

**Living beyond the glass ceiling: Life histories of women in higher
education leadership in South Africa**

by

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ABSTRACT

Close to two decades, since the birth of South Africa's post-apartheid democracy, women have enjoyed unprecedented levels of participation in higher education. Yet, the distribution of women academics at senior levels remains uneven and unequal across institutions. Recent data shows that despite enabling policies and support programmes, as well as the restructuring of higher education in South Africa, the number of women in leadership has decreased from seven to five .

The goal of this study is not, however, to study pathology. Put differently, this study does not locate itself within the more familiar literatures on "barriers" to women participation in higher education leadership. Rather, the special focus of this study is on women academics that have succeeded in reaching the highest executive levels of appointment in higher education. This begs the following questions: What explains the success of these women despite the institutional barriers to female academic advancement in universities? Why did these select few women 'make it' into senior executive positions while the majority of their counterparts did not? What are the composite experiences of women academic executives in senior management? How do such women cope within male-dominated executive environments?

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to trace the pathways followed by these women executives to reach these senior positions in academia; to describe the experiences of women in higher education leadership; and to theorise the attainments of these women academic executives in the context of established explanations for gender-based achievements. The study will develop detailed life histories of each of the selected women subjects as the main design strategy.

While there is a diverse set of feminist traditions and leadership theories in social science scholarship, this study does not start with an *a priori* commitment to an established theory, but allows theory to be generated out of the documented experiences of these senior women in higher education leadership. This approach, broadly described as grounded theory, is complex but necessary, especially in the context of the proposed life history methodology, where much of the accent falls on the experiences of the informants expressed in their words. Placing a predetermined structure on the lives of the informants might distort what is expected to be a powerful, emotional narrative rather than simple quantitative data on silent objects.

The study, nevertheless, remains conscious of the shaping influences of sociological, anthropological and political science conceptual frameworks in informing the crafting and interpretation of individual life histories, as outlined in the seminal study of Vijay Reddy of the Human Sciences Research Council on black scientist achievements in South Africa (Reddy 2000).

The intellectual advance that this study will make is to move beyond the “barriers” paradigm in social science scholarship on women’s achievement, and focus on the ways in which women who have achieved success make sense of their leadership experiences on a day-to-day basis. It is of special interest to understand how women negotiate their leadership in what remain patriarchal institutions in higher education. The practical value of this inquiry is to aid institutions eager to meet employment equity targets about the institutional environments that inhibit or advance gender-affirming experiences in higher education. It is also to assist development experts, government and international aid agencies to generate more effective interventions aimed at ensuring equity in the appointment and retention of women senior academic leaders in higher education.

Key words

Administration, barriers, higher education, gender equality, gender equity, life histories, policy, leadership/management, grounded theory, women empowerment.