GENDER EQUITY IN LEADING A SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

There is a scarcity of research focusing on gender equity in higher education leadership in the African context or reference to the standing of gender equity in the private higher education institution. Thus, this study sought to explore gender equity in leading a South African private higher education institution. Using a generic qualitative research approach, data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews, and a focus group with eight institutional leaders from a South African private higher education institution. The data from the study revealed that gender stereotypes persist in private higher education institutions, defining which roles women must hold and how they must be managed and regarded inside the institution. As demonstrated by the study's findings, there is no clear policy on leadership appointments, which leads to unfair practices in selecting leaders, such as an old boys club that advances male leaders. As a result, defining leadership and its responsibilities and context becomes significant. It is recommended that South African private higher education institutions establish a comprehensive, transparent policy on leadership and the support thereof, recognising the dual track faced by women in the policy to advance gender equity in the leading of these institutions.

Keywords: gender equity; leadership; private higher education; women leaders; policy

INTRODUCTION

There is a lack of research focusing on gender equity in higher education leadership in the African context or framing the issue using African-originated theories for an African context (Moyo and Perumal, 2020; Simon and Hoyt, 2021). The research that has been conducted in the Africa, specifically the South African context, on the issue of leadership and gender equity, focuses primarily on the public higher education setting (Kele and Pietersen, 2015; Seale, Fish, and Schreiber, 2021; Sebola, 2015), with little or no reference to the status of gender equity in private higher education institutions. Despite the promise of gender equity and equality in higher education policies, the lived circumstances of African women are not taken into consideration, thereby continuing the gender imbalance in the leadership of South African higher education institutions (Akala, 2018). Research conducted in 2017 affirmed this imbalance, as it found that merely 15 per cent of South African public higher education institutions are headed by women (Seale et al., 2021). UNESCO (2021) reported in their women and higher education report that women still encounter hindrances when pursuing key academic and leadership positions. Against this background, this study aimed to explore gender equity in leading a South African private higher education institution.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was situated within the African feminism(s) theoretical framework. The author recognises that within feminism, there is considerable diversity, therefore, the use of the plural form of feminism(s) when referring to both African and Western feminism(s). African feminism(s) recognises and acknowledges that patriarchy still endures in society today in varying forms, limiting women from reaching their potential (Burnett and Adom-Aboagye, 2019). African feminism(s)' inclusive nature makes it well-suited for this particular study. The use of African feminism(s) as a theoretical framework approach creates a simpler structure for both genders to understand gender issues and address gender inequities in higher education (Odhiambo, 2011). African feminism(s) argues that political aspirations are hidden in everyday mundane communication and are concerned for the integrity of African women's voices that has been misrepresented or erased using conversation as the toolkit for change could help uncover feminist concerns (Buzzanell, 2021). Research using the African feminism(s) lens, recognises the role of African women as agents of social change and studies issues of survival in uncertain contexts (Cruz, 2015).

African feminism(s) describes a specific type of feminism focused on the needs and goals as they arise from women's actual realities in African society, therefore localized, indigenous,

and post-colonial stances (Shamase, 2017). African feminism(s) focuses on the trials that African women encounter in contemporary society and the way they creatively overcome these problems through actions (Cruz, 2015). African feminism(s) advocates for social, economic, and political freedom, simultaneously being aware of a multiplicity of obstacles (Biwa, 2021). Research conducted on gender discrimination in South Africa suggests that the gender inequality within leadership structures is varied and intricate (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012). Therefore, the fundamentals of African feminism(s) provide scope for discussing these complexities regarding gender equity within South African private higher education leadership.

CHALLENGES WITH ACHIEVING GENDER EQUITY IN LEADERSHIP

Despite the South African legislative frameworks for gender equity, there remain challenges in influencing the promotion of women to assume leadership positions at higher education institutions (Moodly and Toni, 2019; Sebola, 2015). In addition, there is complacency amongst higher education decision-makers to address this gender imbalance, based on Deem, Morley, and Tlili's study (2005) supported by post feminists' discourses, that the issue of gender equity is not a concern anymore (Shepherd, 2017). Odhiambo (2011) confirmed this assertion by stating that an academic assumption is made within higher education institutions that gender equality exists.

