

GENDER EQUITY TENSIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S POST-APARTHEID HIGHER EDUCATION: IN DEFENCE OF DIFFERENTIATION

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a theoretical and thematic exploration of gender equity in post-apartheid South African higher education. The article argues that while South African women played a very important role in the struggle for political liberation, the current situation in South Africa's political, economic and education institutions seems to suggest that the effort they put in the struggle does not commensurate the gains thereafter. A majority of South Africa's girls and women still struggle to access quality education and excel at most levels, which is a direct contravention of the Constitutional guarantee of equality for all who live in this great nation. Although the gender equity paradigm in South African higher education can be credited as having recorded some formidable achievements in terms of increased enrolment for female students especially Black women in higher education, a deliberate effort has to be made to shift attention from aggregations to impediments in order for the promise of equality and equity to be realized for those who experienced most barriers in accessing higher education. In the current South African context, one needs to deal with disadvantages that are perpetuated through the socio-economic positioning of families, the inability to use the language of power, content complexity, embedded institutional cultures and practices, among others.

Key words: gender, equity, higher education, post-apartheid

INTRODUCTION

Finding solutions to gender related inequities and inequalities has been a subject of discussion in the past three decades. Notwithstanding the achievements that have been realized so far; promises and guarantees provided through the constitution and international statutes are yet to

change the situations of the formally marginalized women substantially. This is because gender related inequities and inequalities continue to haunt the same cohort of girls and women in institutions of higher learning today. For instance, although the South African Constitution (1996) recognizes education as a fundamental human right, areas of serious marginalization still exist within the current higher education system. On the international plane, whereas the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women¹ (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 by the United Nations (UN) serves as the international bill of rights for women, gender related inequities and inequalities are still being grappled with. In relation to the above, the Beijing Conference held in 1995 (The United Nations 1995), the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the African Union Protocol developed in 2003 all foreground the need to have gender related inequities tackled. Centrally, any forms of discrimination and violence against women at all levels regardless of race, creed and geographical position ought not to be tolerated.

Reforming higher education was one of the areas that were undertaken by the African Nation Congress (ANC) government upon gaining independence in 1994. It was imperative to change the higher education landscape that had been gendered and racialized by the apartheid regime and structures. For instance, The Department of Education, White Paper 1 (1995) prefaces the need for equity of access, fair chances and non-discrimination. Similarly, the inclusion of the equity clause² in higher education was aimed at a catalyst of the reform process while at the same time aiding institutions of higher education to overcome sexism and racism. Consequently, Pityana (2009) illustrates that the equity paradigm in higher education was adopted in order to expand opportunities, to extend potential to those who might have been construed as unworthy and to treat everyone with fairness.

Section 37 of the 1997 Higher Education Act states that:

In their admissions policies, all South African universities are required to comply with appropriate measures for the redress of past inequalities, but they may not unfairly discriminate in any way (Department of Education 1997a, 37)

Attempted definitions of gender equity have proven problematic because equity is not about providing equal opportunities alone but rather an engagement with the source of disadvantage and dealing with the plight of disadvantaged groups. This in itself will highlight on the magnitude of the problem and how well to resolve it. Whereas we concur with the Office on the Status of Women (OSW) definition of gender equity as the fair and just distribution of means of resources and opportunities to men and women (OSW 2000), we note that mere

distribution of resources and opportunities does not necessarily provide a base for an adequate equity position since injustices in question are complex, have a long history and are insidious in nature. Furthermore, when redress policies are presented in universalistic and egalitarian terms, they tend to be simplistic because the underlying conditions and circumstances that exacerbate injustices are often ignored.

In this article, we discuss gender equity by using a discourse that has been advanced by Taylor (1994) and Young (1990) that calls for consideration of the unequal treatment of certain individuals through special arrangements as an avenue of attaining gender equity in higher education. We argue that in opposition to maintaining the status quo, a 'closely guarded'³ positive discrimination that is necessitated by the context and content of the intervention is desirable. We make this argument by first presenting a general overview of gender construction and its implication on women in higher education. Secondly, the discourse of transformation and gender equity policy is sketched. We conclude by providing a few relevant theories and literature regarding justice and education.

