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Challenges to and Enablers of Women's Advancement in Academic Careers at a Selected South African University

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Abstract. The study was motivated by the question of what challenges and enablers women encounter as they progress in their academic careers. A qualitative research method was used. This participatory action research involved 19 members of a South African university's permanent academic staff who shared their perspectives on women's academic advancement. A literature review was conducted to provide contextual insight. The four key themes that underpinned the data analysis are: factors hindering women's academic careers; challenges faced by women academics; advancing women's academic careers; and advancing the employability of aspiring female academics. Unfair recruitment processes, intrinsic societal attitudes, low self-esteem and a lack of mentorship programmes were identified as critical factors impeding women's academic careers. Revised recruitment policies, promotion opportunities and support programmes for women are evidenced as critical to advancing women's academic careers. It is suggested that a concerted effort be made by women as individuals, universities and the government to advance women's academic careers.

Keywords: career progression; women empowerment; academic career; challenges and enablers; higher education

1. Introduction

In countries and cultures around the world, women face numerous obstacles in the workplace that impede their academic growth and development (O'Connor, 2019; Nyoni & He, 2019). Family responsibilities as well as gender discrimination, in various professions, are cited as challenges (Isaacs et al., 2022). Urban and Chantson (2019) attest to the notion that juggling work and family obligations are significant barriers to female employees' career advancement in South Africa. In particular, working mothers face significant challenges as a result of their childcare responsibilities. Workload, caregiving responsibilities for family

dependants, time management and a lack of appropriate support networks are cited as sources of such challenges (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Liani et al., 2020).

What is apparent is that working women face enormous difficulties when trying to balance work and family obligations. According to Liani et al. (2020), cultural norms and beliefs indirectly impose constraints on women's social and economic mobility in South Africa. Women's labour-force participation has never equalled that of men. As a result, there is considerable emphasis on gender disparity in academia and the under-representation of women in prominent academic leadership positions (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Herbst, 2020; Urban & Chantson, 2019). While several nations have observed recent trends towards gender-parity between certain academic employees, there is a need to accelerate women's representation in top positions (Herbst, 2020; Shah et al., 2020). In South Africa, merely six of the 26 vice-chancellors at public universities are women. Notably at Walter Sisulu University, where the study was conducted, the first female vice-chancellor in the university's history was appointed in 2020. This study aimed to identify the specific challenges to and enablers of women's academic careers at a South African university, in pursuit of accelerating the empowerment of women at higher education institutions (HEIs).

Gender disparities in academia and the under-representation of women in prominent academic positions have become of serious concern to researchers (Herbst, 2020). Women face numerous challenges in their career paths in a variety of professions across multiple institutions (Jalilianhasanpour et al., 2020; Sarseke, 2018). While there is a trend toward equity between academic employees, the number of female employees in HEIs is lower than male employees. Male dominance has become the norm in most institutions and, combined with rigid career paths, has limited women's employability in universities (O'Connor, 2019). Gender identity has become an important factor in determining one's academic career path and the social acceptability of job responsibilities for both men and women (Jalilianhasanpour et al., 2020; Nyoni & He, 2019). Despite their under-representation, women continue to be an important part of our institutions and of society at large, and continue to advocate for, and devote time and effort to, advancing sound values and formal and informal education in society.

Given the complexities of gender disparity in academia, measures to improve women's career advancement in the field are complicated because male dominance continues to undermine gender equality efforts (Liani et al., 2020; Rutledge, 2020). Given women's right to equal opportunities and the proven benefits of staff diversity, identifying and implementing evidence-based intervention programmes that improve parity is critical, particularly in South African HEIs (Strydom, 2017). Evidence from 26 South African universities shows a gender representation disparity in the permanent academic staff of South African universities (Figure 1).

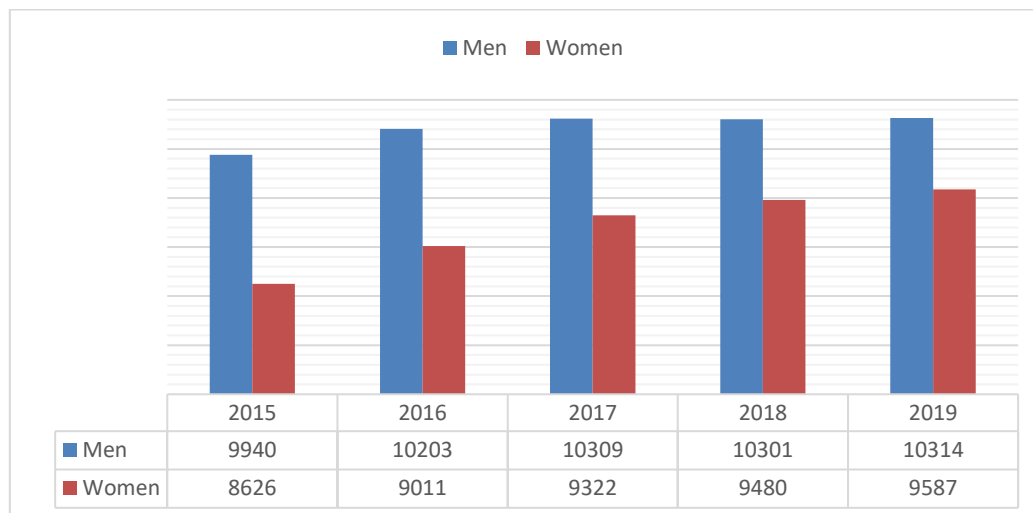


Figure 1: Headcount of male and female permanent staff in South African universities (2015–2019)

Source: Higher Education Data Analyser (2020)

The ongoing dominance of permanent male staff members in South African universities represents the employment situation at HEIs in South Africa. In the period from 2015 to 2019, female representation increased slightly, from 46.5% in 2015 to 48.2% in 2019. This increase in female representation is acknowledged, however, there is still a significant gender discrepancy in South African universities given that women dominate the labour participation population in South Africa (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Figure 1 indicates their marginalisation, despite equity-related legal frameworks that the South African government had designed to promote equality, which include, but are not limited to, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996; the Commission for Gender Equality Act 30 of 1996; the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998; the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000; and the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008.

