

## **Leadership In Post-Democratic South Africa - Building Support Towards The Advancement Of Women**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Within a continuously changing environment, leadership qualities cannot be static. The ability to adapt leadership styles pro-actively or in response to change, is an important quality. This paper reports on a survey carried out amongst a small group of women in higher education, at a women's leadership academy in South Africa. It explored whether, with the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994 and post this period, there was a difference in the view of the characteristics of leadership in higher education compared to the apartheid period (pre-1994), and what that view would be if it had changed. It also further explored whether there was a view that the characteristics of leadership was gender specific. Lastly, questions focused on whether there was a need for continued support for women towards and in leadership. Comments indicated that participants felt that more women had been included in higher education leadership post-democracy, but that leadership qualities were still gender specific, with traditionally viewed masculine characteristics still predominant. The responses also reflected a continued need for support and development for women in and towards higher education leadership, with various suggestions on the forms this should take. Responses resonated with the scholarly literature arguments for adaptability in leadership, considering organisational and environmental sustainability and ever-increasing complexities of these milieus. The paper reports on the findings of the survey using a qualitative approach, although numerical data is minimally presented at times. The focus is on the comments to the survey questions, with a qualitative analysis and presentation of findings, linking these to the literature on leadership qualities and support for women towards and in leadership.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership characteristics, gender, South African higher education, leadership support for women

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Globally [1, 2, 3,4], as well as in South Africa [5,6], the dearth of women in positions of leadership has been recognised as a huge area of concern. Not only does this speak to inequalities within our societies, but also impacts socio-economic and organisational sustainability [1,2,3,4,5]. The absence or severe lack of women in leadership also extends to the higher education (HE) sector, both internationally, and within the South African context[2,5]. Within the South African context, during the apartheid era (pre-1994), all South African public universities had men as vice-chancellors, with a predominance of white men. Post the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa introduced legislation and policy to address gender inequality, aspiring towards gender parity in all spheres of society, including higher education[6,7]. The former president, Nelson Mandela, aspired to gender parity within ministerial appointments within cabinet in 1994, with at least 50% women as ministers. Though this was not achieved, it set the scene for equitable representation of women and men in positions of leadership.

### **1.1 Gender parity and leadership for sustainability**

Researchers have recognised and globally acknowledged that, for socio-economic and organisational/institutional sustainability, it is critical that both women and men form part of the leadership in all spheres of society (political, economic, social, religious, health, etcetera) [3,4]. The simple fact that women form the majority of most, if not all countries' populations, should be an argument in itself for gender parity in leadership towards sustainability. Researchers also recognise that diversity in leadership in leadership enhances profitability and efficiencies within organisations [4,6,9].

### **1.2 Leadership and positional power**

Often absent from the conversation on leadership, is the aspect of positional power. Those who hold leadership positions are effectively in positions of power, influencing the direction (or lack thereof) of policy and decision-making at various levels of an institution/organisation or beyond. Not only do men hold positional power and influence decision-making – but do so “disproportionately” [10]. Hence the argument that men have shared responsibility to transform our university spaces, using such positional power. There is not only a wage/remuneration gap, as men earn more than women, but there is also a power gap in favour of men [11].

## **2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

The analytical framework is seated within the context of Rawls' theory of social justice [6,12]. The study is further contextualised, as part of a broader research project within the social justice framework of Rawls (1971). As cited in Moodly [6], this is an “ethical framework, allowing equal access and fair opportunities to all under conditions which facilitated “equality of fair opportunity”. Moodly also cites Neier (2015, 47) who states that

“social justice may be defined primarily as distributive justice”. In this, Moodly [6] states, social just also considers “social and economic rights” to the extent that it benefits society. Considering sustainability in leadership, the social justice framework affirms “a compelling argument ... for the consideration of, at the very least, equal representation of women and men in leadership”[6]. Moodly [6], argues that this is especially important, considering the South African context, where the population is majority female, “within an oppressive and continual patriarchal system”.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 The South African higher education context

As previously indicated, South African women form the majority of the South African population. This is also the situation in HEIs. This is not reflected in the number of women in HE leadership, even post democracy. As indicated, the position of vice-chancellor in public South African HEIs was one hundred percent male.