Women leaders' experiences continue to be challenging due to sustained difficulties with gaining admission to leadership positions, the recruitment process, and institutional culture (Khunou, 2018). One of the reasons cited as a justification for these difficulties is that women are privileged to less human capital investment in education and work experience than men (Simon and Hoyt, 2021); therefore, there is a shortage of competent women, more commonly referred to as a pipeline problem or theory or fallacy (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Moodly and Toni (2017) wrote that research points out that higher education leaders are usually sourced within the higher education institution and are predominately candidates who rise through the institution's ranks. Interestingly, Sebola (2015) implied that due to the lack of women enrolling and completing their PhD programmes in South Africa, there is a smaller pool from which to select women leaders for higher education institutions, as confirmed by the UNESCO report on women in higher education (UNESCO, 2021).

Due to women predominately being responsible for domestic demands, they often have more career interruptions and less work experience than men (Simon and Hoyt, 2021). There is clear evidence that there is a variance in women's timing and career structure, particularly with leadership development (Redmond et al., 2017). Women experience the so-called double track

where they are required to combine both work and life roles continuously (McReynolds Palmer, 2014). The increased time and work commitment required from a leadership position affect women's choices for their careers, in contrast to men (McReynolds Palmer, 2014). COVID-19 has resulted in new and continued social and academic repercussions for women in higher education, as women experience more complications when balancing work and family responsibilities (Chitsamatanga and Malinga, 2021). The familial obligations of women are perceived by them to have constrained their career development and serve as a reason for women failing to advance through the hierarchies of higher education institutions (Obers, 2014). Within academics, there is a failure to recognise the gendered nature of family life, where it is assumed that everyone can equally be devoted to their profession (Aiston and Fo, 2021).

Within the African context, it was found that women are wary of female educational leaders as they are seen as deviant from feminine values that place pressure on their marriages, which could deter women from entering education leadership positions (Moyo and Perumal, 2020; Maposa and Mugabe, 2013). In other words, within an African context, career ambition is considered unfeminine, as it is focused on agentic rather than communal behaviour, as valued within African feminism(s) where collectivity is respected (Morley, 2005). This is not a uniquely African view; Ross (2018), whose research focused on the Western hemisphere, also stated that women grapple with maintaining their femininity while simultaneously dealing with the expectation of how a leader should act.

Social power structures are inherently gendered, such as higher education institutions, where women leaders are silenced; for example, it is much more acceptable for a man to get to and maintain the floor by speaking loudly and monopolising the conversation when speaking in public settings than women (Aiston and Fo, 2021; Townsend, 2019). If a women were to speak up or make her voice heard in these settings, she is viewed as being hostile, aggressive, and worse, not only by men but sometimes even by fellow women (Aiston and Fo, 2021). This lack of support from fellow women in academic leadership is not uncommon. Women in leadership positions either are unaware of how to best support their female colleagues or view supporting them as a threat to their own career progress (Redmond et al., 2017). This refers to the Queen Bee syndrome, where senior women replicate behaviour exhibited by male leaders, thereby legitimising gender inequity (Chitsamantaga and Malinga, 2021; Derks, Van Laars and Ellemers, 2016; Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019). This lack of support and female role models in leadership also deter women from applying for leadership positions within higher education institutions (Krause, 2017).

Women in higher education institutions are perceived to lack access to support networks as enablers to positions of power compared to men (Moodly and Toni, 2017; Obers, 2014).

There tends to be a grooming process for men if they are earmarked for a leadership position, whereas women only have support from their family and junior colleagues.