The reasons for this continuing disparity between the headcount of male and female permanent academic staff have been argued by different scholars, where some schools of thought see limiting women from advancing their careers as a cultural limitation (Avolio et al., 2020; Staniland et al., 2019). Others see it as an institutional structural weakness that has failed to uphold gender equality and provide platforms that promote women's inclusiveness and participation (Santos et al., 2021; Cross et al., 2019). Consequently, women have to do more to overcome the barriers and address the challenges that cause gender imbalances in permanent academic positions within South African universities.

This gender gap in South African universities has engendered mixed feelings, interpretations and sentiments in aspiring academic women in our society because it concerns their career advancement (Sadiq et al., 2019). In essence, this trend towards male domination in academia impacts on the pursuit of women's inclusion and gender equality. Consequently, responsible representation of women's interests and values within HEIs is affected because a limited number of

women attain decision-making positions (Sadiq et al., 2019; Urban & Chantson, 2019). To reduce the effects of under-representation and exclusion, it is essential to determine ways to advance the employability of career women at South African universities.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, the study explores the challenges that result in the under-representation of women and impact on women's academic career advancement at a South African university. Secondly, the study determines factors that could enhance women's academic career advancement at a South African university.

The study focused on the following research objectives:

- To identify the factors that hinder the advancement of women's academic careers at a South African university.
- To identify the challenges faced by women academics at a South African university.
- To determine the enabling factors that could advance women's academic careers at a South African university.
- To identify ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers at a South African university.

The findings of this study may contribute to the field of knowledge of gender and education by providing clarity on the low representation of women in academic positions and by assist with the empowerment of women at South African universities.

2. Literature Review

Universities are gendered institutions that are embedded within a hierarchy of gendered organisations (Walker, 2020). The most prestigious institutions, the highest-paying specialities and the most prominent posts are dominated by men (Rutledge, 2020; Urban & Chantson, 2019). Higher Education Data Analyser (2020) reveals that men have always held more permanent academic positions than women in South African universities. This gender disparity has attracted an increased focus on gender inequality and the under-representation of women in academia (Sadiq et al., 2019; Urban & Chantson, 2019).

Globally, one of the most prevalent reasons for these disparities is the concept of "chilly climate", a phrase coined by Hall and Sandler in 1982. Harassment by students and colleagues; hostile department and classroom climates; biases in hiring processes; inequitable allocations of work responsibilities; and policies that penalise women's significant role in managing work and family responsibilities have been documented in studies on the chilly climate for women academics (Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015; Bilimoria & Liang, 2014; Sandler & Hall, 1986). Perhaps the South African backdrop is more pitiful, owing to decades of marginalisation under apartheid, which negatively influenced race and gender representation in the labour market (Isaacs et al., 2022; Netnou & Strydom, 2020).

2.1 Challenges influencing women's academic career advancement in South African universities from a historical perspective

Apartheid's racial and gender segregation policy fundamentally altered South African society and resulted in severe disparities. While women suffered more than men, both groups faced exploitation and prejudice (Van Hout & Wessels, 2021; Ndinga-Kanga et al., 2020). Studies conducted by Gradín (2021) and Crimmins (2020) uncovered worrisome subtexts of racism, classism and sexism in academia, as well as endemic sexist cultures that marginalise women. Different factors have been postulated to contribute to the challenges confronting women's advancement in their academic careers in South Africa. Some scholars, such as Letsoalo and Rankhumise (2020), Liani et al. (2020) and Walker (2020), argue that the fundamental problem can be traced back to sociocultural conceptions about women. Even though South Africa's Constitution guarantees equal rights for everyone, sociocultural gender constructs promote male domination and female subjugation, with a detrimental effect on choices and ideas about the advancement of female academics, encouraging institutional sexism. Institutional sexism is subtly exercised in South African universities when male academics' views and activities are prioritised over those of female academics (Albertus, 2019; Nordling, 2019). Male dominance in terms of academic gender analysis is also evident at Walter Sisulu University, where the study was conducted, for example, the gender representation at senior lecturer level, 30% females and 70% males; at associate professor level, 18% females and 82% males; and at professor level, 28% females and 72% males.

Women in academia have historically encountered obstacles while seeking jobs in higher education. They were routinely ostracised from mainstream South African academic culture and denied the chance to carve out sustainable niches for themselves in universities under apartheid (Albertus, 2019; Mokhele, 2013). Multiple forms of oppression and prejudice impeded individuals determined enough to seek professions in academia. This situation is challenging for most younger female academics because they must balance careers, education and family. Scholars, such as Breeze and Taylor (2020) and Walker (2020), argue that the identity of African women in our societies and communities hinders women's advancement in academia because most women are expected to handle household responsibilities and not to embark on a career.

According to Walker (2020), most women lack sufficient motivation to improve their careers, not just in academia but also in other industries, particularly when compared to men. A lack of empowerment of women aspiring to become academicians is also highlighted by Mukorera (2020) and Sá et al. (2020), who argue that a South African background necessitates women empowerment initiatives that assist career progression. While there are initiatives in place to address the challenges that women face, more proactive steps are required to eradicate the significant degree of gender disparity in South African universities (Mukorera, 2020; Sadiq et al., 2019).

