there are very few women at professoriate level, which remains overwhelmingly male and mainly white in South Africa

It is for the above reason that countries around the world have established acts and policies that regulate the labour practices to ensure parity in the employment practices in institutions. In South Africa for example, The *Employment Equity Act* (EEA) (RSA 1998) and the *Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (RSA 2000) were established to

respond to the need to eradicate unfair practices that had for a long time led to the discrimination of people according to gender, disability and class. These are not the only Acts but as a report on the *Profile of Higher Education in Southern Africa* (Fongwa 2012: 77) states, there has been a 'plethora of acts and policies' that are aimed at redressing inequities within the South African higher education context. These acts and policies have afforded every South African citizen a chance to realise their potential in their workspaces in terms of access and mobility.

Resulting from these acts and South African higher education institutions' own initiatives, a few women have since succeeded to break the glass ceiling to senior and powerful positions. However, when these women finally break through, reports show that they have to surmount more challenges emanating from the power of male supremacy (White 2003). These male power and other institutional barriers suppress the voices of the women to lead effectively and to become change agents within their institutions.

Women in Leadership in Higher Education

As Odhiambo (2011: 668) and Ngunjiri (2010: 1) have noted, generally there are few studies conducted within Africa on gender and leadership. Most literature in this field comes from developed countries (Carvalho, Özkanlı & de Lourdes Machado-Taylor 2012). The vast literature on discourses around women in higher education is mainly on the invisibility of these women in senior positions and the need to provide a space for them to break the glass ceiling. This makes it difficult, therefore, to understand the challenges these women face once they are promoted to leadership positions in African higher education, particularly women in South African higher education (SAHE). However, a look at the challenges of these women reported in studies from developed countries gives an indication that there are political, structural and cultural barriers that have an impact on the success of women in senior positions. It becomes necessary, therefore, to report on some of the SAHE challenges that these women face as highlighted in this paper, in order to give recognition to their narratives. A study on the experiences of women in senior positions based on an African higher education institution is important to bring a localised perspective that bridges the gap in literature.

Since women and leadership draw so little attention from the African scholars, there is almost no literature that looks specifically into the issue of

voice and agency for women in senior positions in SAHE. As such, this paper contributes to this field by discussing the experiences of academic and administrative women in senior positions in SAHE with a specific focus on these women's voice and agency. The two concepts, voice and agency, are discussed in this paper, with a focus on institutional factors and processes that are deemed critical in the process of leadership in the workplace. The authors of this paper believe that having a voice and an ability to drive changes in one's work environment (agency) are important aspects in leadership. Sen (2002: ii) defines agency to include 'what human beings can do to improve [themselves and their environments], together with the meaning, motivation and purpose that they bring to their activity, whilst appealing to their sense of power within'. From this, it could be seen that agency denotes meaningful conscious endeavours to effect change, which can only be attained if people are motivated to contribute to such changes. It is in line with this understanding that The World Bank Report's (2014: 3) definition of agency echoes the words 'decisions', 'desired outcome' and 'ability' as key to agency:

> The ability to make decisions about one's own life (or environment) and act on them to achieve a desired outcome [that is] free of violence, retribution, or fear.

The World Bank Report (2014: xv) clearly states that agency is equated to empowerment since women who have agency have a 'free space to decide for [themselves]' and are 'no longer dependent on others to make decisions'. The report further states that to empower themselves in this way, women need to have the capacity to talk and engage in all discussions, discourses and decisions in their work environment. This is referred to as voice.

On the other hand, Maiese (2005: 1) defines voice as:

> [the] ability to engage in meaningful conversation, to make a difference through what one says, and to have a say in key decisions ... [express] viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings which receive a 'fair hearing' and are readily recognized by others.

Looking at the two concepts, voice and agency, it could be noticed therefore that the aspects of change or improvement, making a difference and

influencing change are central issues that need to be taken into consideration. It could therefore be concluded that when discussing women and leadership in senior positions, the two concepts cannot be divorced from each other.

It is disturbing, however, that women in senior positions often report incidences of institutional practices, processes and discourses that marginalise their voices. Such practices have an impact on these women's ability to engage in decision-making, articulation of an authoritative voice and fitting into the institutional cultures (Marumo 2012; Mestry & Schmidt 2012). In a study by Hale (2009), the narratives of women in senior positions at one US higher education institution indicates that women still face gender-typical stereotypes that nullify their ability and power as efficient leaders in higher education. The challenges they face include among others non-recognition from men in the same positions and colleagues in their departments. This makes it difficult for these women to exercise their power, make decisions and lead their departments effectively. As a result, these women find it difficult to assert themselves in their positions and bring positive changes to their institutions.

