

Leadership: The invisibility of African women and the masculinity of power

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In a recent reply to the 'ideology of no transformation' in higher education, Cloete¹ shows that African women PhD graduates grew from 10 in 1996 to 106 in 2012 – a 960% increase. But read on, because this figure translates to a participation rate of only 2.4% per 100 000 of the relevant population. When white women are compared, their participation rate is 40 times higher. My argument, therefore, is that black African women are invisible in leadership and the 'masculinity of power' marginalises them.

The question to be asked then, is whether or not the picture changes for other areas of leadership beyond performance in advanced degrees? The answer is 'no'. At present, there is just one black African woman with an A rating from the National Research Foundation and only two who are B-rated in comparison to 12 white women who are A-rated and 67 who are B-rated. I am certainly not suggesting that black African women should be awarded A and B ratings even when they do not deserve them. Rather, I ask why is it that, after 21 years of democracy, only three black African women have risen to these levels. What is it that we are not doing to ensure that more black African women get to these levels? Although we thank Minister Pandor for the 42 SARChI chairs recently awarded to women, most of the recipients were white women. So irrespective of what the CREST data say, the point is that black African women remain invisible despite the increased number of black African women who hold doctorates.

Looking at the government's latest report on the status of women in South Africa, it is clear that despite educational gains, women are generally employed in low-skilled occupations. Gender inequality in South Africa varies across sectors, from 12th in the world in terms of political empowerment, to 83rd for economic participation, and 85th for educational attainment.

Although statistics are helpful, they are inadequate. On the matter of women and leadership, I believe that words are more important, perhaps because we have the figures and their power to speak often needs amplification. We know, for instance, that there are few women CEOs, that academic management is slow to appoint women, and that only the South African parliament can boast parity between men and women. In most cases, the numbers paint a dismal picture, despite the triumphalism of our democracy.

The representation of women in government has made us think that we are doing much better than we really are in the leadership stakes. We see rows of women in parliament, some taking prominent positions. In the media, women leaders in the political and judicial arena capture our imagination, and we congratulate ourselves on gender transformation. Of course these achievements are important, but in our space – research and higher education – the picture seems very different, especially when one begins to disaggregate both 'women' and 'leadership'. Which women? What kinds of leadership? My concern is that for all the demographic transformation in government, does it translate to anything approximating equity in leadership more broadly?

Even the relatively positive achievements of women in government mask the real relations of power within social and political movements, and Hassim² argues that 'questions concerning who has voice and agency ... remain largely obscured'. This is not to say that women have not benefitted from the new procedural and institutional arrangements of the state after 1994: of course we have, but we have to see this transformation as very much still a 'work in progress'.

So today I choose words to help the numbers. In a recent book entitled *The Colour of Our Future*, Netshitenze³ argues that black women have suffered 'triple oppression': first, as disadvantaged and marginalised in class terms; secondly as black in a racialised society that privileges the white minority; and thirdly as women in patriarchal African cultures.

It seems to me that black women are also affected by the assertions of Africanness which are a strong feature of contemporary politics, because their promotion of pristine forms of African culture generally valorises patriarchal practices. This important return to heritage as a way of restoring dignity to African identity sometimes depicts women in subject roles. Obbo⁴, for example, cites the effect of modernity on women, as elite African men abandon their 'traditional' wives in villages to marry younger, educated women in urban centres. The irony, says Obbo, is that this is equally true of intellectuals who 'exhorted the celebration of African culture'.

Feminism among Africans has also not fared well, because of its epistemological whiteness which, understandably, has not had much purchase in South Africa. Feminism therefore often sets up a rivalry between black and white women, because it has generally been soft on racial and class inequality.⁵

Behind the numbers, therefore, there is an analysis of our historical and contemporary status as women. I can't speak for white women, but in academia they seem to have been the beneficiaries of democracy more than black African women, rising to senior professorial positions and even executive management, although there is a glass ceiling at vice-chancellor level for almost all women.

This brings me to my own experience, beginning in the township with its economic and educational deficits, making the best of apartheid higher education at the University of Bophuthatswana, and eventually earning a place at Wits. There, I had to contend with its forms of 'coloniality' in racial, gender, linguistic and curricular terms, until I graduated with a PhD. The academic totem pole has its own challenges, as I climbed the ranks to

professor, dean and deputy vice chancellor, against considerable odds. Hard work is important, but I have also learned the hard lesson that it is not sufficient in itself.

My experience has taught me that women have to be much better than men to land top jobs, they have to work doubly hard, and this gradually becomes an albatross as more women attain executive positions, because talented women are often constructed as ambitious rivals; and gender politics harshly depicts them in patriarchal stereotypes, caricaturing their personalities to curb their influence.

The 'Rhodes must fall' and the 'Open Stellenbosch' movements tackle the 'coloniality of power', as Grosfoguel⁶ has coined it, but I don't see issues of gender equality being asserted in these current politics. In this sense, gender is trumped by race, which tends to make women compete with women, which often leaves black African women at the back of the colonial procession.

If I have lamented the invisibility of black African women in leadership, I am also challenging the 'masculinity of power' along with the coloniality of power in higher education and other sectors of the economy. Changing the numbers does not change influence, and leadership is not the outcome. So what do young up-and-coming women in science and research need to do to rise to leadership?

Firstly, they need to stay in the system. Often people do not think of research as a career. In fact, research and academia are not marketed as careers – perhaps because the salaries are not that great. Many of our young scientists aim to complete a PhD as a passport to another professional destination. This emigration of research capacity from universities weakens potential leadership in the academy and reduces our influence in knowledge creation and production.

It is true that a career in research is not immediately glamorous – it means exploring new, unknown paths with patience and persistence without losing focus or hope, even when setbacks and difficulties occur, as they frequently do. So my encouragement to all young researchers is to *stay the course*, no matter what the challenges might be – because challenges there will be. Young researchers, especially young, black African women, just stay the course!

Since black African women are almost entirely invisible, the possibilities of becoming, and then being, visible are an enormous challenge. Yet staying the course means not just your own progress and success, but the possible lowering of the glass ceiling for even younger potential black African women scholars. The prospects for leadership are immense: our critical mass efforts to attain improved higher education qualifications, greater research success and better positions open to us opportunities for intellectual growth, personal development and career advancement, and for feminising universities by changing ways of knowing, ways of doing and ways of leading to achieve a more equal society.

My advice to young black women scholars is to make the most of every opportunity that presents itself. Learn, connect with fellow researchers, make friends and take a firm hold on leadership possibilities, because that is how leadership starts – for all young people.

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