THE NATURE OF POLICY REGARDING WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The South African government enacted affirmative action legislation, more specifically the Gender Policy Framework, as part of a strategy to redress the gender imbalance (Kele and Pietersen, 2015). Institutional policies continually perpetuate gender inequity and prejudice, leading to the glass ceiling preventing women from being appointed to leadership positions (Krause, 2017). In addition, the current challenge with the implementation of gender equity policies at South African higher education institutions is that it is focussed on the homogenous women's circumstance and experiences (Akala, 2018). The question becomes whether institutions have policies to recognise and nurture women intent on leadership positions or whether a lack of interest is used as an excuse not to challenge gender equity in higher education leadership (Jones-Goodwin, 2020). Kele and Pietersen's (2015) study, as well as Moodly and Toni (2017), confirmed the failure of South African public higher education institutions to implement equity legislation, in addition to failing to comply with government plans for women empowerment.

There is an increase in advocating for more family-friendly policies due to COVID-19 pandemic to enable women to manage their work/life balance, including flexi-time, telecommuting, child-care, and more (Kim and Wiggens, 2011; Sabharwal, 2015; UNESCO, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the resignation of female academics because of a lack of childcare support and additional responsibilities at their homes (Skinner, Betancourt, and Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021). South Africa's public higher education institutions' policies does not consider nor contest the continued inequities concerning gender roles and identity that dominate the broader South African society (Khunou, 2018).

Gender equity can only be achieved with progressive, prescriptive gender equity policies that focus on addressing the gender gap in higher education leadership (Peterson, 2016). This is not a uniquely South African problem; even in European countries with progressive, prescriptive policies regarding the promotion of gender equality, there continue to be challenges in attaining gender equity in the leadership of higher education institutions (Peterson, 2016). The consequences of this misalignment between policy and practice have to be examined; if a policy does not include strategic intention and tactics to specifically redress the gender imbalance in South African higher education institutions, then policies are executed

inconsistently on an ad hoc basis (Khunou, 2018). These informal practices, when applying policies, lead to further marginalisation of women leaders by reinforcing the glass ceiling. A lack of uniform policy in South African education institutions hinders South African women from progressing into leadership positions (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012).

Legislation and policy must be used as a tool to support and advance gender equity in educational institutions (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012). Morley (2005) argued that many of the Commonwealth countries, of which South Africa is one, borrow policies and have strong policy networks with fellow Commonwealth countries, of which the majority are Anglophone countries. This echoes the sentiments shared by African feminism(s) that a unique, purposeful policy must be devised based on the conditions as experienced in Africa, with a holistic perspective of women leaders considering their multi-layered, connected, overlapping reality. This is confirmed by the research findings of Odhiambo (2011) that asserted that policies and strategies at both the local and national level must be developed, dedicated to expanding women's involvement in policy making and leadership in higher education institutions within an African context.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Significant gender inequity remains despite initiatives and the legislative framework to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and ensure they are better prepared for these roles (Shepherd, 2017). One potential reason for this could be that despite the promise of gender equity and equality in these higher education policies, the lived circumstances of African women are not taken into consideration, thereby continuing the gender imbalance in the leadership of South African higher education institutions (Akala, 2018). Research conducted in 2017 affirmed this imbalance, as it found that merely 15 per cent of South African public higher education institutions are headed by women (Seale et al., 2021). Achieving equitable representation in the leadership of South African higher education institutions seems unattainable (Sebola, 2015). The justification for the marginalised representation of women leaders is usually explained by using the following argument – "differences in women's and men's investments in human capital, gender differences, prejudice, and discrimination against female leaders" (Simon and Hoyt, 2021, p. 395). Sebola (2015) found in their research that gender equity is possible in South African higher education institutions if substantial support policies for women in leadership positions are established. UNESCO (2021) reported in their women and higher education report that women still encounter hindrances when pursuing key academic and leadership positions. There continues to be collective gender inequalities and