Theoretical Grounding

This paper draws from Smith's Standpoint Theory in analysing the experiences of the women in senior positions in SAHE. Standpoint theory, as a feminist theory, emphasises self-reflection as a process women need to undertake to understand themselves in relation to dominant discourses in their environment. Spence (2002: 31) brings to the fore Smith's concept of 'relations of ruling', which alludes to discourses that construct women as nurturers and home carers in the midst of men who are constructed as leaders in the labour force. The argument in the relations of ruling is that it is only when women understand such discourses (or reflect on them) within their social environment that they can find ways to deal with the challenges they encounter in their social spaces with the aim of finding ways to reshape their environment. In the case of this paper, focus is given to how women perceive these relations and what measures they put in place to create dialogue with them in their own way.

According to Smith (1992), relations of ruling entail understanding the environmental dynamics. This could assist women in understanding the forces and factors that shape gender discourses and assist them to find ways to move beyond the subjective, negative constructions imposed on them by the institutions' community. In essence, women draw strength from such

constructions by exploring them with the intention to 'go beyond what is implicated by the constructions' (Smith 1992: 329) and use them to their advantage. For example, while gender discourses could still place women in lower senior positions compared to men holding similar positions in different aspects and belonging at home as nurturers and carers, they can use these constructions as a form of a social capital that could give them the voice and agency needed to advance their institutions. Hooks (1989) talks about a similar idea when she emphasises the need for women to embrace who they are, not only at present (i.e. with their status as leaders), but also their past, which shapes their total identity and helps them to theorise their roles in communities. This means that the negative constructions need to be reinterpreted positively by women as empowering them to practise their leadership differently from men. In this paper, therefore, while negative constructions about women in senior positions in SAHE are highlighted, the study shows how the women interviewed for this study interpret the stereotypes as actual forces that show that women have the power to be agents of change. Through the same stereotypical views about them they can have a voice to change and advance their professions and institutions.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences of women in senior positions with regard to voice and agency. Using a qualitative approach assisted in drawing in-depth responses from women (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Fourteen women in administrative (support), academic (lecturing) and leadership positions were individually interviewed. These women came from across all the faculties at the institution in which the research was conducted. Notwithstanding the intersectionality of race, gender and class, it should be noted that in the selection of participants, the only variable that was considered was gender pertaining to women in senior positions. While we have to acknowledge that this is a limitation in this study, the decision to exclude race as a variable rested on the authors' observation that women from other race groups were absent in the leadership positions within the institution. However, even though race was not the focal point of our data analysis, it can be mentioned that the majority of women participants were white. Also worth noting is that eight of these women were senior administrative personnel from different sections of the institution and only four were directors in their

academic divisions. The women were later involved in three focus-group discussions, depending on their availability on the chosen dates. The first session consisted of four administrative women, the second session was a mixed group of one academic woman and three administrative women and the last consisted of three academic and three administrative women. The following two objectives guided the individual and group discussions that the authors had with the women:

- To gain an understanding of the experiences of women in senior positions in SAHE
- To gain an understanding of the mechanisms of resistance the women use to deal with their work challenges

The process of collecting data from these women was exciting, since one author is also a woman in the academy who aspires to climb the academic ladder and occupy a senior position at some point, while the other is already a deputy director of one unit at the institution. Conducting this study was motivated by the authors' aspirations and we were aware of the subjective nature with which data collected could have been interpreted. This reflexivity made us more vigilant during the interviews. We tried to avoid steering the discussions in the direction that would suit us as researchers. Watt (2007: 86) points out the importance of reflexivity for qualitative researchers by stating that:

> Researchers first of all need to be aware of their personal reasons for carrying out a study … their subjective motives – for these will have important consequences for the trustworthiness of a project. If design decisions and data analyses are based on personal desires without a careful assessment of the implications of these methods and conclusions, they risk creating a flawed study.

It could be stated, however, that as Watt (2007) further indicates, subjectivities form part of qualitative studies, so researchers do not have to aim to purge them but being aware of them and dealing with them lead to trustworthy results in a study. In this light, it is important to state that the reporting of the findings in this paper are indeed the experiences of the interviewed participants. However,

being women in academia assisted us in forming a rapport with the participants from an angle of gender similarities, challenges and aspirations.

