

FREEDOMS FOR WOMEN AS OUTLINED IN THE FREEDOM CHARTER: THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Women at all levels of South African society began articulating their interests in the 1950s, with the Women's Charter preceding the Freedom Charter by a year. Since 1994 South Africa has taken bold steps to advance the interests of women and made great strides in the quest for gender equality and women's empowerment. However, persistent disparities remain in South Africa between women and men with regard to senior positions in the higher education sector. Drawing on a number of dialogues and discussions, this paper seeks to analyse the reasons behind gender inequality in education and reveal whether patriarchal values and stereotypes related to women in certain sectors of South African society are a factor. This paper will contend that despite legislation protecting women, both subtle and overt forms of discrimination still exist in the sphere of higher education. The paper also seeks to analyse challenges still being faced as well as offer possible solutions to the gender inequality that continues to prevail in the education sector.

Keywords: Freedom Charter; education; discrimination; gender equality; pay parity

INTRODUCTION

Current statistical research suggests that executive and senior leadership posts within higher education in South Africa are male dominated, with females occupying only approximately 30 per cent of positions (Moodly 2015, 234). This highlights the glaring shortcomings in gender equality and the advancement of women despite 22 years of gender reform programmes in democratic South Africa.

If the status quo is not challenged, there is a risk that deep-rooted patriarchal belief systems will remain unopposed and women will fail to break through the so-called glass ceiling. It is therefore important to gather first-hand testimony from women working within higher education institutions to gain an insight into this problem. Various

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qualitative and quantitative studies relating to gender equality in higher education in South Africa reveal that historically women have been openly discriminated against and their voices heavily suppressed. Kallaway (2002) provides a detailed account of the history of the South African education system within the socio-political context of apartheid. Other works, such as that of Moodly (2015), examine the current phenomenon of men occupying the vast majority of executive and senior management posts at universities, and investigate gender equality from a social justice perspective. While these works are important in drawing attention to gender issues in education, gender equality in higher education still appears to be something of a taboo subject that is not being frankly debated by those within the system. This in itself might tell a story of women historically taking a back seat to men and being popularly perceived as remaining docile.

This paper aims to highlight the experiences of women in higher education from a gender equality standpoint, from a historical and current perspective, through oral testimonies and interviews. Women in South Africa have historically voiced their concerns about equal rights, equal work and equal pay, as articulated in the Freedom Charter: “Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work”. The Freedom Charter, adopted in Kliptown, Soweto on 26 June 1955, was the statement of core principles of the South African Congress Alliance, which consisted of the African National Congress and its allies the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People’s Congress. The interviews conducted for this paper provide valuable insight into how gender equality has evolved in the South African education system. The Freedom Charter stated that men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work. However, for the next four decades South African female educators saw little change in the educational structure, which was deeply rooted in apartheid patriarchal and Calvinist values. Since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 there have been sweeping reforms with regard to gender equality in an attempt to uplift and empower women across the board. Nevertheless, practices harmful to women are still evident in various forms that violate social, political, economic and cultural freedoms. In exploring these issues, as a point of departure, oral testimony is important in understanding the current situation and ascertaining whether changes have in fact been implemented.

RESEARCH PROCESS

The primary objective of the study was twofold: first, to interview female educationalists in higher education and to gather their collective memories of teaching in the era of apartheid and then of democracy in South Africa; and second to gather oral testimonies from women currently working in higher education in South Africa to ascertain the prevailing climate with regard to gender equality. The rationale for collecting testimonies in Tshwane was twofold: first, as a research site it was geographically viable, as the

author resides in Tshwane and time for fieldwork was limited; second, Tshwane is home to several major universities such as the University of Pretoria and University of South Africa, which provided easy access to interviewees. However, interviews were also conducted with staff at the University of the Free State and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Seven participants ranging from lecturers to senior lecturers and deans were interviewed. The interviews were conducted individually, and each lasted approximately an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for ease of reference to statements during the writing-up process.

THE HISTORY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Women have consistently been at the forefront of the education sector and have always played an important role in educating young South Africans. Although a noble profession, teaching has historically been viewed in South Africa as a female-specific vocational area. There is a marked history of pervasive and very subtle gender socialisation. During apartheid there was scant choice of occupation for black and to some degree white women, and it was largely accepted that a woman could study teaching or nursing, or become a secretary.