2.2 Enablers of women's academic career advancement in South African universities

The inherent societal disparities of apartheid led to a variety of transformation-oriented activities in the new democratic system to address gender inequality, and HEIs were among institutions most in need of transformation (Mokhele, 2013). In their research on women in academic leadership, Walker (2020) and Albertus (2019) acknowledge government policies and the commitment of South African institutions to implement and improve gender and equity promotion programmes. Mazibuko (2006) claims that governing bodies and management in HEIs had to deal with many sources of power, conflicting goals, decentralised structures and limited resources. Structures inside institutions, faculties, colleges, executive management, senate and council are examples of power centres. Although significant restructuring has occurred, vestiges of old biases persist (Coe et al., 2020; Breese & Taylor, 2020; Walker, 2020). These stereotypes continue to harm rather than encourage, black African women in daily encounters.

To enable the advancement women's academic careers, the structure of opportunity, including the economy, work requirements, the gender classification of employment, job distribution, family structure and discrimination within professional pathways, must be addressed (Letsoalo & Rankhumise, 2020; Liani et al., 2020; Walker, 2020). Although the country's Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 stipulates the compliance requirements for employment in South African universities, Albertus (2019) and Sadiq et al. (2019) argue that irregularities still exist in the recruitment processes, which affects gender representation. A transparent recruitment process in line with the Employment Equity Act will enhance the equitable representation of women in South African universities.

Gender-empowerment programmes and mentorship workshops for aspiring female academics also provide positive platforms for women's inclusiveness in South African universities (Liani et al., 2020; Sadiq et al., 2019). Low self-esteem, which is a barrier to career decision-making, is addressed in empowerment and mentorship programmes, allowing for self-efficacy to be realised (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Thus, institutional cultures and beliefs about the 'typical nature' of women should be readdressed to enable women to pursue career paths without limitations.

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study since this research method helps researchers investigate and comprehend the relevance of a social or human issue to provide solutions to real-life socioeconomic challenges (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is the development of concepts that help researchers to understand social phenomena in natural (as opposed to experimental) settings, with an emphasis on the participant's experiences, views and interpretations of real-life situations (Fletcher, 2017; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Accordingly, a participatory action research design was employed in this study. Participatory action research involves researchers and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better (Fine & Torre, 2019). Participatory action research focuses on social change that promotes

democracy and challenges inequality; it is context-specific, often targeted at the needs of a particular group in an iterative cycle of research, action and reflection; and often seeks to 'liberate' participants towards a greater awareness of their situation in order to take action (Husni, 2020; Fine & Torre, 2019).

In line with the objectives of this study, Walter Sisulu University was sampled. The university has four campuses at various delivery sites and approximately two thousand staff members, including both academic and administrative staff. Qualitative interview data were collected from thirty permanent academic staff of both genders (40% male and 60% female responses) at the university. To analyse these responses, a thematic technique for data analysis was employed using ATLAS.ti version 9, which helped the researchers categorise selected themes from the responses collected from participants. Considering the nature of this study, an ethics clearance with certificate number 2021/01/BCEL/EXTERNAL was obtained from the university. The sampling method, respondent-driven sampling (RDS), was limited to the university's permanent academic staff on the four campuses of the university, in line with the study's objectives and logistic challenges associated with primary data collection during Covid-19. It was expected that the permanent academic staff of the university would provide vital data needed to achieve the study objectives.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis is a process that assembles and gives meaning to the data. It entails an ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process of interpreting the collected data (Lester et al., 2020; Michael & Schucany, 2017). Response saturation was achieved at the 19th participant from the 30 anticipated participants. Data saturation is achieved when it is expected that additional or new information will not change the findings of the study (Lester et al., 2020) and 19 duly completed responses from the participants were considered adequate for a detailed analysis. The subjective thoughts of the participants were key in order to evaluate the challenges to and enablers of women's academic careers at a South African university. A thematic analysis was performed to ensure that the opinions of each participant were grouped and categorised into specific themes and sub-themes. The researchers adhered to the steps and method underpinned by thematic analysis (Table 1) to concisely analyse and present qualitative interview data.

Table 1: Steps and methods in thematic analysis

Step	Method	Explanation
1	Organising data	Questions were numbered, sorted and prepared for analysis.
2	Review of transcripts	Data was reviewed to familiarise researchers with the data collected and ensure that collected data reflected the study direction.
3	Stage one coding	Initial emerging themes were labelled and categorised.

Step	Method	Explanation
4	Stage two final coding	The coding process was used to sort related data, grouping related headings with similar content. These formed the categories under the themes.
5	Representation of data	The findings in the themes were represented in figures and network linkages using ATLAS.ti, followed by thematic presentations of participants' verbatim words.

To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, as stipulated in the ethics clearance certificate, pseudonyms were given to the participants, both male and female, who participated in the study (Table 2).