Data analysis for this study was mainly thematic but drew from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective. This means that although themes that emerged from the categorised data as well as the researcher's arguments are presented in the results section, the researcher is aware that the formulation of such themes draws heavily on the discourses of power, dominance and inequality that dominate gendered spaces. Nel (2012) alludes to the use of CDA in cases where researchers are aware that discourses of power have an influence on the relations of people within a social space. This notion of an awareness of discourses of power forms the crux of what CDA scholars such as Van Dijk (2001), Fairclough (2004) and Machin & Mayr (2012) view as the most important aspects in CDA studies. In fact, Nkoane (2012) asserts that the prevailing discourses should be considered when interpreting the voices of participants in any study. We aligned ourselves with this proposition in analysing the voices of the women in this particular study.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that the few women that make it to senior positions in higher education face challenges in many areas of their professional lives. These challenges have a serious impact on these women's ability to bring and influence changes in the powerful positions that they hold. The women reported that in most cases they found that their voices were not heard. At times, when they were allowed to contribute, one woman indicated that the subtle message that they received from the male colleagues was that '*she is a good leader, but we should make sure that she does not row the boat too much'*. The women further reported that they always felt that the institutional culture did not often allow them to come forward as leaders since the male power suppressed their voices and ability to be agents of change. The institutional and social barriers to effective leadership arise from the gender-stereotypical discourses about women, which challenge their leadership styles and render them inferior to men. Dahlvig (2013: 99) has found that the historical hierarchical and patriarchal structures that form part of the institutional cultures force women to assimilate to male-dominated leadership norms, which silence their voices and kills their agency. Another issue that arose from the discussions with the academic women was that they often had

to defend themselves against exploitation by male colleagues who sometimes dump unwanted workloads on them. These three issues, the leadership style, disabling institutional cultures and exploitations by male colleagues are discussed in detail below.

Leadership Style

From the findings, it was noted that the women in the study preferred a more participative, empathetic, caring and empowering leadership style. During the focus group discussion, the women consistently emphasised that '*taking the people [they] work with by the hand'* and '*mentoring them for senior posts as well'* make one a true leader. They believed that their personalities as *'caring individuals'* made them unique for the role of empowerment and mentoring.

> I just come with that motherly love. I am a mother to students and colleagues [so] I should have that motherly touch… that way of advising people, of working with people to make them succeed and give them a sense of why I occupy that position

To echo that women have to use a motherly touch to mentor others, another woman pointed out that she regarded herself as '*an ambassador for other women'* who advocated for the success of other women in academia as well. She sees her role as a woman leader, as that of strengthening other women through offering advice and working together with them towards the success of their careers. The kind of leadership that is expressed here is an interpersonal one that Yarrish, Zula and Davis (2010) have noted as characterising women leaders and which differentiates them from men.

Regardless of the strength of the women leadership as stated above, one finding was that the women felt that their leadership is often compared to that of men and they find themselves under immense pressure to change the way they do things in order to fit into the male-dominated culture. On this point, Eagly and Chin (2010) have observed that due to this comparison pressure, women in leadership positions are more likely to switch between the typically male leadership styles and typically female styles, depending on the context. When pressured, some women in leadership positions abandon their caring nature and adopt a chauvinistic leadership style, which oppress other people. This was seen in the context of this study. The academic women

pointed out that at times women who hold senior positions in their departments forget the plight of the other women and impose huge workloads on them, undermine their abilities and do not consult before making decisions. They stated that perhaps this stemmed from the long period of oppression that the women leaders had endured under the male leadership. One of the women said:

> Let me take an Afrikaner woman, she has never been given power before and immediately she is put in power, the only way she knows is to use that power as an oppressive tool … When she climbs the ladder, immediately you see the power relations because those that are down start fearing her because she also stops identifying with other women below her.