THE DISCOURSE ON GENDER

Those who propagate gender differentiation rely on ideologies such as gender essentialism that positions men and women as being fundamentally and inherently different, by nature. This outlook produces domination, differentiation in role assignment and allocation of privileges. Reproduction and sustainability of gender inequality is further perpetuated through patriarchy, notions of femininity, masculinity and the rigidity of the religious and cultural systems to accommodate change. The role that social establishments play in accelerating gender inequalities cannot be underscored either because it is in these social establishments that the reality of being gendered is played out and felt.

Simone de Beauvoir's (1989) contention that one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman is rather profound. The inseparable questions of whether gender is a product of nurture or nature are still less clarified as much as they have been in the public arena for a long time. Juxtaposed to these questions is the internalized inferiority by women themselves and hence contributing to their own current disadvantages. Butler (2004) iterates that gender ostensibly constitutes the liveable, the relationship between gender norms and human survival. Butler further argues that nurture and nature play a complimentary role to each other. The genetic predisposition guarantees minimal survival whereas the social attribution intervenes at the onset life; the two establish conditions for a liveable human life.

Basic gender differentiation arguments are also derived from the discrepancy of innatists' biogrammer box. Testosterone that is predominantly found in men is associated with

aggression, strength and superiority whereas oestrogen that is found in women is linked to weakness, irrationality and emotionality (Bowlby 1969; Lorber and Moore 2002; Connell 2005). Firstly, using the biogrammer box to privilege and marginalize a fraction of a population lacks the necessary credibility because men and women have the propensity to exhibit either of the character traits depending on the situation they find themselves in. In such a case, how can one be conclusively male or female? What happens to women who exhibit equal strengths and exuberance in male dominated domains? Secondly, previously material possessions and gains were looked at as a source of power for the male gender but women are beginning to have possessions of their own and hence such a stance is less appealing and ought not to be used to disenfranchise women (Wharton 2012; Mead 1935; Oakley 1985; Afonja 2005).

The generationally and culturally entrenched images, laws, values and practices prescribe the appropriateness of certain behaviours and roles for girls and boys within designated private and public spaces. At an early age, girls are socialized into motherhood and wifehood roles whereas boys are taught to be tough like men and not to be 'soft like women' (Afonja 2005; Lorber and Moore 2002; Ortner 1989–1990; Oakley 1985; Bowlby 1969; Lerner 1986). While acknowledging the profound place of values and practices in African communities in particular, we argue that the advent of formal education has exposed women to similar opportunities professionally and otherwise as men whence the dilemma of drawing a thin line between male and female designated roles.

The intended or unintended offensive and demeaning messages that are carried through the daily usage of language exacerbate the oppression and devaluation of women. For example, Obododimma (1998) explains that, the use of proverbs in the Igbo language in Nigeria is orthodox, masculine, derogative and devaluing. The rhetoric and proverbs in this language and other African languages extol masculinity and sustain patriarchy while degrading femininity by using derogative and demeaning illustrations and objects. Through proverbs, women are presented as irrational, childish, devilish, morally incapacitated and fragile. Likewise, the metaphors for gender express the male as norm and the female as deviant; the male as whole and powerful, the female as unfinished, mutilated, and lacking in autonomy. Further, women's talk and knowledge has been classified negatively as intuitive and gossip (Lerner 1986).

Popular beliefs and practices espoused by religions such as Christianity have also contributed to women's disenfranchisement. Through the guidance, observation and adherence to pertinent scriptures and doctrines, members come to believe that gender was ordained by God. However, the case of the biblical creation account and the fall of mankind are two scenarios that place a woman in a place of weakness, susceptibility and inferiority as is noted in the Holy Bible (Genesis chapters 1, 2 and 3, Standard Version), despite that there are also a

number of inferences in the bible that exalt strong women such as Ruth, Mary mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Naomi (Holy Bible, Standard Version).