Table 2: Pseudonyms of participants

Participant	Pseudonym	Job Designation
Participant 1	WSU1	Lecturer
Participant 2	WSU2	Deputy Director
Participant 3	WSU3	Professor
Participant 4	WSU4	Professor
Participant 5	WSU5	Senior Lecturer
Participant 6	WSU6	Senior Lecturer
Participant 7	WSU7	Senior Lecturer
Participant 8	WSU8	Head of Department
Participant 9	WSU9	Lecturer
Participant 10	WSU10	Professor
Participant 11	WSU11	Lecturer
Participant 12	WSU12	Senior Lecturer
Participant 13	WSU13	Professor
Participant 14	WSU14	Professor
Participant 15	WSU15	Lecturer
Participant 16	WSU16	Head of Department
Participant 17	WSU17	Senior Lecturer
Participant 18	WSU18	Professor
Participant 19	WSU19	Lecturer

The pseudonyms were used for thematic presentations of participants' verbatim responses. This aids the logical presentation of responses because it addresses the subject under investigation. Subsequently, themes and categories were coded from the transcribed data to identify the concepts that addressed the study's research objectives. This helped to relate each response to its theme. According to Deterding and Waters (2021), data coding indicates the researcher's attempt to study the transcribed information and categorise it into significant units and sub-units in line with the study objectives.

5. Findings

The themes and categories of this study are presented below.

5.1 Themes on the factors that hinder women's academic career advancement

This section of the study examined the participants' understanding of the factors that hinder women's academic career advancement at a South African university. This theme aligns with the study objective, which seeks to identify the factors that hinder women's academic careers at a selected South African university. Thus, participants were asked to state what they thought these factors are and the use of ATLAS.ti helped identify these factors, as presented in Figure 2.

Note: the sub-themes are not arranged in a hierarchy of emphasis but as a network linked to the central theme.

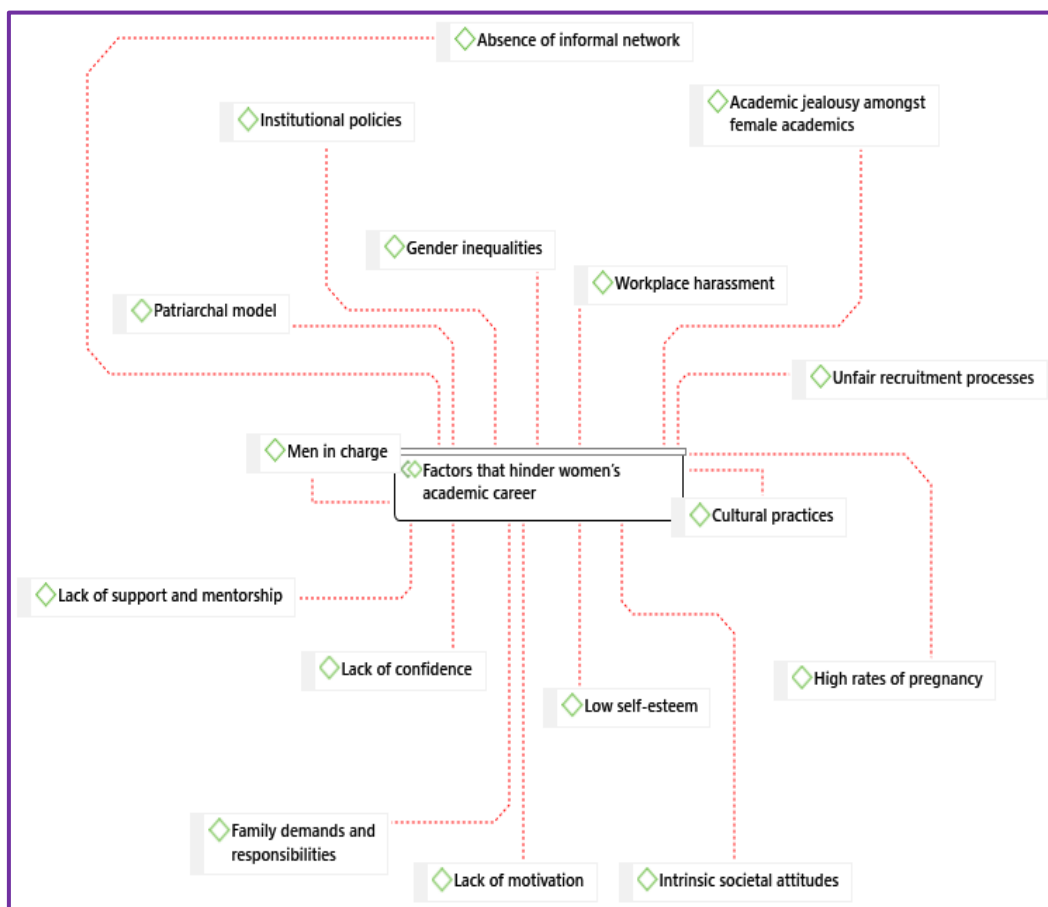


Figure 2: Factors that hinder women's academic career advancement at a South African university

Figure 2 presents a network diagram depicting the factors hindering women's academic career advancement at a selected South African university. It is noted that participants emphasised the unfair recruitment processes as a factor, favouring male counterparts in most cases. The absence of informal networks among aspiring academic women, workplace harassment, patriarchy and low self-esteem were also highlighted.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' comments:

WSU1 indicated that unfair recruitment processes, patriarchal models, and workplace harassment still apply in academic institutions.

WSU2 stated that universities are a microcosm of the broader society. In many instances, women are still held back from progressing to higher positions due to patriarchal beliefs and attitudes that view women as less capable than their male counterparts.

WSU9 said that tenacious patriarchal discourses exist that prescribe specific roles and attributes to men and women.

In addition, participants identified a lack of motivation; a high rate of pregnancy; a lack of support and mentorship; family demands and responsibilities; academic jealousy between female academics; cultural practices; and a lack of confidence as factors impeding women's academic career advancement at a South African university. These factors, as indicated by the participants, are consistent with Kim and Kim's (2021) argument that a systematic reassessment of patriarchy, unfair recruitment processes and gender inequality could be barriers to the career advancement of women in academics.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' comments:

WSU4 said that women lack the motivation to continue with their studies and receive no support from their families. Gender inequalities leave women with children to take care of them alone (without support). High rates of pregnancies.