practices that hinder women from gaining entry and participating in South African higher education, despite several strategies called for by the government to advance women within this sector (Moodly and Toni, 2019). Male staff members are dominant in senior posts and academic leadership at public South African higher education institutions (Simon and Hoyt, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As this study aimed to ascertain and understand the participants' insights with regard to gender equity in the leadership of a private higher education institution, a qualitative research methodology was best suited. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. A screening process was used to select participants based on specific criteria, including being a South African private higher education institution leader with at least two years of leadership experience. Thus the sample consisted of female and male leaders within a South African private higher education institution with differing ages, races, and years of working experience. The differentiation of the participants allowed for richer data analysis. In addition, as the theoretical framework that guided this research was based on African feminism(s) with the distinguishing feature of both men and women working together to address gender inequity, it was important to include both male and female voices in the data collection.

As qualitative research is mainly interested in participants' interpretation and construction of meaning within the context of their life experiences, data were mainly gathered by conducting individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Semi-structured interviews were the key data collection method for this study. Individual interviews were conducted with eight leaders of a South African private higher education institution. A focus group was the secondary data collection method. It was conducted with four institutional leaders that also participated in the individual semi-structured interviews to get group consensus about issues related to gender equity in the leadership of a South African private higher education institution. Additionally, as this study was situated in the theoretical framework of African feminism(s), using conversation as a toolkit to uncover feminist concerns is recommended, therefore, the data collection methods of semi-structured interviews and a focus group that were chosen for this research.

The software programme ATLAS.ti was used in the qualitative data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes and sub-themes were discovered throughout the data analysis, the two main themes that emerged were obstacles to gender equity in leadership; and leadership appointment, support and management.

The following key is used to explore the themes and sub-themes: institutional leader (IL), focus group interview (FG), and the South African private higher education institution (PHEI). The line number will be used to refer to quotes taken straight from the interview transcripts (L). For example, institutional leader 3, line 4 of the interview transcript, is referred to as IL3 L4.

Obstacles to gender equity in leadership – Gender stereotypes

The data from the study indicated that although there might be a challenge with the availability of highly educated women in the pipeline for leadership positions at higher education institutions, in the PHEI, this was not the case. There seemed to be an overrepresentation of women in the PHEI and the discipline of media studies (65% in the PHEI). In addition, the few academic staff who had obtained a PhD at the PHEI, were in the majority women, which contradicts Sebola (2015), Khunou (2018), and UNESCO (2021).

Gender stereotypes and gender bias were repeatedly referred to by the participants in all the interviews and confirmed as barriers to achieving gender equity. One of the participants commented that not only the roles within society but also higher education are gender-defined, as illustrated in the literature (Simon and Hoyt, 2021) and explained by one of the participants:

> "So men are the leaders within the schools, they are the leaders in the institutions, and the women are the nurturers, they take care of the people in the educational institutions … a perception in education that women teach, they don't lead. I also think that mostly, women are perceived as administrators and therefore they fulfil roles like the registrar, the administrator, the student liaison officer, seldom do they get elevated to higher echelons within educational institutions." (IL1)

The other participants echoed this viewpoint. They included in their reflections that women are mostly responsible for administration-driven jobs; they are seen as the emotional support structures of the institution and that it is "natural" to see men in leadership roles, corroborating the think manager–think male sentiments found in higher education (Fitzgerald, 2020; Moodly and Toni, 2019; Peterson, 2016). As per the praxis of African feminism(s), it has to be recognised that not all women are homogenous; therefore, it is not necessarily true that all women could only serve in a leadership position that provides emotional support, as some women could be better suited for example in a leadership position that provides strategic intent (Kunene, 2018).

The perceived gendered domestic responsibilities pigeonhole women who wish to enter the leadership track in higher education, unfairly when compared to their male colleagues. The participants explained:

> "…a consequence they are having to balance that with careers and that often means that it puts them out of the running for occupying positions of leadership." (IL5)

There was a participant in the focus group that commented that it is important to recognise that domestic responsibilities might not rest predominately on the shoulders of women and that as a male, he can relate to the dual-track pressures faced by women. Within African feminism(s), it is a key feature that both men and women work collectively to shun gendered segregation and the patriarchal conceptions of male and female roles, which this participant is an example of (Ekpa, 2000; Odhiambo, 2011; Shamase, 2017).