Butler (1988, 2004) argues that since the construction of gender is unconvincing, it is possible that the marginalization that is associated with it can be reversed. She further notes that gender has been conceived by conforming to repetitive acts that are historically and socially shared. These acts are revised and consolidated over a period of time so as to suit the prevailing context. The cleavage in Butler's argument though very technical and hard to achieve opens up a window of opportunity and possibility for gender transformation today. The key is in the understanding of the subjective relationship between the actions being reproduced and designing a different pattern that does not produce marginalization and subjugation but empowerment and liberation.

As shown through the various views, gender relations are made complex through nurture and the social constructionist attempts. Oakley (1985, 16) argues that "sex" is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. "Gender" however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into "masculine" and "feminine".

PATRIARCHY, APARTHEID AND GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Gender inequality and the general annihilation of women in the South African context can also be traced through the trajectory of the entrenched patriarchal systems and structures that have been in existence for many years. Patriarchy puts males at the centre of decision making, headship and occupation of the political and production spaces. It has been nuanced that patriarchy transcends all race groups in South Africa and therefore it is not a preserve of African cultures as many have come to believe. But rather it runs across Afro centric and Eurocentric mythologies and civilizations globally (Republic of South Africa 1998; Badat 2009). In essence through patriarchy men are brutalized while women get to be neutralized across racial lines.

The education sector in South Africa and other parts of the continent have been greatly influenced by paternalistic tendencies. Marshall (2000) notes that the formal and informal curricular reinforces and reproduces the dominant hegemonic views of stereotypical masculinity and femininity. Likewise, Labode (1993) and Msimang (2001) contend that the exclusionary nature of missionary education was part and parcel of the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology. As a result, gender issues are given less prominence since they are relegated to private spaces where family, emotions, nurturance and relationships 'belong'.

The quest for equality and in particular gender equity in higher education was exacerbated by the exclusionary, segregated and sexist apartheid policies that kept Black South Africans and women from participating meaningfully in higher education. Msimang (2001) elucidates that segregation during the apartheid era was both formal and informal. Formally, group movements and participation in education at all levels was controlled through laws enacted by the apartheid regime. Every day practices and experiences mirrored the informal control mechanisms as well. Furthermore, education under apartheid was very polarized (apart-hood) with the majority of the citizens (Black) being relegated to inferior education through Bantu Education (Union of South Africa 1953; Jansen 2003; Lindsay 1997) and the closure of Open Universities through the Extension of University Education Act (Union of South Africa 1959).

Fiske and Ladd (2004) and the National Department of Education, White paper (Department of Education 1995) note that, education under apartheid was structured in a manner designated to foster the apartheid ideology. While the presence of Black (Africans, Indians and Coloured) people in institutions of higher learning was minimal, that is, in 1991, out of every 1000 White South Africans, 51 were enrolled in postsecondary institutions as opposed to 35, 13 and 9 out of every 1000 Indian, Coloured and African populations respectively (Herman 1997). Reflections on earlier scenarios show that Black women representation in higher education in the 1960s and 70s was very marginal. For instance, Badat (2009) shows that in 1960, women constituted 13.3 per cent (502) of the total Black enrolment, in 1970, 18.9 per cent (1 580) and in 1975, 21.6 per cent (3 928). Due to the racialized state of higher education then, representation of women in Natives universities was far greater than the national overall figures. Concomitantly, this trend reflected in the staff composition too. The Native universities were monopolized by males up to 1975. The 22 per cent Black female participation was mainly populated in nursing and paramedic courses with the exception of teaching that had slightly more women than men during the same period (Badat 2009). The National Department of Education, Green Paper (Department of Education 1996, 10) notes that White men still hold prestigious positions in institutions of higher learning. The manifestation of this problem is a pointer to the few women who either lack the required qualifications to hold such positions or the institutional structures that are still embedded in sexism and patriarchy as well as racism.