WSU18 said that factors such as lack of confidence, low self-esteem, fear of the unknown, family roles, as they are the gatekeepers at home, and the lack of support from home and workplace also hinder women's academic career advancement in South African universities.

To overcome these factors that hinder women's academic career advancement, women need to improve their confidence and self-esteem by acquiring the proper knowledge and qualifications (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021; Avolio et al., 2020). Motivation and family support also play a significant role in advancing women's academic careers (Breeze & Taylor, 2020).

5.2 Themes on the challenges faced by women academics

Under this theme, the study sought to recognise how the factors identified in theme 1 (factors hindering women's academic career advancement in a South African university) are a barrier to advancing women's academic careers. This theme aligns with the study objective, which endeavours to recognise the challenges faced by women academics at a South African university. Participants were asked to provide their views on the challenges women in academia face and ATLAS.ti helped identify these factors, as presented in Figure 3.

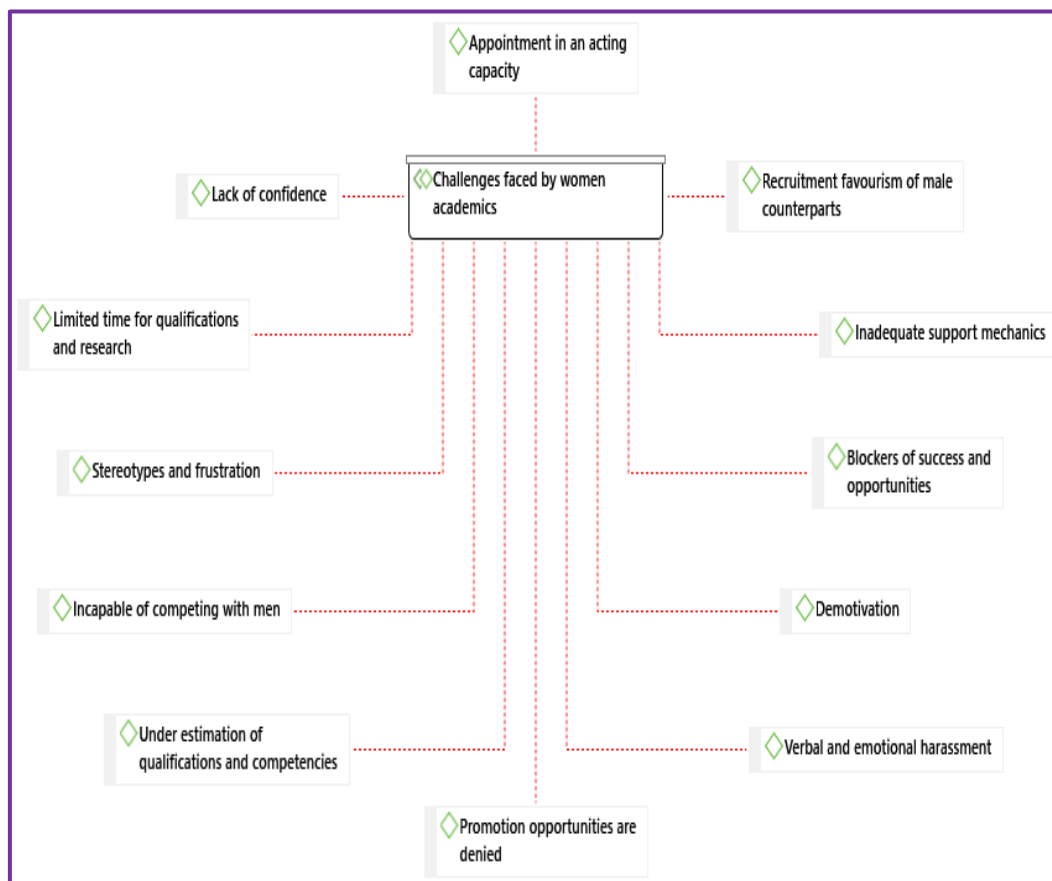


Figure 3: Challenges faced by women academics at a South African university

Figure 3 presents a network diagram of participants' views regarding the challenges faced by women academics at a selected South African university. Challenges, such as the demoralisation of women; lower academic positions; no formal recognition for their efforts, appointment in an acting capacity; promotion opportunities being denied; inadequate support mechanics; verbal and emotional harassment; and underestimation of qualifications and competencies, were identified as challenges confronting women academics.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' comments:

WSU2 said that women are generally not the first choice to be put in higher positions. This, therefore, means that a person with potential, and the necessary qualifications and competencies, may be overlooked based on their gender.

WSU4 emphasised demotivating women dropping from school, becoming mothers, and the burden to take care of the children, and gender inequalities make women feel incapable of competing with men.

WSU7 said that there are inadequate support mechanisms integrated into university systems to support young women academics at a childbearing age or who are still raising young children. One must give up or postpone either their academic career or family aspiration.

WSU9 emphasised challenges such as gender-gap policies, workload allocation with no recognition and acknowledgement, and the system is traditionally male-dominated and promotes gender stereotype practices. These problems are systematic and structural.

WSU10 said that an unsupportive leader would render it impossible for staff to access opportunities such as research study leave, for example, sabbatical. An unsupportive organisational culture will not create opportunities for women to succeed, sometimes competing for goals and priorities within the organisation and competing for role demands for women, being the wife, the mother, and an employee and other expectations that could place demands on the woman's time.