What is interesting about the view above is that once the academic woman assumes power, she starts oppressing those 'below' but fears those that are in the same position with her, which in most cases are men. According to Wyn, Acker and Richards (2000), the structural positioning, which places women in senior positions as part of the power hierarchy resembled by a masculine leadership style, is responsible for how women turn out once they occupy these positions. This scenario paints a picture of a vulnerable woman who is caught up between two poles that stifle her and influence her effectiveness as a leader. On the one hand, there are structural expectations that require women to assert themselves to fit into their positions, while this on the other hand goes against the hierarchical structures they would in normal cases challenge. It is such cases that prevent women in academia from coming forward as strong leaders who challenge the structures according to their preferred approach because even though they understand that institutions need change, they fear to suggest such changes lest they become labelled as weak. As Dahlvig (2013: 99) indicates, they just assimilate into the status quo, are silenced and do little to bring about much-needed changes in higher education. Commenting on the confusing nature of this assimilation for women in senior positions, Wyn *et al.* (2000: 444) quote Young (1990), regarding the dilemma that women encountered:

> When participation is taken to imply assimilation, the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to

> accept and adopt an identity one is not and to try and participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is.

A woman participant expressed this similarly when she stated that she felt she always needed to '*be able to overcome and eliminate the barriers and restrictions which are eroding women's voices*', and to fight the restrictions that placed women within an oppressive power circle that inhibited them from challenging the inequities within the institution. She suggested that women academics in senior positions needed to stand up and '*let men become aware that they are women who know what they are doing and can stand up to them'*. The implication here is that sometimes women in senior positions are trapped into adapting to the male environment in their struggle to prove themselves as efficient leaders, which in turn negatively affects their identity as leaders.

Disabling Institutional Cultures

The academic women pointed out that they experienced an alienating culture that did not recognise their worth and the value they bring in the leadership positions they occupied. One woman expressed this when she stated that:

> No one recognizes the good work we are doing ... it's like we are in a sinking Titanic, this is my experience and that of others. I feel it's working on my confidence as a leader.

The other woman supported this when she said:

> We don't have support. I don't have self-confidence; I feel terrorised in this position ... I feel like I am not growing. When we are in a meeting we fight, we battle ... it's not easy for men to give up their power, there is always gate-keeping when you initiate some things.

Once again, this smothered feeling that academic women express shows that they feel powerless in the powerful positions that they occupy. If they have to battle to voice their contributions in meetings, it could be assumed that the powerful male voice always suppresses and overpowers them. This could lead to a situation where these women could give up trying to assert themselves and become tokens in senior positions. A lack of confidence, as one woman

indicated, leads to fear because one feels that her contribution will be undermined. She said:

> There was an institutional assessment going on, one of the things I said to them is I do not have confidence, I feel I am not growing. In this institution you do not get recognition. Your contributions don't matter; you are in this position but you are not taken seriously. Sometimes you feel like they are questioning how you made it to the top, after all you are just a woman. Your voice always takes a back seat. They only listen to you if there is no counter contribution from the male colleagues …

The other woman also indicated that her experiences at the institution had made her conclude that the institution did not believe in women as having the necessary expertise and capital to lead or occupy senior positions. She recalled an instance when a woman colleague was appointed to a senior position:

> When a post in one of the departments was advertised and a woman was appointed, there was much speculation that she did not know the job even before she started …. I mean, do you think that anybody was going to listen to anything she said? She had already been stereotyped!

The institutional cultures that do not recognise women as efficient leaders' worthy to be given recognition, stem from the constructions that stereotype women as belonging at home and having little space in the workspace (Hale 2009). This is the case where the relation of ruling that Smith's standpoint theory alludes to comes to play. In this theory, the issue of negative constructions about women have been threshed, highlighting that women are often constructed as nurturers who should leave the masculine spaces to the men (Spence 2002). This stereotype perpetuates patriarchal societies that believe in male dominance and continue to benefit men in workspaces, therefore invalidating women's presence and silencing them as well as instilling in them fear and doubt about their abilities in the workspace. Yarrish *et al.* (2010) also allude to this stereotyping of women when they point out that throughout history, societies have constructed good leadership as a masculine feature that women cannot handle. This is clearly seen in this section where academic women who participated in this study felt that they lacked the

confidence to participate fully in senior positions in higher education, feeling as if they were in a 'sinking Titanic' fighting for survival.

Male Exploitation

This point was raised by the women who felt that they were just tokens the institution used to show the outside world that equity issues are taken seriously by the institution. They indicated that they normally got confused when males sometimes disregard them and then at other times compliment them because they were hardworking and always willing to walk the extra mile to assist when the need arose. In one focus group discussion, the women discussed this issue as male exploitation:

> Men can take you for granted, when they reassign all their work, they will give it to you by saying that they know you will do a good job ... if you don't know this trick you fall for it.