AGGREGATION AND GENDER EQUITY

Post-apartheid South Africa had to reflect the achievements of the struggle movement and hence the crafting of an ideology that is anchored on human rights, redistribution and the realization of social justice was necessary. The South African Constitution (1996) desegregated

the formerly White universities whereas the National Commission for Higher Education (1996) aligned all institutions of higher learning under one national system so as to echo the principles of equity, democracy and transformation (Du Toit in Ndebele et al. 2010; Jansen 2003). The intermittent themes in the policy initiatives are based on creating a non-racist, non-sexist, democratic and a unitary system of higher education.

Subsequent statistics (1994–2005) show an increase in enrolment of Black students (male and female) in institutions of higher learning. In 1986, White students' share in the universities stood at 60 per cent while the African students' share stood at 27 per cent. By 1994, the White students' enrolment had dropped to 38 per cent while the African students' enrolment rose to 50 per cent. As of 2005, White students' enrolment was at 25 per cent, and African students at 62 per cent (Bunting and Cloete in Ndebele et al. 2009). However, although the numbers reveal an increase in enrolment for African students, a close scrutiny against the overall population of each race group reveals that very little has changed for the Black community. It can be argued that, whereas during apartheid inequality was informed by race, after 2001, a new sophisticated and complex structure of inequality that is race and class based emerged (Bunting and Cloete in Ndebele et al. 2010). This situation has hence threatened the presence of students from economically deprived backgrounds in higher education, a majority of whom are Black and Black women in particular.

Similarly post 1994 data shows that women are steadily gaining entrance into higher education in South Africa. For example, by 2002, 54 per cent of the total university enrolment was dominated by female students and in 2006, the percentage rose to 55.1 per cent. By 2007, the total enrolment of women had shot further to 56 per cent and in 2009; women formed 57 per cent of the total enrolment in institutions of higher learning. Comparably, there has been an increase of 9 per cent in female enrolment in institutions of higher learning since 1993 (Council on Higher Education 2009).

Despite the fact that women enrolment in higher education has improved tremendously, gender imbalance in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) is a worrying phenomenon. These imbalances can be traced from as far as the apartheid era. Inasmuch as a good percentage of women (48%) were attending higher education as per the statistics in 1993, Martineau (1997) argues that the data is deceptive. A majority of the women who were in higher education were enrolled in part time courses and therefore lacked contact hours with academicians. Additionally, Martineau notes that a majority of women then were enrolled in the traditional female dominated courses (languages, social sciences, humanities and education). The 1995 Information Directorate figures from 15 to 21 universities show that women graduates accounted for only 9 per cent in engineering, 28 per cent in agriculture, 38 per cent in medicine,

and 47 per cent in the sciences (Department of Education 1997b; Badat 2009; Department of Education 1996).

Currently a similar pattern of underrepresentation and participation of women across fields of study can be deduced from available data post 1994. National statistics show that the Classification of Education Study Material (CESM) category (i.e. the field of study) men dominate engineering and sciences; 57 per cent of enrolments in 2007 were men, whereas in 2007, 56 per cent of students in business, commerce and management were women; in the human and social sciences, 59 per cent of students are women; and in education, 73 per cent of students were women. These patterns of enrolment have been consistent since 2004 (Council on Higher Education 2009).

While the undergraduate figures show a promising picture for the position of women in higher education, post graduate enrolment rates show that women are underrepresented. In 2008, 45 per cent of doctoral graduates were black and 41 per cent were women (Department of Higher Education 2012; Council on Higher Education 2010; Badat 2010). One can conclude that the delineation of women from SET is a reinforcement of the traditional female roles of nurturing and caring. The poor representation of women at higher degree level confirms that a large number of women would become relegated to subordinate roles in the work place.