Historically, South African women have had to carry the burden of being the breadwinners while still attending to their families, as mining and industry lured men into migrant labour. Wages have historically been low in professions such as teaching, with gender inequality adding to the burden women have had to carry. Up to 1994 the majority of the education workforce was made up of women, yet male teachers earned more on average than their female counterparts. During the apartheid years female teachers across the racial divide were subject to open discrimination in that they were appointed in a temporary capacity only, with poor opportunities for promotion, lower salaries, and no or unequal access to housing subsidies and pensions. In addition, those who were employed in temporary posts stood to lose their jobs if maternity leave was granted. Female teachers who got married lost their permanent positions; they could re-apply for positions, but were then afforded the vague status of “temporary indefinite” (Fester, 2014).

Black teachers bore the brunt of apartheid discrimination within the education system. Access to universities was rare and statistics show that in 1978 only 2,32% had a university degree and 15,48% had a matriculation certificate. In addition, speaking out against the government could lead to instant dismissal from one’s post (Pogrud 2014, 127). In 1975 a black female teacher earned a mere R108 a month – the wage of an unskilled worker (Callinicos 2004, 376).

The lack of pay parity was further reflection of the inequality women experienced during apartheid. Professor Deidre Byrne (2015, personal interview) recalls:

When I started working in 1979, there was a huge gap. I started in teaching and my salary would have been R175 a month and the men would have been R350, which is almost double for the same job.

Professor Driekie Hay-Swemmer (2015, personal interview) provides the following corroboration:

When I was appointed as teacher in my first position in 1985 my salary was R250 per month, less than my male counterpart. At that time men who went to the army were rewarded differently and it counted for years of experience. Female married teachers could not easily get a permanent job as they would leave soon to have babies and maternity leave was not known of.

Finnigan (1986, 23) reports that during apartheid a male teacher's salary was roughly 10 per cent higher than that of a female teacher, with a white male earning nearly 40 per cent more than a coloured female colleague and 30 percent more than a white female. According to Van Der Berg and Burger (2010, 9), in 1992 black female teachers were still being paid half of what white male teachers were earning, despite the elimination of gender disparities and salary scales having been adjusted. This is indicative of the patriarchal and racial values that dominated the South African landscape at the time. Professor Daniella Coetzee (Coetzee 2015, personal interview) recalls blatant gender inequality and mentions that when she entered the academic world thirty years previously she was the only female in the faculty and was not allowed to speak in meetings unless spoken to by male colleagues.

To add insult to injury, discussion of pregnancy and maternity leave for teachers was considered taboo. Women teachers were not allowed to wear slacks during their pregnancy, and the general feeling among males in senior positions was that pregnancy in the teaching context was a matter of shame. The situation of unwed mothers was even worse: becoming pregnant while unmarried was a dismissible offence (Pithouse, Mitchell and Moletsane 2009, 261). A teacher recalled that she fell pregnant in her second year of teaching while unmarried, and had to get married in order to avoid being dismissed (Kallaway 2002, 236).

Women were also not guaranteed permanent positions as lecturers, despite their level of experience and qualification. Byrne (2015: personal interview) recalls that

When I started at Unisa, which was during apartheid, I was told that they do not simply have the funds to give me a permanent position, but male colleagues that joined the university on the same contract basis would be given a permanent contract. Again, when we asked why that was, we were told that male colleagues have to provide for a family.

These facts and testimonies are not necessarily an indication that women were passive about their vocational circumstances. Women played an integral role in the fight against apartheid and actively challenged gender inequality through emerging trade unions and civic organisations. The establishment of the Black Housewives League, the Transvaal Union of African Teachers Association (TUATA) and the African Teachers

Association are testimony to this (Soudien and Kallaway 1999, 456). In 1961 TUATA organised a petition in protest against the refusal by the Bantu Education Department to re-appoint female teachers who had married (Sono 1999, 75). However, former Prime Minister of South Africa at the time, Hendrik Verwoerd harshly denounced promotion by the unions of the Freedom Charter agenda of “equal pay for equal work” and actively encouraged the recruitment of women to teaching positions, as it was felt they would remain more docile and accepting of apartheid legislation than men would be (Holsinger and Jacob 2008, 515).

PROGRESS IN EDUCATION AFTER 1994

A large number of measures have been introduced by the government in South Africa to correct gender inequality in education since the advent of democracy; this Chisholm (2005) refers to as the “gender machinery”, of which the Department of Education’s Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) and the Higher Education Act (1997) are examples.

Despite this, the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga reported in 2013 that only 36 per cent of school principals were women, despite women constituting the majority of the teaching workforce in South Africa (*City Press* 2013). Although there is an overrepresentation of women in the lower academic ranks, there is a significant decrease in female representation further up the scale of seniority (Mabokela 2002, 10). On average, 68 per cent of heads of departments across all faculties of universities in South Africa are male, and 32.2 per cent are female (Moodly 2015, 234). This suggests that although overt gender discrimination has largely been eliminated in the education sector, historical remnants persist. It was stated in an article published in January 2015 that Higher Education South Africa (HESA) reported significant discrepancies between gender and pay parity in tertiary institutions (John 2015). HESA identified one of the reasons for this as being the underrepresentation of women in the higher academic ranks. The question remains as to why women are so underrepresented 22 years into democracy and 60 years after the Freedom Charter.