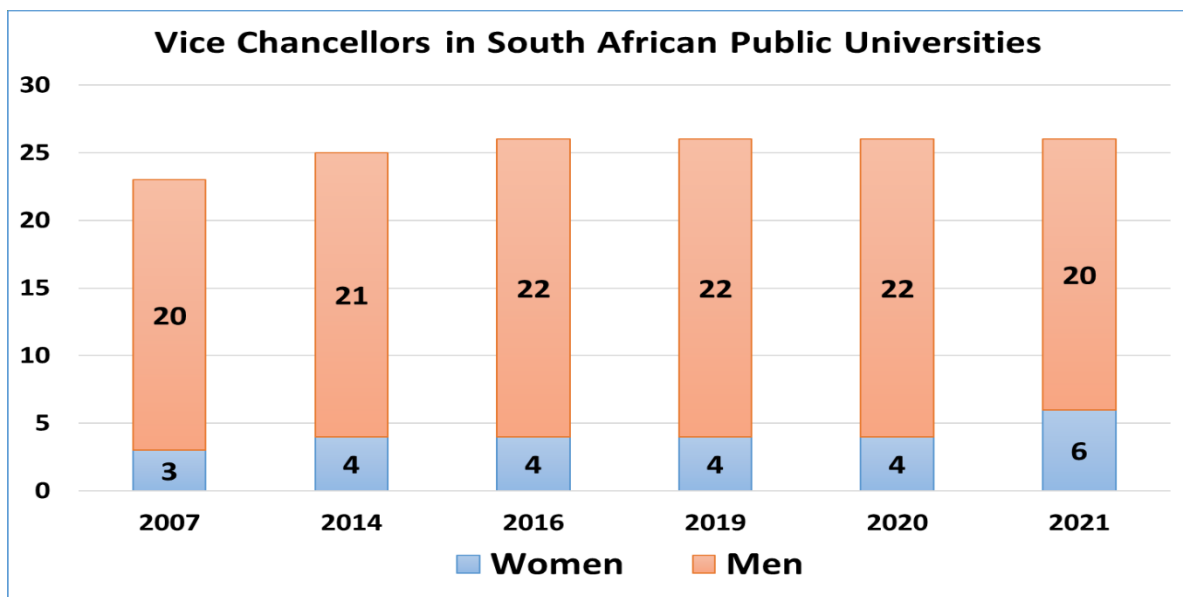


Figure One: Number Of Women As Vice-Chancellors In South African Universities In 2021 [6]

As indicated by Moodly [6], Figure one represents the number of women as vice-chancellors over the period 2007 to 2021. Six of twenty-six vice-chancellors were women, a total percentage of 23,07%. Moodly further stated that in comparison to 2015, the number of women in the traditional positions of Deputy Vice- Chancellors (DVC) Research and DVCs Academic (also known as Teaching and Learning), as well as the number of women as registrars had increased. This was also reflected in the number of women in the position of DVC Research, with ten (10) in 2019 (in twenty-six public HEIs). For the DVC Academic positions, the number of women had increased from six (6) in 2013/14 (in twenty-three public HEIs ) to eleven (11) (in twenty-six public HEIs) in 2019. In the position of registrar, which was also traditionally a male-occupied space, the number of women was nine (9) or 35% in

2019 (in twenty-six public HEIs), in comparison to four (4) in 2013/2014 (in twenty-three HEIs). Moodly argued that more than twenty years had passed and within the context of South Africa HEIs, the 50% mark, as aspired to by the former President, Nelson Mandela, in all positions as highlighted, has yet to be met.