In brief, it can be noted that although numbers reveal that many Black students are accessing higher education, parity has not been attained as yet. The dilemma of the inability of Black students and women to overcome socio-economic challenges is a daunting reality (Fiske and Ladd 2004). Secondly the reality of the crippling effects of primary and secondary education cannot be ignored (Schofer and Meyer 2005). The picture on representation of women given above demands that a deliberate effort has to be undertaken to create a synergy between higher education and the lower tiers of education. Practical steps need to form part of the urgent measures to be taken by the departments of Basic and higher education so that the numbers of women taking higher degrees can begin to compare with that of men. These can include resourcing of rural and Township schools with adequate facilities and competent workforce; adoption of special incentives for women to excel at higher level. Lastly, an undertaking towards shifting current race based equity enterprise to include social class and gender disadvantages will be a right move towards addressing gender equity in the higher education sector.

GENDER AND THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARADIGM

The preamble of the South African Constitution (1996) acknowledges the injustices of the past

and pledges to build a just society that is based on democratic values, social justice and human rights. The social justice project is largely premised on fairness and justice in terms of provision and allocation opportunities and resources to members of society. It is against this background that Stowell (2004) counter-argues that just procedures do not always guarantee just outcomes. Stowell is of the view that concepts such as justice, equal opportunity and fairness are not defined succinctly. This situation is made worse by the fact that unchallenged institutional cultures, structures, processes and the formal and informal curricular are left out of justice and equity policies. It is in view of this that we also argue that if the playground is not always level mere equal distribution will not be sufficient. In other words, circumstances may call for implementing what could be deemed as unfair means while questing for justice for all. This speaks more to the application of Rawls' (1971) difference principle.

Fraser (2008) notes that there two forms of injustices; the socio-economic injustice that is rooted in the political and social structures and whose remedy is redistribution. Marginalization, exploitation and deprivation are ways through which this form of injustice is felt and experienced. The second form of injustice is cultural and symbolic; it's rooted in social patterns of representation, communication and interpretation. Its manifestation is through the subjection to alien cultures, being invisible in one's culture and being subjected to demeaning cultural stereotyping and misrepresenting. 'This form of injustice requires recognition so as to redress the harms of disrespect, stereotyping and cultural imperialism' (Fraser 2008, 93). We argue that women's marginalization in higher education can also be located in the two forms of injustices (socio-economic and misrecognition) that have been proposed by Fraser.

Nussbaum (1999) argues that as human beings we are entitled to dignity and integrity regardless of our natures and conditions (poor, rich, male and female, rural, urban). Thus, our dignity is based on the shared humanness principle and not on how fortunate we are. Although Rawls (1971) makes the same observations as Nussbaum on the equality of all human beings and the equal entitlement to the appropriation of equal liberties, Rawls calls for further compensation to the economically and socially challenged masses. The compensation or equity measures that he calls for have to be undertaken within the confinements of the institutions in question. Rawls' views on social justice are clearly articulated in the two principles of justice in which the first one calls each person's equal rights to the most extensive scheme of basic liberties available to everyone in society. The second one acknowledges that somehow total inequality is impossible and therefore states that inequalities can be accepted if and only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged or if they are attached to positions of office that open to everyone to compete for.

Nevertheless, the appropriate paradigm on which social justice ought to be premised on

has proven to be very contentious. Whereas formal equality plays a vital role in the conceptualization of social justice, it doesn't guarantee its attainment due to the fact that human beings are gendered, racialized, classed and boxed in political and other affiliations. To demonstrate this complexity, Alcoff (1988) argues that it is becoming increasingly impossible for feminists to hold onto the claim that they know and understand what is good for all women. This is so because even if womanhood is the point of departure in feminist theory, there is no such a thing as a unified sisterhood. Womanhood is like an onion, it has many caveats and layers to it that have to be unravelled and understood in their own contexts and environments. Further arguments by Kant's (1970) on equal dignity egalitarianism approaches whose basis is liberty, equality and brotherhood have been questioned and seen as being flawed because by treating everyone equally; the inequality that exists in the society is not taken into cognisance. On his part Barry (2005) advocates for equal allocation of opportunities and rights unless there are convincing reasons. He puts a lot of emphasis on people's choices and accountability which could be plausible because choices are informed by amongst other factors, social capital and domination. Thus, Satz's (2007) argument on the complexities in interpretation of what the principle of equal opportunity may mean in educational reform accentuates the implausibility of the egalitarian approach to justice.