FINDINGS

Salaries in teaching have historically been skewed in favour of males, but with the advent of democracy this disparity appears to have largely been eliminated on paper. However, pay discrepancies are related to the level of experience of males and females. Patience Mushungwa explains (Mushungwa 2015, personal interview):

I don’t think there are discrepancies in terms of equal pay for work of equal value, but I do think that because men have progressed more easily (because they don’t have the responsibilities that we have) they have progressed faster. You will definitely find differences in pay even if you are both senior lecturers. It could be levels of experience, but in my experience they are valid ... when you talk about remuneration of women versus men it

might not be directly because this is a woman you are giving her lower pay, but the fact that she has come in at a lower rank and she is coming in at a lower rank because she has had so much time off dealing with her own gender-related things such as child rearing and all of that, so men have progressed much faster especially in the academic space.

Byrne (2015, personal interview) echoes this sentiment, but adds the following interpretation:

You wouldn't find two senior lecturers earning different salaries if they were a man and a woman, but what you would find is a woman doing the jobs or the tasks of a senior lecturer but not getting the promotion because she doesn't have the research outputs or whatever, but she would be doing the same tasks and therefore getting a lot less. So I think there is a reluctance to promote women to professor, associate professor and above.

In the interviews conducted for this paper all the interviewees agreed that the major obstacle to women rising through the ranks of senior and executive levels is the fact that women discriminate against themselves by believing that they are not worthy of such positions and that only men can occupy top management posts. Although these sentiments are changing rapidly, it appears that while being socially and politically free, women have themselves internalised these restraints.

Mushungwa (2015, personal interview) states:

I think if I look at success of men versus that of women in the workplace, I think the biggest issue is confidence. I think the difference is what I have seen with men and the reason why they get more success in what they do is that they are not rattled by the fact that people might not like it.

Hay-Swemmer (2015, personal interview) adds that there is still considerable evidence of stereotyping. In higher education the statistics speak for themselves in that 2015 there are only two female vice-chancellors in the country. Professor Leonie Higgs (Higgs 2015, personal interview) feels that one of the main reasons for this is that men are able to handle stress better than women and that, because of the enormous demands placed on staff in senior and executive positions at universities, many women do not want these positions and therefore do not apply for them.

This pervasive belief among both men and women that women are the weaker gender feeds directly into the perception of different leadership capabilities. The concept of "a man's world" is generally accepted, but it is particularly evident in South African society, where patriarchal values have become deeply embedded over centuries in the social fabric of our society. Coetzee (2015: personal interview) provides a thought-provoking example of this by pointing out that it is common to find a female principal at a girls' school, but that one would be hard-pressed to find one at a boys' school. At higher education level the belief that men should lead is still deeply entrenched. Dr T. Netshiangana (2015, personal interview) makes the observation that not only do a considerable number of men struggle to believe in the leadership capabilities of women, but women themselves believe that women cannot lead them. People tend to

think that women lack the disciplinary skills that are expected in senior management positions within higher education. Coetzee (2015: personal interview) states that women often believe that men are inherently aggressive and therefore better leaders. These points provide an interesting insight into the quiet acceptance of the prevailing gender inequality. It must be pointed out, however, that gender inequality often also takes the form of subtle discrimination, which makes it difficult to identify explicitly. Hay-Swemmer (2015, personal interview) cites examples of blatant gender stereotyping at academic institutions:

On council level I have often heard “she is not only soft on the eye but also clever”, so references to females’ bodies and sexual undertones are still a reality; women are not invited for sports activities, going to rugby or soccer stadiums or to play golf. Even chairpersons allow males to respond more than females, who often do not get a chance to speak at a meeting.

Mushungwa (2015, personal interview) feels that this subtle discrimination in higher education is both individually based and exists at institutional level, even though a lot is being done to make diversity understood and acknowledged, and to make people aware that diversity can be of great value to universities.

Although a great number of men have seamlessly adjusted to gender equity policies, patriarchal values and cultural belief systems are deeply embedded in South African culture. Mushungwa (2015, personal interview) cites the example of black men who were of the view that women should not vote in the 1994 democratic elections. Patriarchy is not simply a generational issue that can easily be overcome. Mushungwa (2015, personal interview) explains:

I don’t necessarily think it is related to gender because a lot of young people are very patriarchal and very domineering in terms of how they understand the role of women – very young – in their twenties or less – so I don’t know if generationally it will make a difference. I think that if there are interventions directly geared at to ensure people move away from past known to the new known, we will have better luck.