### **3.2 Challenges for women and leadership within the higher education context**

Research identified various institutional challenges that impede the progress of women towards and in leadership. These include but are not limited to cultural and structural challenges [6,13,14, 15,16,17,18,19, 20]. Various aspects of these broad areas of challenges have been identified, and manifest as gendered cultures, family-work balance, lack of support structures, and lack of policy implementation and practices. Discourse of these challenges has also been extended to the role of men in supporting and advancing women leadership. These areas are briefly discussed below.

#### **3.2.1 Gendered cultures and a patriarchal system**

In the global context, there has been a consistent reflection in the literature of the gendered culture within HEIs [6,9,20]. Not only is the pathway to leadership different for men and women, both chronologically and lineally, but the responsibilities expected of women in terms of these, are of a more challenging nature. Literature continues to reflect, and sadly so, that the responsibilities for family is likely to remain primarily that of the woman [21,22,23,24]. These traditional roles and responsibilities spill over into the institutional area, in which women are viewed with the same lenses, and are expected to take on similar roles and behaviours, as those in the family space. These include a caring, compassionate and understanding nature, non-assertive and using “gentle persuasion” in their leadership style [6,9]. Any deviation from these behaviours is negatively viewed, and should women assert themselves, or act in ways normally associated with men’s leadership styles, they are considered bullies and as acting in ways considered masculine [2,6,].

Networks within institutions, known as the “old boys networks” usually favouring men, are also informal spaces, such as sport and male social gatherings. These spaces in which men build “trust and rapport”, often exclude women. It is within these spaces that at times, important decisions are made, to be concluded in the formal workplace[6,14,15].

#### **3.2.2 Family-work balance**

Closely related with the barriers of gendered cultures and patriarchy, is the challenge for women to balance work and family life. This greatly impedes their opportunity to consider positions of leadership. As a result, the likelihood of women to achieve leadership, is limited by expectancies around gender norms [1,6,21,22,23,24].

#### **3.2.3 Lack of support structures and implementation of policies and practices**

Throughout literature the emphasis on support structures for women has been reiterated [1,3,6,23,24]. Support in the form of mentorships, leadership academies, and networking, amongst others cannot be downplayed in the advancement of women. Together with such structures, is the critical role of implementing policies and practices that advance women in leadership. Too often, literature reflects that though policies are in place, implementation thereof, and change in practices is sorely absent within institutions [6].

### 3.2.4 Men exercising their agency in the advancement of women in and towards leadership

Literature reflects the critical role of men, especially those in leadership, exercising their agency and positional power in supporting the advancement of women [6,10,25]. As Moody [6] argued, there is a need to reflect on the roles and responsibilities of both men and women in leadership, “in addressing gender inequalities and the disproportionate power relations within our societies”. Without the support of men in positions of influence and power, there is always the danger of complacency in accepting the status quo.

Given the introduction and literature review, a survey was carried out, which explored whether there was a difference in views on characteristics for higher education leadership pre-and post South African democracy, whether the view of leadership characteristics as gender specific was still predominant, and whether there was still a need for support, and the form thereof, for women in and towards higher education leadership.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

A survey comprising seven questions was distributed to approximately seventy women delegates who had been registered to participate in a workshop on Higher Education leadership organised by a Chapter of a non-profit organisation (NPO) [26]. The focus of the chapter was the “advancement and leadership development of women ... empowering women leaders in higher education” [26]. The survey link had been sent to the delegates via the NPO, to ensure confidentiality of information in relation to the Protect of Personal Information Act (POPI) [27] and voluntary participation and consent. As delegates registered, the link was sent to them by the Chapter hence the approximation of delegates who were sent the survey, as relayed to the researcher/author by the NPO. Thirty-eight responses were received, which translated into approximately a fifty-four percent (54%) response rate.

The seven questions posed are listed below and it was assumed that all delegates would interpret it in a South African context.