The women indicated that at times male colleagues would mock them by saying that they should do the work because they knew what they were doing and then piled all the work on them. This happened in particular in cases where the woman had held a senior position before, which in most cases would be lower than their currently held position. However, to men it would be sufficient to abandon their own work and duties and leave them to the woman academic. Lamenting on a similar situation, one woman reported:

> Even in this position people assumed I would know my job, know how everything worked, which was not true because if you are a researcher or HOD, it differs from being a dean… I think it is a way of trying to frustrate me or leave me to do the bulk of what they consider unimportant work so that they get time to do what they deem important …

The women also felt that when men relegate work roles to women, it is not simply because they trust the women's expertise. The reason for these men's behaviour seems to stem from the belief that work that could be done by women has no value and threatens the egoistic superiority demeanour men attach to masculine tasks. One participant indicated that in the research office

that she managed, a male colleague who had always managed the staff development programme relegated the responsibility to her when she joined the office. She indicated that initially the male colleague would tell her how difficult it was to draw a *'solid staff development plan for the year'* because one needed to be *'grounded in research'* to understand the needs of the academics. When the women colleague showed understanding of research and programmes, her colleague suggested that she be responsible for staff development.

This could be likened to Peterson's concept of 'feminisation' of roles (2011: 625). This refers to a process in which certain jobs or roles that women can do are regarded as feminine and therefore become undervalued, leading to a degrading of respect and prestige for such roles. The fact that men leave their duties to be done by women and do not get involved means that they regard any work that could be done by women as not prestigious enough to be done by men and perhaps not promoting the institution in the most significant way as constructed through the male opinion. This could be the reason why they 'subtract' themselves because they do not want to be associated with the job and roles they feel no longer have value.

Although giving women extra work or leaving them to do tasks could sometimes be considered as empowering them, according to Peterson (2011), it is just a way of showing that the position has decreased in status and power and is therefore no longer fitting for men. This again points to the relations of ruling (Spence 2002) where women are once again juxtaposed to men and are socially constructed in a work environment to depict characteristics of valueless and weakness and as a result, they are unable to place and position themselves as powerful agents in senior positions. The only way they are constructed is as beings that will always be subordinate to men and only take over what men leave behind. In this case, it becomes apparent that the same male forces that want to put women back where the men think they belong would suppress whatever contributions they make. Therefore, when women feel that they have finally made a breakthrough into senior positions, men find ways of devaluing such positions in different ways such as leaving the paperwork to women, as seen in the findings of this study.

Finding Voice and Agency through Redesigning Constructions

As stated earlier, the standpoint theory used in this paper requires that partici-

pants reconstruct or redesign the negative constructions about them as a coping mechanism used to find the positive in a negative situation. The findings above indicate that women in senior positions in academia mostly have negative experiences emanating from the way they are viewed as either effective or non-effective leaders. What is significant is the finding that even after breaking through the ranks of academia to occupy senior positions, women academics are still considered unfit to take up such positions. The construction of a female as a home 'carer' or nurturer who has to leave the work environment for men, especially leadership, persists in the academe and frustrates women's efforts to show agency in their positions.

It is worth noting, however, that the participants in this study felt that they could not just succumb to the constructions without challenging them. The challenge is not stepping up to become like men and adopt the male leadership style. These women believed that they could draw strength from the negative constructions and use them to bring about changes in the academe. One participant, who is the only woman in a senior position in her department, emphasises this point when she says:

> I am the only woman among men. I do not allow men to create a wall for me or for them to create two environments, one for me and one for them. I take them on using my own strategies as a woman; you know that form of resilience and power that only women have. They all think that I am feeble and sensitive because of femininity. And yes, that sensitivity allows me to deal sensitively with the junior staff and I think for me it is an asset.

This statement takes us back to earlier paragraphs, in which Hooks (1989) stresses the need for women to turn negative constructions into positive ones by reinterpreting the negative constructions and embracing them as a basis from which they draw their strength. Smith (1992) indicates that the past constructions, which have seen women regarded as weak, over-sensitive and as people who cannot engage in serious male discussions [at the workplace] should actually currently be used by women to carve their own leadership styles that are in step with who they are'. In other words, *'they should go beyond such constructions'* (Smith 1992: 329) according to the standpoint theory. Such is the agency that women can enforce in academia. In an interview with one participant, this issue was reiterated:

> Power must be women power, that's where our power lies: develop our own identity, not the kind of power that we want to be like men, we won't get anywhere. Have power as a woman; that is how we are created. On the academic side, internalize that power, not try to have male power, women and men are different …

Another woman said:

> As a woman I have different abilities, that softer touch, I bring different dimensions to leadership with my own attributes … the softness makes me a good mentor, an approachable person, a mother-like figure.