Breeze and Taylor (2020) were correct by emphasising that women academics face several systemic issues, such as stereotyping and insufficient support from the institution and their families, resulting in depression, frustration and despair, among other mental health-related issues. Furthermore, issues such as feeling incapable of competing with men, barriers to success and opportunities, and women's lack of confidence were raised by the participants. In terms of insufficient support from the institution, participants mentioned workload allocation and limited time to pursue qualifications and research as challenges that women face at the university. Previous studies suggest that informed career-building support programmes are important for boosting the confidence of aspiring female academics (Herbst, 2020; Jalilianhasanpour et al., 2020).

5.3 Themes on advancing women's academic careers

This section of the study examined participants' understanding of the factors that advance women's academic careers at a selected South African university. This theme is in line with the study objective, which seeks to determine the enabling factors that could enhance women's academic career advancement at a South African university. Participants were asked to state these factors, and ATLAS.ti helped identify these factors, as presented in Figure 4.

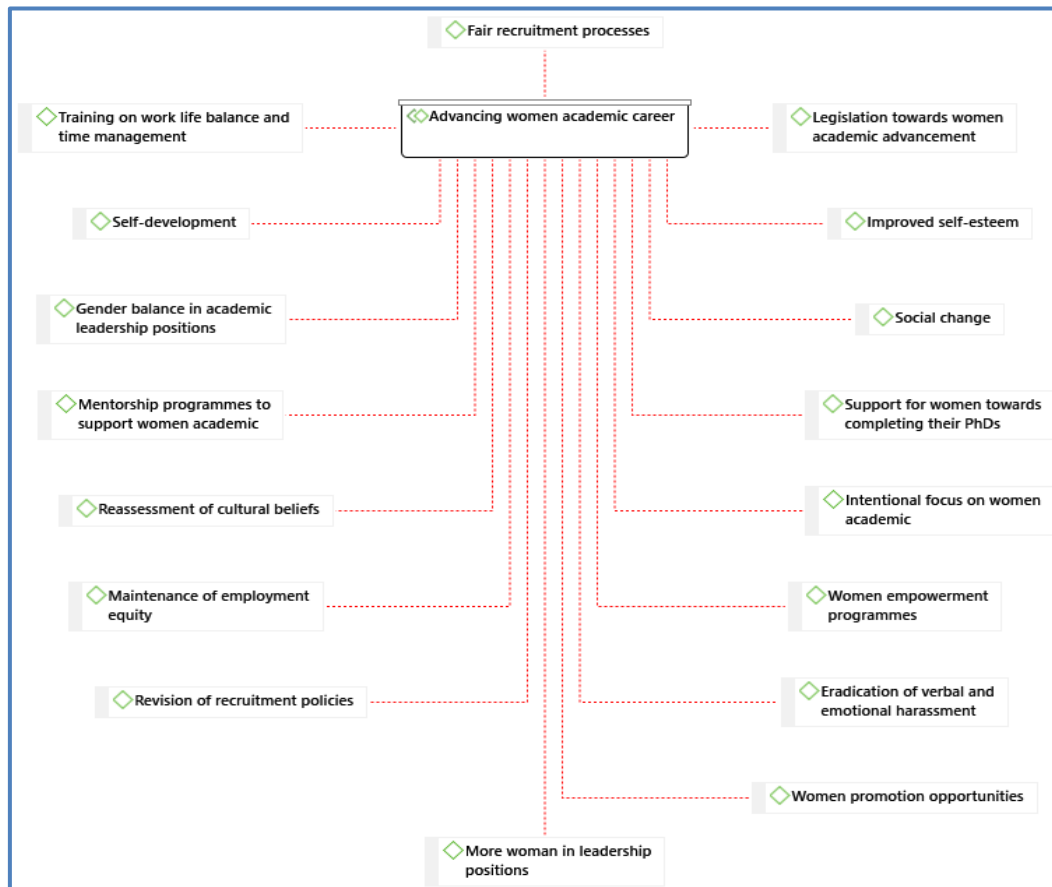


Figure 4: Factors that could assist in advancing women's academic careers

Figure 4 presents a network diagram depicting the factors that could advance women's academic careers at a South African university. Participants highlighted that empowerment programmes for women, promotion opportunities for women, revised recruitment policies, the eradication of verbal and emotional harassment, and maintaining employment equity are vital in advancing women's academic careers at a South African university.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' comments:

WSU1 indicated that recruitment processes must enable and support more women to attain leadership positions, information about salary scales, workloads, etc., must be made available to all staff members. Secondly, promotion opportunities must be made available to women, equal positions and pay for women and men in academics, acting capacity leadership/management experience of women recognised as value work for the institution, and eradication of verbal and emotional harassment at work by empowering women to stand up for their rights, speak and be heard.

WSU5 said that it is vital to consider the following issues to advance women's academic careers, issues such as an intentional focus on women academics to lift them in their academic career, putting programmes to support female academics, mentorship programmes for women, institutional systems, and policies on clear workload, institutional

policies on code of conduct on gender discrimination, bullying, victimisation, and sexual harassment, support for women towards completing their PhDs and allowing a balance of both women and males in leadership positions.

WSU8 said that support would go a long way, both in the family and workplace and that women need solid mentors and encouragement from peers. Early childhood educational centres (Crèche) would help young female academics with childcare responsibilities.

WSU15 said that legislation could be used to force women's advancement. Secondly, some jobs could stipulate that only female academics can apply.