Using the 1994 period as a benchmark, would you say:

1. There is a difference in the view of the characteristics of leadership in the higher education sector pre-and-post this period? (Y/N)
2. What is the view of characteristics of leadership in (1) above, in your opinion? How has it remained the same or how has it differed pre- and- post this period?
3. Is there a view of leadership characteristics as gender specific? (Y/N)
4. What is the basis of your response in 3 above?
5. Is there still a need to have support workshops/seminars/structures to develop and support women towards and in leadership? (Y/N)
6. What is the basis of your response in 5?

7. If your response in 5 was YES, how should such support workshops/seminars/structures be structured?

#### **4.1 Brief description of participants**

According to a description of the delegates provided by the NPO, all were women within the South African higher education sector, with the majority within public higher education institutions (universities). Delegates included women in academic leadership positions up to the level of deputy dean. Others held academic positions (lecturers and senior lecturers), while others held administrative positions with their institutions.

#### **4.2 Analysis and discussions of findings**

A qualitative approach was adopted, and the findings were analysed using a deductive approach to analysis [28], as well as a thematic approach, coding the findings according to themes. According to Pearse [28], research findings contribute to “the body of knowledge” and “theory development”. Pearse cites numerous authors, stating that in a deductive approach, “theoretical propositions are derived from a review of the literature”. These propositions are then “used to guide the collection and analysis of data”. Coding assists in within this approach, identifying patterns that can be identified in the analysis of the finding and grouping these into themes [29].

### **5 LIMITATIONS**

It is acknowledged that the survey was limited to a group of women delegates at a leadership in higher education workshop and cannot be generalised to the broader higher education sector. The responses though, contributes to the body of knowledge on women and higher education leadership, and more broadly to women and leadership studies and development of theory. Gender is acknowledged as non-binary, whereas the researcher has not explored leadership in this context in the research.

### **6 FINDINGS**

In the following sections the findings are discussed as per the questions.

#### **6.1 Responses to questions 1 and 2: Differences in the view of the characteristics of leadership in the higher education sector pre-and-post 1994**

Four (4) of the delegates (10.5%) indicated that there was no difference in the view of the leadership in the higher education sector pre-and post 1994, with thirty -four (89.5%) indicating that there had been a change in view.

Reasons provided by the four delegates, included that change was slow and that patriarchy was still dominant. One delegate indicated that male leaders did not provide equal opportunities for both men and women. Responses of all four delegates reflected that traditionally, mostly men held positions in higher education leadership Though there had been a shift, this had not been a significant one.

For the thirty-four delegates who indicated that there had been a change in the view of leadership characteristics post-1994, the majority indicated that the space of higher education

leadership was opening to women, albeit that the pace was slow. They also observed that attention was being given to diversity, inclusive of gender and race. Women were more involved in the policy development and decision-making, with their voices slowly penetrating the 'corridors of power'. One delegate responded that pre-1994 (in the apartheid era), previous leadership characteristics favoured 'strong white males with extrovert qualities'. More recently, she indicated, there has been an increasing recognition of diversity in leadership towards successful organisations. Efforts into women and leadership positions, had increased towards the development and promotion of women and persons of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Another delegate noted that there was a more 'participatory style', moving from autocratic pre-1994, to a democratic leadership style post-1994. One delegate stated that there was a change in expectation of leadership to a more inclusive and humanising character, noting that she had observed differences in leadership styles in men and women, as well as in the evaluations of these styles. A delegate also noted the constant evolving context, call for agility in leadership. Though there had been a change towards diversity and more inclusivity in leadership, it was still not equitable, according to many of the delegates. Men still held most leadership positions.

## **6.2 Responses to questions 3 and 4: The view of leadership characteristics as gender specific**

Five (5) of the delegates (1.2%) did not agree that there was a view that leadership characteristics were gender specific, with thirty-three (33) of the delegates (86.8%) indicating that there was such a view.

Reasons provided by the five delegates who did not agree that there was a view that leadership characteristics were gender specific, included that leadership required 'an appropriate mentality' and 'knowledge and skills', and this applied across gender (stated by four of the delegates). Another delegate stated that each has the ability to lead, and that leadership skills could be acquired through 'education, training and engaging in relevant platforms.