An interesting and surprising finding of the oral testimony gathered is that women often discriminate against and oppress female colleagues far more than their male counterparts do. This phenomenon has been labelled “queen bee syndrome”, and, as Malie (2011, 24) notes, it can take the form of opposition by some women in senior positions to women’s liberation in order to protect their immediate territory and position while at the same time preventing the advancement of other women. “Queen bees” fail to promote female solidarity and discourage female aspirations in terms of advancement. There is little literature on this phenomenon, and its existence appears to be highly dependent on the nature of the institution, organisation and/or structure. The oral testimonies of the interviewees reflected mixed responses to the suggestion that this phenomenon exists. Dr Diane Parker (Parker 2015, personal interview) insists:

I think it is a personality thing and it probably does happen. I think the supportiveness with men ... men get into a club and when they in this club they support each other and they mentor each other. They create opportunities. I don't know about the queen bee syndrome. Certainly in my working life that has not been the case, but certainly if you see how some boys have been mentored by other men, women don't do that in the same way.

However, this does not necessarily mean that women support one another to advance their careers. Netshiangana (2015, personal interview) expresses the opposite view, stating that in her career in education she has often found women deliberately thwarting the professional advancement of other women. She states:

Women who are up there and are supposed to be helping don't do that. Instead of pulling us up, they push us down ... I feel my experience has led me to find out more about it. It is about us women discriminating against each other. All these men are so welcoming. It depends on where you are and the context. I have worked for many institutions. The discrimination came from women.

Hay-Swemmer (2015, personal interview) echoes this sentiment, expressing herself as follows:

They [women] doubt themselves. It is also very lonely for women in senior positions – they are not welcomed by men, while there is lots of jealousy going on between women. There is a trend that some women who have reached the top do not want others to follow them. Women in power do not approve the promotion of women into senior positions – often not having solid arguments. I have seen in my career women being other women's biggest enemies in their success.

Byrne (2015, personal interview) acknowledges the existence of queen bee syndrome at universities:

You find that women professors discriminate against women colleagues and bully women colleagues. In all universities I think there is a tremendous amount of bullying so higher ranking women professors will actually bully their counterparts because of the perception that women counterparts are a) a threat and b) easy to bully. So yes, there is a queen bee syndrome – absolutely. There is a lot of that. It is very hard to eradicate because it is in subtle forms.

The same sentiment is echoed by Mushungwa (2015, personal interview), who states that there are cases where women develop queen bee syndrome and display it as they rise into higher positions, pulling the ladder up after them.

Another interesting finding to emerge from the oral testimony is that institutions of higher education in South Africa provide insufficient support structures for women in leadership positions.

Hay-Swemmer (2015, personal interview) expresses the following belief:

Women carry double loads in terms of families and work. We simply do not have sufficient support networks and structures to support women in academic – they must still go home and be

a mother, look after the house holding, cook, be a good wife and member of the community – the playing fields are not equal; men simply have it easier.

Byrne also states that there are universities that do not make allowances for the work–life balance at all and do not allow female staff to fetch their children or take them to the doctor or hospital. This is in violation of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, in terms of which employers are obliged to provide a favourable working environment for employees (2015, personal interview).

Mushungwa (2015, personal interview) offers a possible solution:

Unfortunately we don't have a set-up where women can dialogue about women issues and the struggles they have. To be honest with you, I think we should have those support groups. So if one has to look at interventions, it has to be some set-up where a place where like-minded people that are going through the same struggles can get together and just share and gain.

A possible solution to the paucity of support structures entails the reconceptualisation of support structures for women in higher management positions, mentoring and life coaching, running more campaigns, identifying talent and writing success stories.

CONCLUSION

The oral testimonies of women working in higher education revealed that although much has been done by the government since 1994 in terms of achieving gender equality, subtle forms of discrimination persist, particularly affecting the ability of women to rise up the ranks. The research reported on in this paper has made apparent the historical plight of women in education. Despite the noble ideal of gender quality in the workplace as expressed in the Freedom Charter, women educationalists are still subtly marginalised. Since the demise of apartheid there has been growing awareness that will eventually bring change, but the process is very slow. It is vitally important that women be able to relate their current experiences of gender discrimination in higher education in order to destroy the illusion that we are living in a non-sexist society. These verbalised experiences create opportunities for women to build support structures that make open and honest dialogue possible.

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