To assist in advancing the academic careers of women, it is important that institutions endorse fair recruitment processes, employment equity and encourage career mentorship programmes (Jalilianhasanpour et al., 2020). Women academics also need adequate institutional support programmes and mechanisms to eradicate stereotyping and the frustrations and obstacles that it causes (Letsoalo & Rankhumise, 2020; Liani et al., 2020; Walker, 2020).

5.4 Themes on ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers

The purpose of this theme of the study was to determine ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers and become influential members of academia at a South African university. In line with the study objective, the participants were asked to provide their views, and the use of ATLAS.ti helped identify these factors, as presented in Figure 5.

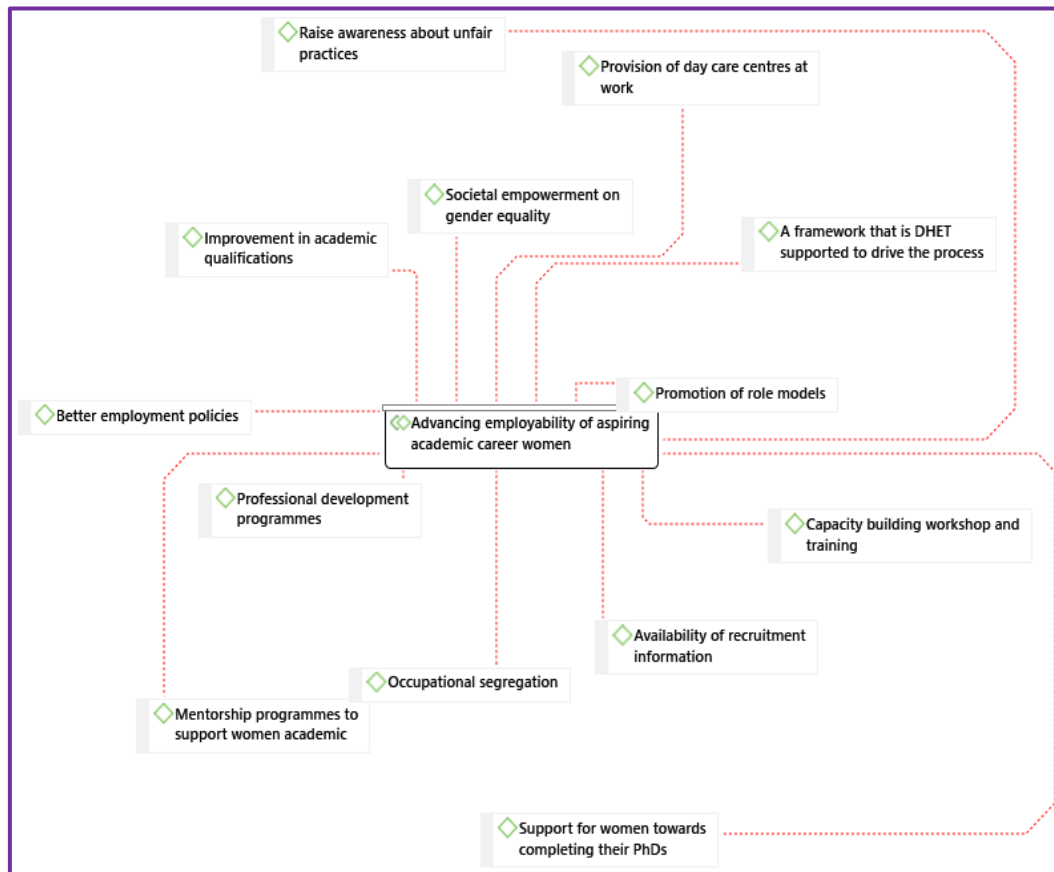


Figure 5: Ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers

Figure 5 presents a network diagram of participants' views regarding ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers at a university in South Africa. Several views were documented, including mentoring opportunities for young female academics; implementing and monitoring support programmes for women; providing day-care centres at work; and implementing a framework that is supported by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training to drive professional development programmes at the university. In addition, suggestions were made regarding capacity-building workshops and training for women, the promotion of female role models for young academics, and societal empowerment on gender equality as ways to promote the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers and become influential members of academia at a South African university.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' comments:

WSU1 noted issues such as better employment policies, mentoring young women in academics, awareness about unfair practices, and promoting representation of women.

WSU2 said universities must design and implement women empowerment programmes to improve women's qualifications, develop their leadership skills at different levels (middle and executive

management), and offer ongoing, sustainable coaching/mentoring programmes.

WSU10 said women should apply for positions, and whilst at it, they need to get all the empowerment so that they do better, and capacity-building workshops, rewarding good performance and promoting those who do well are also essential.

WSU16 emphasised that it is vital to empower women with skills that will make them competitive in the workplace. Encourage women to study further by providing them with facilities to either increase their output or attain higher qualifications.

WSU17 added that training more young women in various fields, especially men-dominated fields, and encouraging women to pursue their postgraduate degrees at the earliest possible time even while having kids is key to promoting the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers.

The views of the participants align with the arguments of Liani et al. (2020) and Walker (2020). Both of these researchers suggest that fair employment policies, mentorship and support programmes are vital to advancing the academic careers of female academics at universities. The importance of requisite skills, postgraduate qualifications and capacity-building workshops can never be overemphasised because these have proven to have a significant impact on promoting the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021; Rutledge, 2020).

6. Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

This research aimed to identify barriers to women's progress in academic careers and investigate enabling factors that may aid in the advancement of women on academic career paths in South Africa. The study revealed the following key findings and recommendations are proposed:

- **Hindering factors of women's academic career advancement:**

The study's findings reveal that participants perceive several barriers within the university system that have hampered women's academic advancement. Unfair recruitment processes, gender inequalities, patriarchy, intrinsic societal attitudes and a lack of support are significant barriers to women's academic careers. There is a lack of self-esteem and confidence among female academics.