> "I tend to also try and have the kind of guidelines and limits what I am capable of as a father and as an employee and looking at the female situation, I get it that sometimes if you are in a leadership role if you are at home and now you still have to divide to say you have these deadlines and you have to balance the family." (IL6, FG)

COVID-19 has further exacerbated women's career progression, as there are new and continuing social and academic ramifications as women face more challenges combining work and family obligations – not recognising holism, as a pillar of African feminism(s) (Biwa, 2021; Chitsamatanga and Malinga, 2021). Some of the participants described these challenges:

> "Women have more responsibilities at home and their families, they are not able to cope with the leadership position because leadership comes with responsibilities also, and it is just too much."(IL3)

A participant reflected and stated that during COVID-19, they felt that women in the PHEI are withdrawing, which correlates with the article written by Skinner et al. (2021) that more female academics have resigned as a result of COVID-19. The participant related her experience of feeling increased pressure due to a lack of available childcare for working women (WEF, 2021):

> "Female academics' performance had gone down because they don't have the help from the helpers that they have because it is lockdown." (IL4)

The participants reflected on how fortunate it might be for unmarried, childless females during these times; they do not face similar challenges, which places them at an advantage to continue to either operate as a leader or apply for a leadership position within the PHEI:

> "I would say I feel that single women, career women hunting leadership position, they have more time on their hands." (IL3, FG)

The preceding perception confirms that the only way to achieve success as a women leader is to sacrifice family life, as corroborated by Diezmann and Grieshaber (2019), who wrote that women who in their early academic career remain unmarried, childless, and complete their PhD studies, enjoyed not only a longer academic career but also increased their possibility of advancing into more senior leadership roles. This is in stark contrast to the expectations of African feminism(s) that assert that women should not sacrifice their right to have children in order to advance (Shamase, 2017). Obers (2014) also wrote that single women gravitate more towards leadership roles, while married women gravitate more towards teaching roles in higher education.

Obstacles to gender equity in leadership – Culture and patriarchy

The participants reflected that the higher education sector remains patriarchal and masculine. These sentiments are strengthened by Abalkhail (2017), who affirmed that patriarchal beliefs are even more prominent within the African culture and supported in specific religions, in which the PHEI finds itself, as one participant remarks:

> "… masculinity in the workplace where men always look down on women to think that women cannot manage. It is an African thing, it is also cultural. Culture has also played into it, for men to see women as secondary." (IL3)

The other participants corroborated that in African society, patriarchal beliefs stemming from culture and religion continue to dominate every sphere of society. This is, however, in contrast to the belief of African feminism(s) that seeks to disturb the patriarchal culture (Shamase, 2017). As one participant observed:

> "It has always been seen really much as a boys' club, and so if you are not male, you really don't fit in and actually, you should not be in this environment." (IL2)

This approach is detrimental for the PHEI since a patriarchal system places women in a subservient position, resulting in gender disparities, creating an environment for gendered segregation, as opposed in African feminism(s) (Mestry and Schmidt, 2012; Odhiambo, 2011). The participants confirmed that in the PHEI, men do not treat nor view women as their equals. This viewpoint affects the PHEI's culture, as the one participant observed:

> "The institutional culture is almost set in such a way that women cannot lead, even when women are placed in positions of power they cannot effect any change." (IL4)

Obstacles to gender equity in leadership – Self-preservation strategies

The data further confirmed that one of the significant obstacles to achieving gender equity is the strategies that women themselves employ to self-preserve in the PHEI and their lives. One participant explained that as a women leader, you are expected to continuously prove yourself capable (Moyo and Perumal, 2020) which places unfair pressure on women leaders in the PHEI:

> "Maybe they have to prove themselves more than their male competitors, I think women sometimes have to work harder to earn the promotion. I think, women, younger women now want to succeed in their careers and they might be fighting for their places on the Board." (IL8)

Therefore, one of the other reasons women decide not to pursue leadership positions in the PHEI is a strategic decision to safeguard their marriage and domestic responsibilities. A participant pointed out how as a married mother, initially, she made a strategic choice not to pursue a leadership role, as echoed in the literature by Moyo and Perumal (2020). This statement corroborated a concern that is expressed in African feminism(s) that African women do not view women leadership in educational institutions as favourable as it places strain on their relationships (Maposa and Mugabe, 2013; Moyo and Perumal, 2020). A participant further expanded on this by pointing out that as a married woman in a leadership position, your marriage and home life do suffer.

According to Shepherd (2017), women also use self-preservation strategies that are seen as lacking strategic agency. The participants corroborated why women have this lack of self-belief and confidence in the PHEI:

> "You fear that you are going to be judged, you fear that you are not adequate, you fear that you aren't going to make it in that business." (IL2)

Leadership appointments, support and management

The findings revealed that applying and/or being appointed as a leader in the PHEI is often an informal process as it does not routinely occur according to established policies and protocols. Half of the participants did not apply for their current leadership position. It was either a position specifically created for them or a position that they created for themselves. This casual approach towards leadership appointments in the PHEI is expressed by the participants as unfair, although some of them benefitted from this practice, again both the male and female participants:

> "The biggest problem is in our institution is that positions are not advertised, so we don't even know the position exists, and you receive an email, just say congratulations, person X has just been promoted or has this position." (IL2)

The PHEI is not unique in its ad hoc practices; these findings in the study are corroborated by Khunou (2018). These ad-hoc practices of the PHEI can be attributed to the current Quality Management System (QMS) policy that the PHEI has adopted. There is an absence in this policy to specifically address leadership appointments, as reflected by one of the participants:

> "I don't see anything in our policy that is specifically aimed at addressing leadership or leadership capacity building or even recruitment or appointment of leaders." (IL5)

Most of the participants were not aware of any specific leadership appointment policy. Still, they did assume that the current QMS policy as adopted by the PHEI indicates that all appointments comply with the regulatory and mandatory requirements of not being discriminating. Although the policy states there should not be discriminatory practices in the appointment of leadership positions, the data suggests the contrary happens at the PHEI as the adverts for these positions are written so that candidates, usually women, are discriminated against. This research's findings support Kele and Pietersen's (2015) study as well as Moodly and Toni's (2017) findings that the PHEI, like other South African higher education institutions, fails to apply equity legislation in order to comply with government objectives for women empowerment.

Another discriminatory practice at the PHEI which limits the achievement of gender equity, according to the participants, is the existence of the old boys' club that decides who should enter which leadership position. The participants described this practice:

> "So because the majority of people that make these decisions are men, it is natural to assume that they will probably take on another male, but also because they classify a certain role with a certain gender." (IL1)

Therefore, this old boys club advances the men and the opinion that men do not view women as equal in the PHEI, again echoeing the gendered segregation and patriarchy as opposed in African feminism(s), as one participant explained:

> "Look at the men in these roles and you think, I've got so much experience and then sometimes you wonder, did they get it because of experience and qualifications or because of someone that they know." (IL2)

The findings of the study confirmed the practice of homosociability in the PHEI. This old boys club advances the men in the PHEI and therefore is seen as the gatekeeper to the leadership positions in the PHEI, corroborating Moodly and Toni (2017). This discriminates against anybody who is perceived as an outcast. As supported by the data in the preceding section, the PHEI, as a social power structure, is inherently gendered (Özkanlı et al., 2009; Townsend, 2019). However, in the PHEI, this gendered practice does not necessarily refer to discrimination

in the number of women versus men leaders appointed but instead in the treatment, influence, and experience of these respective leaders. This practice leads to adversarial gendered politics, as critiqued in African feminism(s) (Buzzanell, 2021). There was an observation from the participants that there are discriminatory practices against the women leaders in the PHEI:

> "A man can be assertive and people look up to him, women can be assertive and see me as a b@$ch and it is, that is the problem because you, the problem is that we [women] are not seen in the same light. You [women] are not seeing me as trying to advance my career in the same way you would Mr X and he is doing exactly what I am doing, and so, I think we have to be more forceful and put down your foot proverbial." (IL2)

The data corroborated with Aiston and Fo (2021) that speaking out is considered a risky move for women in higher education. It leads to being viewed as a trouble maker, and as a woman, it is considered unfeminine. Again, this echoes the concerns of African feminism(s) that being a women leader is to be unfeminine – the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome (Aiston and Fo, 2021; Chitsamantaga and Malinga, 2021; Derks et al., 2016; Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019). Therefore, many women are hesitant to enter into leadership positions as they have to actively work and develop a skill set that is considered masculine. The participants commented that it then becomes a strategic choice to embrace more traditionally masculine traits in an effort to be respected and survive as a leader in the PHEI. As confirmed by literature, this is a reaction to prejudice and threats to their social identity (Derks et al., 2016; Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019).

> "I have also chosen to adopt masculine traits because it does give me some form of leverage when I walk into a room." (IL1)

One of the participants differed on the preceding point and commented that this is not a choice of women leaders to embrace more masculinity in their leadership and personality. Instead, they are adapting to suit the environment, supporting the view that the most effective leadership style of an institution is not gendered but rather situational (Merchant, 2012).

Upon reflection, one of the participants also added that leadership qualities and traits cannot be defined as gender-specific. Interestingly, one of the participants commented in the focus group that the reason it could be viewed that women leaders embrace masculine traits in their leadership style is perhaps an effect of being mentored by male leaders or only having access to male leaders to "learn" from:

> "Who does our current female leaders learn from, so there is an element of the masculine in our leadership. Many of us have come through working ranks where we've had male figures as the leaders throughout." (IL8, FG)

This comment strengthened the literature that the gender inequity challenge of too few women leaders in higher education to serve as role models, referring to the pipeline problem that exists (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Simon and Hoyt, 2021). This data also corroborated an obstacle to achieving gender equity argued by Krause (2017), that women are discouraged from seeking leadership roles in higher education institutions due to a lack of female role models in leadership. However, most of the participants cited that within their career trajectory, it was a women leader who played a significant role:

> "My big motivation was if this woman can do it if she is succeeding, she is making a difference, then as a woman, what I need to do is to learn you know on how I can also do these things." (IL3)

The data seemed to corroborate the literature that women's unique attributes, are the reasons why in the majority, women leaders are preferred in the PHEI over male leaders (Karadag, 2018). The participants confirmed these characteristics as preferable in a leader:

> "Women are involved, more cognisant of emotions, will reach out more and be more emotionally available to staff." (IL4)

Gender parity is feasible, according to Sebola (2015), if a robust support structure for women in leadership roles is developed. The women participants in the study, all of whom are institutional leaders, described the level of support that they receive in the PHEI:,,

> "It is uncharted territory and it is, not much support until you kind of really need it. You are on your own, if you need support, you can ask for it, but you kind of expected to manage by yourself in a way." (IL8)

The data corroborated Moodly and Toni (2017) that women leaders in South African higher education only have their family and subordinate colleagues for support. More intense pressure and scrutiny are placed on the women leaders – the glass cliff, without providing support (Alan, Ertac, Kubilay and Loranth, 2020).