On the other hand, the distributive paradigm to justice whose primacy is the allocation of material things does not appeal to Young (1990) either. She believes that focusing on material distribution lessens the concentration on social structures, power struggles and institutions within which distribution takes place. Young states that it would be imperative for social justice to encapsulate the specific and particular circumstances of individuals, and not the sameness and universalized conditions. Moreover, advocating for equality for all is potentially dangerous for it is bound to reproduce and assert the oppressive and dominant systems of the past that are responsible for the current inequalities in society. Young (1990) further observes that people's contexts ought to be named and assigned appropriate meaning (looping effect) so as to avoid a repetition of the past inequalities. Within this thinking, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness and violence are identified as representing the five faces of oppression that women go through. These five faces can also be traced from our earlier discussions on discourse of gender under the auspices of patriarchy, colonialism and sexism.

It is equally complex to decide on justice on the basis of achieving the common good for all because determining what is perceived as good varies from individual to the next. Young (2000) argues that issues of justice cannot be based on the achievement of common good because injustices differ from one structurally different group to another. Satz (2007) explicates that the sources of differences start in the 'race' of life (parentage, income, gender, religion,

geographical positioning, and race). If women are to deal with the disparities in their own lives, Hassim (1991) suggests that their differences have to be recognized first. Hence in the same vein the symbolic recognition of the 'different' and 'particular' has been supported as a possible mechanism to foresee justice and fairness (Fraser 1995; Mackinnon 1993; Taylor 1994).

The call for the inclusion of the particular and specific contexts of justice into policies, as argued by Omora (2000), is based on the argument that the same policies that purport to serve the interests of the larger public bolster policies and practices that support the privileged and the dominant culture. Similarly, Taylor (1994) also notes that the crucial role society plays in constructing and exposing identities is put at risk within procedural liberalism that is based on neutral application of rights. In view of these, Nussbaum (1999) suggests that we have to be expeditious in acknowledging the cultures and daily experiences of women in developing countries instead of homogenising the experiences of women through universalized concepts of justice, human rights or human development. Such constructs are synonymous with Western ideologies and colonialism. Taylor (1994) proposes that instead of the politics of universalism focusing on the uniformity of the shared humanness and respect of equal rights, (higher education) policies should focus more on the recognition of the uniqueness and individual identities of groups and people that distinguish them from each other because 'differences cannot be resolved through assimilation nor annihilation' (1994, 38).

In rejecting a universalist approach to justice, Satz (2007) argues that justice ought to transcend the allocation of equal resources and opportunities to individuals. This needs to take the form of adequacy for citizenship that is based on equal civic status of citizens and a fair but not equal access to opportunities above citizen's thresholds. The adequacy approach in developing human capabilities has the potential to transform education in several ways. First, it sets the minimum thresholds of attainment for governments and other state apparatuses on which accountability can be based. Secondly, it is founded on the democratic role of education that is missing in the equal opportunity approach. Thirdly, it can offer an explanation as to why some inequalities may require greater remedial attention than others and lastly, it is a more realistic approach for diverse communities such as South Africa and the particular context and position of women in the higher education system.