Responses by the thirty-three delegates who indicated that leadership characteristics were still viewed as gender specific, included that more men than women continued to occupy most leadership positions (most delegates), that women were 'underestimated' (one delegate) and granted fewer opportunities for growth and development than men. Delegates also cited their own experiences for their responses in question 3. A delegate indicated that she had observed differences in leadership styles, with women leaders being more 'accommodating' when staff experienced 'personal challenges'. Another delegate stated that women who were 'strong-minded' were often 'characterised negatively' while those who had 'quieter, introverted personalities' were 'overlooked or not considered tough enough to be good leaders'. A delegate stated that men and women 'lead differently' and that there was a prevalence of certain characteristics (though not exclusively so), in one gender. She cited compassionate leadership as a trait more prevalent in women. Inclusivity of leadership, with a 'focus on building relationships', and development of subordinates, 'humility' and 'empathy', were some of the leadership characteristics of women, as described by a delegate. She contrasted these qualities with those of men, describing theirs as 'autocratic, results-focused and 'power driven'. For another delegate women were more 'respectful in communication', whereas men were 'dictators'. In another delegate's view, 'patriarchy' was 'real and rife'. Much still had to be done in recognizing the strength of women in leadership. For another delegate, 'societal bias' influenced the views of the 'suitability' of women in leadership, due to the traditional role that women 'fulfill in society'. Though 'gender should not matter' in the contribution persons

make in leadership, the 'de facto situation' did not reflect this, was the view of a delegate. One delegate stated that 'characteristics praised in leadership' were 'predominantly male traits', though the view was changing towards 'empathy and communication'. There was also an observation that women in leadership were not supportive of each other. Another view was that men with 'lower qualifications' were considered for leadership positions over 'more qualified women'.

### **6.3 Responses to questions 5, 6 and 7: The need for support for women towards and in leadership**

In response to question 5, whether there was still a need to support women towards and in leadership, one delegate responded 'no'. This could have been an errata, as in her response to questions 6 and 7, she motivated for mentoring, expressing that women lacked confidence at times. She suggested 'mentorship programmes, support groups' and workshops on leadership skills. Considering this, all delegates (100 %) agreed that there was need for continued support for women towards and in leadership.

Below follows, in bullet points, reasons provided for responses to question 5 and suggested forms of support. The bullet points are not necessarily associated with an individual delegate's response(s) but summarise comments of various delegates.

Reasons for agreeing that women needed to be supported:

- To improve women's competency and confidence to lead, and foster career advancement.
- To support women to 'deal with their fears' and to be more pro-active leaders.
- Women need to learn and unlearn many issues, as the 'status quo has affected our mindsets'.
- Women are afraid to be labelled as 'bullies, aggressive and bossy', and avoid being assertive. They needed confidence.
- There was a lack of women mentors to support young women.
- The glass-ceiling still existed, and women needed to work twice as hard as men to 'prove themselves'.
- More women were required in leadership positions.
- Women think that they need to 'exhibit male characteristics to become leaders'.
- Women need to learn to use their own strengths, and their 'unique characteristics'.
- Women need to learn 'how to deal with traditional leadership personalities'.
- As gender inequalities and bias still existed, women need to 'be prepared to navigate the space'.
- Women are still vulnerable to gender-based violence in the workplace.
- Women's home responsibilities have not changed. There is a need for skills development on work-home life balance.
- With the evolution of technology, training on use of technology, more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, was required.

Support mechanisms suggested included:

- Leadership awareness raising and coaching.
- Colloquia
- Mentorship programmes which could extend across universities.