There does seem to be a difference in the level of support that is offered, not necessarily to the different genders but rather from the different genders in the PHEI. This assumption corroborated, as asserted in the literature, the differences in the leadership styles of men and women in higher education and again confirms the preferability of a women leader in this context to provide support (Karadag, 2018; Simon and Hoyt, 2021). It was evident that there is a consensus of a lack of support for women leaders that could be improved upon in the PHEI:

> "… very little guidance provided to female counterparts in the organisation. The problem though is because we actually don't have any set of good practices in place, it makes it really difficult to lead." (IL2)

The majority of the participants echoed that due to the lack of formal policies and structures that specifically address support for a leader (including advancing women leadership), there is an ad hoc, informal support network in the PHEI. The support that is offered by the PHEI seems to be more reactive, sporadic and an emotional type of support, rather than a proactive, formal, structured approach. The participants explained:

> "There is emotional support. I can phone somebody and they will support me that way, but in terms of the actual leadership role, expectations. No, there isn't any, nothing." (IL2)

A possible reason for this lack of formal support is the non-existence of specifically addressing leadership in the QMS policy, which has led to no one within the PHEI being able to define what a leader is, and how this leader should be supported.

> "I don't think that our own leadership know sometimes what good practices are and so it is difficult for them to lead and so it is therefore difficult for us to follow that leadership. So generally the experience to me is like a ship through the night, and I hope I get to the other end." (IL2)

As asserted by Khunou (2018), the data from the study reiterated that failure to include strategic aim and methods to address leadership in the PHEI QMS policy has led to the practice of leadership and support thereof being implemented inconsistently, which further advances inequity. Therefore, as Jones-Goodwin (2020) argued, this lack of interest in establishing formal leadership policies, which includes strategic intent on addressing gender equity, elucidates the current challenges with achieving gender parity.

It is important to note that reaching gender equity in the leadership of the higher education sector is essential as staff must mirror student demographics; the higher education sector is missing out on the societal and institutional benefits of greater diversity for the improved health and well-being of staff and improved productivity, and it is required by legislation. If there is gender equity in the leadership of a higher education institutions, women could perceive this focus on gender equity as an alignment with their own ethics – and feel that women are supported in this institution (Madera et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that women might be more attracted to work at such institutions where there is an alignment with their own values. Institutional leadership with gender diversity can hint at how women would be accepted and treated at higher education institutions and society at large. The ramifications of neglecting gender equity in higher education are damaging to the South African socio-economic viability and sustainability, based on the national transformation agenda aimed at empowering women in all domains of society. Based on the current obstacles encountered by South Africa, there is a necessity for a range of leadership approaches. The nature of women – focused on fostering,

caring, and facilitating collaboration can help achieve a diversity that is longed for and required in the sector in the nurturing of an egalitarian society in South Africa (Moodly and Toni, 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

A limitation to the study was that the interviews had to occur virtually (on MS Teams) due to the restrictions imposed because of COVID-19. A further limitation was that it was only possible to conduct eight individual interviews and one focus group during the period where fieldwork ensued. A more extended period might have afforded more opportunities for multiple interviews.

This study was prompted by the scarcity of research on gender equity and leadership in South African private higher education institutions. Whilst this study has contributed to the field, it could not analyse all aspects of gender equity in the leading of private higher education institutions. Thus, there is a need for greater empirical research - investigating a comparison between the status of gender equity in the leadership of both public and private South African higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

The general aim of the study was to explore gender equity in leading a South African private higher education institution. This exploratory study found that the status of gender equity in the leadership of this South African private institution is concerning. This conclusion is based on the fact that despite initiatives to address gender equity in the leadership, there is a lack of equitable authority and recognition for women leaders due to the persistence of gender stereotypes, cultural and patriarchal beliefs, women's lack of agency or ability to occupy leadership positions because of their domestic responsibilities and to safeguard themselves against criticism and pressure, and a lack of formal policies. The recommendation to establish a formal, comprehensive, transparent policy in South African private higher education institutions' Quality Management Policy on leadership appointments, the management of leaders, and support thereof is the first step in addressing gender equity in the leadership of South African higher education private institutions. It is hoped that this study has contributed to assisting private higher education institutions, and policy makers in advancing gender equity in the leadership of South African private higher education institutions.

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