Our main argument is that dealing with the unprecedented marginalization of women requires a different approach, a substantive approach to equality and justice, which surpasses egalitarianism through the acknowledgement and recognition of the differences that separate womanhood, wifehood and sisterhood from one another (see also Mackinnon 1993; Young 1990). For meaningful engagement to exist, oppression and domination have to be part and parcel of the discussions that precede justice (Young 1990). In the case of gender inequality in

higher education, redistribution alone or simply giving one access cannot attenuate the gap. An understanding of the social positioning of groups in relation to each other, how and who enjoys the non-material goods (respect, power and opportunity) and finally the role that social relations play in the sustainability of the enjoyment of the non-material things is fundamental if we are serious about correcting the gender imbalances. Hence ‘social policies have to offer special treatment for certain groups of people’ (Young 1990, 158). ‘It is not enough to just open the gates of opportunity. All citizens must have the opportunity to walk through those gates’ (Msimang 2001, 1) quoting President Lyndon Johnson of the United States of America in 1965). According to this thinking, equality should not be pursued as a right and theory, but as a fact and as a reason.

THE CENTRALITY OF WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Factors ranging from freeing and releasing one’s potential, enabling one to function adequately as a useful member of a society and developing basic and higher functions that lead to freedom of choice and liberation from domestication and oppression have been pivotal in advocating for education for women (Sen 1994; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Freire 1985). Sen (1999, 75) specifically notes that ‘a person’s “capability” refers to the alternative combinations of functioning’s that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations and various lifestyles’, what Sen (2009, 231) later refers to as the achievement of things that one has reason to value. Taking Sen’s line of thinking, one can argue that an educated woman has higher chances of living a meaningful life and her well-being is guaranteed because she can participate in decision making both in and out of her home precincts. She also has the capacity to reclaim her legal rights as opposed to the uneducated woman. If that is the case, then the stakes for obtaining higher education are even higher. Sen’s thinking resonates with Nussbaum’s (1999) capability approach which among other things argues that, availability of resources needs to be interrogated to find out if they enable or stifle the functioning of the woman. Thus, in brief, Nussbaum questions the positioning of women in the society in relation to good living after attaining recognizable levels of education. ‘If women and men are to do the same work, they must receive the same education’ (Kamtekar 2001, 219). But most importantly the capability approach at stake here is ‘concerned with is our ability to achieve various combinations of functionings that we can compare and judge against each other in terms of what we have reason to value in life not just incomes or commodities’ (Sen 2009, 233).

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

While concluding we want to observe that the complexities of merit, race, gender and class inequalities in Higher Education have made it impossible for gender equity to be attained. Although lauded for increasing the number of women (especially Black) and additional Black faces in higher education in comparison to the colonial and apartheid days (Council on Higher Education 2009), a lot more needs to be done in order for meaningful change to be realized. For example, there is urgent need to resolve the paradox that has been created by the government and universities pursuing social equity, redress and quality simultaneously on one hand while financial difficulties and academic incapability continue to incapacitate the Black/rural/working class students, especially females (Badat 2010; Macleod 2006). Secondly, Morrow (1994) indicates that there seems to be confusion between formal access to universities and what Morrow calls epistemological access-learning (how to become a participant in an academic practice). Morrow argues that epistemological access cannot be ‘automatically’ transmitted to those who pay fees, or collect hand-outs and attend classes regularly. Special attention needs to be paid to those whose needs and experienced forms of exclusion are endemic in society, such as the thinking that black males and females are equal. Young (1991) concurs with this view and states further that, material and institutional access gained from distributive justice may not be meaningful if it does not include empowerment and meaningful participation by the formerly marginalized and the women who in the case discussed are double or triple marginalised. If real human potential and talent are to be harnessed in the South African higher education system, the false egalitarianism that is presented in procedural Affirmative Action processes, the game of numbers, overshadows the real agenda of transformation. The system of higher education, therefore, ought to focus on the development of human capabilities and human functionings in which women and girls and reason to value.

NOTES

1. For the purpose of this study, the term women/woman will be used in a general way in reference to women of all race groups in South Africa, however, when need arises, direct reference to black women or any other category will be done directly.
2. The equity clause is part of the affirmative action initiative that was introduced in 1998 through the Department of labour as a way of improving the employability of black South Africans and other minority groups that had suffered marginalization through the apartheid structures.
3. By closely guarded I mean positive discrimination that is under check and balance so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past structures.

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