- Communities of practice on leadership.
- Conversations with male leaders on gender parity.
- Career-pathing.
- Women's strengths and how to apply these in positions of leadership.
- Conversations with women in leadership, engaging on their transition into leadership and how they navigated their challenges, learning from 'real life experiences'.
- Support that is structured to address 'individual needs'.
- Workshops structured in a manner that challenge delegates to 'understand themselves'; 'develop empowerment, assertiveness and confidence'. These workshops should also cover the 'technical aspects of leadership', and 'women as change agents'.
- Including men in leadership seminars.
- Participation in research where women are not 'subjects'. In explaining this, a reference was made to an article by Zuber-Skerritt, O. 2007. Leadership development in South African higher education: the heart of the matter.)
- Encouraging women to apply for leadership positions.
- Network opportunities and advice by persons in positions in leadership.
- Employer/ organizational support.

## **7 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND THEME IDENTIFICATION**

As previously indicated, a deductive approach was adopted in the analysis of findings, considering the literature, and identifying themes that resonate throughout the responses. The analysis and discussion are clustered under the themes as identified.

### **7.1 Patriarchy in the higher education sector and society**

As reflected in the literature review section, the responses expressed that despite the shift to a democracy post- 1994, the view was that most positions of leadership in higher education are still occupied by men. Though women were making in-roads, the pace was slow. In areas where women occupied positions of leadership, there was still a view that the expectation of leadership characteristics were still those traditionally associated with men. These included, assertiveness, authoritarian and results-focused (as contrasted with a compassionate focus). Though these characteristics were lauded when visible in men, both literature and delegates' responses reflect that women were ostracised, or negatively viewed when they asserted themselves. They were sometimes viewed as bullies when asserting themselves or when 'stong-minded'. The gendered/ stereotypical expectations of the roles of women within the home as primary caregiver to children and caretaker of the home, amongst others, as foregrounded in literature, are also reflected in the appeals by delegates for engagements around these views of women and their responsibilities.

## **7.2 Gendered nature of leadership**

The literature review section reflected that prior to 1994, there were hardly any women in executive leadership in any public university in South Africa. Vice-chancellors in these institutions were all men. The gendered nature of leadership was thus male-dominated, with admiration and affirmation for authoritarian and assertive leadership qualities. Delegates comments reiterate as reflected in literature, that the status quo remains for women. Those who display assertiveness, continue to be viewed negatively. Though there is an increasing recognition and appreciation for diversity in leadership, with characteristics such as care, compassion and participatory leadership being promoted, these continue to be viewed along gendered lines, and associated with women. The situation lends itself to a form of conundrum, as these qualities are recognised as contributing towards diverse and sustainable leadership, yet women continue to be the minority in these positions.

## **7.3 An argument for leadership characteristics as non-binary**

Delegates have also stated that leadership characteristics should not be gender-biased, rather than be recognised as qualities that all leaders should embody. Despite this view, it has not influenced people's mindsets or behaviours as reflected in literature. The patriarchal nature of society, and universities which are microcosms of these, continue to influence the view of leadership as gendered, with qualities of leadership divided along gendered lines and associated with either men or women. A digression from these lines and associated characteristics by any gender, is viewed negatively. Universities and society at large, has much work to do in promoting leadership qualities as non-binary.

## **7.4 Forms of support for women towards and in leadership**

The responses of delegates continue to affirm the need for support for women towards and in leadership. The literature has reflected this over various eras. It is a concern that there is still a lack of equity, and that continued support is critical for the advancement of women. This aspect for women's progress cannot be neglected or ignored. We ignore it at our peril, backsliding many centuries, lest we remain vigilant. Women continue to call for support in various forms, as outlined in section 5.3, with theory reflecting that men's voices are a critical component in the transformation of leadership.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

The themes as outlined confirm that the issues raised in relation to women, leadership, patriarchy, the gendered nature of leadership, and the need for support toward the advancement of women in and towards leadership, are still the reality of a post-democratic South Africa and the higher education sector. Despite advancements of women and the increased number of women who occupy leadership roles, support of women cannot be relaxed. The views as expressed by delegates, through either their own observations or experiences, or perceptions, reflect what is expressed in the body of literature on the subject. The theory cannot be ignored, that transformation in the advancement of women is a slow

and challenging process. Support programmes, together with men's support and agency, need to continue, to push at the barriers.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST:**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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