The above means that if women are taken as mere carers, they need to use that nurturing to uplift and mentor the junior members of their department; that is power. If women are regarded as soft and weak, they need to use that softness to influence the people to understand where they want to take their department, to say to them, as leaders, *'We cannot do it alone, because we have our weaknesses, let's do it together'*. This is what the standpoint theory suggests (in our opinion), namely that women should not try and emulate the male leadership style but lead in their own way and find the voice and agency in the leadership style that is exclusively 'female'. As they do so, Smith (1987) suggests that they will be theorising their constructed roles and identities, and using such a theory as their social capital that would enable them to have the voice and agency they need in academia. This does not mean that women need to bend to and re-enact the negative stereotypes about them but they need to use these as springboards that can advance their agenda in senior positions. One woman in this study jokingly suggested that women were strong in their perceived weakness, that the weakness was what made them strong and powerful in the positions of power that they held. She said:

> We got power, we must just use it. Our power is not only being in academics but also in being nurturers. We have power of doing our job well, power of knowing our field and of caring. Women have power to manipulate, we have charm, and we got a lot, we can make decision

> … Why did you think Eve got it right to let Adam to eat the apple? Just because she had power to use her woman power to do so!

The manipulative nature of becoming part of decision makers highlighted in this response is not deceiving and taking advantage of situations but it is to be smart to make men understand that women have the knowhow in leadership. The women suggested that even if this took using one man in a department to voice what actually was a woman's idea, it would still advance the agenda of changing and transforming departments. In this case, it means putting an idea through to one man and 'manipulating' him to buy into the idea and asking him to raise it in a meeting. If it is a good idea, members in a meeting will buy into the idea when a man raises it. Even though this could seem like giving the womanpower away, it does not rule out the fact that it is a woman's idea and it has achieved its purpose. In this way, the woman's voice and agency is realised through a strategic, diplomatic and 'charming' manner that makes a man feel important in raising the idea. In line with this, a participant reiterated:

> Sometimes I need a male ally who would back me up and make my voice be heard. In senior positions we need the support of men because they are heard … this is a strategy, and if it helps to put our ideas forth, we can use it, because actually what will be implemented will not be the voice of the man that raises an idea but my voice through a man.

Looking at the discussions in this section, we cannot ignore that while the women in the study sought to carve a leadership identity that embraces and assigns a positive value to attributes that are considered feminine; the approach could on the other hand be counterproductive to their efforts of challenging the patriarchal structures. Their strategy to reconstruct the negative stereotypes by using them to their advantage seems to strengthen and reinforce the very stereotypes and essential notions of femininity that they seek to overcome. However true this might be, the authors believe that workspaces are complex for women in leadership positions and at times to navigate the spaces and the legitimacy of their presence in these spaces, the women might have to compromise some of their principles. It could be argued therefore that an understanding of the challenges women in leadership positions face and the

strategies they employ to overcome them should be situated within a discursive context that informs the perceptions of women as leaders.

Conclusion

The findings and discussions in this paper indicate that gaining voice and agency for women in senior positions in higher education is a serious challenge that these women need to surmount. The challenges that have been identified include questions around the women's ability to lead, their leadership styles, their place in the work environment and the construction of the woman's role as nurturer at home and a carer who should not be involved in serious decision-making discourses in higher education. The standpoint theory that has been used highlights that this is the frame within which women in the work environment, not only in academia, are placed. It states that when women step into the work environment, they need to remember these societal constructions around femininity and then shape their current experiences around these constructions. Important in this theory, as highlighted, is that women should embrace these constructions and use them as an empowerment tool that would give them agency within the work environment. Through the responses of the women in this study, it has been established that such a standpoint is possible, in which the women feel that they can use the negative schemes formed about them by the male dominated world to advance their agenda of being agents of change. Therefore, as the objectives of the study were stipulated, the current study has successfully drawn on the experiences of the academic women who participated in the study to understand the challenges they face when they get to occupy senior positions as well as finding and understanding the mechanisms of resistance that they use in the face of their negative experience.

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