Training and mentoring programmes could assist female academics to regain their confidence and self-esteem. It is also recommended that university authorities and key stakeholders be proactive in reassessing university structures to address possible barriers to advancement. Human resources policies regarding workplace harassment and diversity management should be re-examined.

- **Challenges faced by women academics:**

According to the participants' perspectives, women face several challenges as academics. They emphasised challenges such as lack of formal

recognition for women's efforts; the appointment of women in acting roles; the denial of promotion opportunities; verbal and emotional harassment at work; and an underestimation of their qualifications and competencies.

It is recommended that university administrators and the government revisit work ethics and job deliverables, as well as support mechanisms within university communities, to eliminate many of these challenges that affect progressive women in academic careers. Furthermore, systematic monitoring and consequence management are essential to address workplace challenges such as stereotyping, patriarchy and harassment.

- **Advancing women in academic careers:**

The study revealed that participants perceived gender imbalance in the academic leadership positions of the university, and they indicated a lack of women's empowerment programmes and support in completing their qualifications. Fair recruitment practices and employment equity were highlighted as a means of eliminating discrimination against women and favouritism shown towards men.

The study recommends that individuals, university authorities and the government should address their respective responsibilities in advancing women's careers. Individually, women must obtain the necessary qualifications to pursue academic career paths. University administrators and the government, under the auspices of the Department of Higher Education and Training, should implement leadership coaching for women and support programmes that incorporate women's inclusiveness and interest representation within university communities.

- **Promoting the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers:**

In terms of promoting the employability of women, the standard of employment processes is critical, requiring women aspiring to advance their academic careers to identify the necessary qualifications and experiences to obtain academic positions. The participants suggested the following as critical factors to consider in advancing the employability of aspiring career women, namely implementing mentorship programmes for young female academics, providing day care centres at the workplace to cater for young children and a government-supported framework to drive professional development programmes.

The study recommends that efficient support and development programmes be implemented and continuously monitored to address occupational segregation and promote the employability of women in academia.

7. Conclusion

Women in academia face several challenges; yet efforts to empower women at South African universities over the past number of decades have not borne significant fruit. In this context, this study was designed to identify the obstacles to advancing women's academic careers and propose solutions to these obstacles.

To accomplish this, a qualitative research method was used, with strict adherence to the participating-action design, which is the foundation of this study. The findings of this study concerning factors that impede women's academic careers, challenges faced by women academics, advancing women's academic careers and promoting the employability of women aspiring to advance their academic careers were documented with a holistic consideration of both the work of previous scholars and the analysis of the study participants' subjective views.

The researchers were able to make a significant contribution that adds to the body of knowledge by addressing the following issues: firstly, a collaborative effort is required from women in academia, university authorities and the government to both address the challenges women face in their academic careers and to strengthen the factors that enable them to advance in their careers. Secondly, addressing these challenges begins with employment. Therefore, factors such as employment equity, institutional recruitment policies, occupational segregation, a transparent framework for job deliverables and institutional support for nursing mothers should be documented, implemented and upheld. It is suggested that all stakeholders involved in the process share responsibility and accountability for the reconciliation of the challenges to and enabling factors of women's academic careers. Developing a tailored mentorship and support platform that can empower women and provide insight into academic career paths will assist women to advance in their academic careers.

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Appendix



CHALLENGES TO AND ENABLERS OF WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT IN ACADEMIC CAREERS AT SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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About the study

Gender disparity, the under-representation of women, and challenges confronting women academics in South African universities have become a concern for researchers. Evidence from 26 universities in South Africa shows male dominance in the permanent academic staff of South African universities. Questions regarding the challenges faced by women who aspire to advance their careers in universities in South Africa remain unanswered.

Aspiring academic women in our society have mixed feelings, and hold diverse interpretations and sentiments, about how the gender gap in South African universities affects their academic career advancement. Gender inequality in higher education also affects the responsible representation of women's interests and values in universities, as only a limited number of women attain decision-making positions. It is in this context that this study was motivated. The study aims to identify challenges to and enablers of women's academic careers in South African universities.

You have been selected to participate in this study and answer open-ended questions in a written questionnaire. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality

All information that is collected in this study will be treated confidentially. You are guaranteed anonymity with regard to the information shared for this study. When we publish the results of the study, we will not use any information that identifies you personally.

About the questionnaire

This questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. We rely on your expert opinion, so please answer as honestly and accurately as possible.

For any inquiries, please contact Dr Ifeanyi Mbukanma at +27 (0)63 554 1302

Thank you very much for your participation!

Gender

Please mark the appropriate box with an 'X'.

Male	
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Female	
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Academic qualifications and position

Please enter your highest academic qualification, your current academic position, and your academic discipline in the table below:

Highest academic qualification	
Current academic position	
Academic discipline, for example, Humanities or Natural Sciences	

Research questions

1. In your view, what are the factors that hinder women's academic careers in South African universities?

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2. In what specific ways have these factors acted as, or been perceived to act as challenges to the advancement of women's academic careers?

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3. What do you think could be done to overcome these challenges and advance women's academic careers in South African universities?

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4. What do you think is needed to advance the employability of aspiring women in academic careers in universities in South Africa?

5. What institutional structures are in place to address the barriers that women face when aspiring to hold decision-making positions in South African universities?

6. What measures could be used to increase the number of women in decision-making positions in South African universities, and sustain that increase?

7. In what specific ways should women, who aspire to advance their academic careers and attain leadership positions, be empowered?