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Why are women still underrepresented in leadership roles at South African Higher Education Institutions? A systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review to examine the barriers and opportunities for women's leadership in academia, with a particular focus on South African higher education. Secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations, and opinion pieces, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of existing research. A total of 130 studies were reviewed, with data collected and analysed using qualitative content and thematic analysis methods. The findings highlight persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder women's advancement in academic leadership. These include gender bias in recruitment and promotion, the absence of mentorship and support networks, challenges in achieving work-life balance, and the intersectionality of race and gender, which disproportionately affects Black women. Despite the progress made through gender equity policies, the slow pace of transformation within male-dominated academic institutions remains a significant obstacle. However, the study also identifies key opportunities for women in leadership, such as the implementation of gender equity initiatives, the strengthening of mentorship programmes, and the increasing recognition of diverse and inclusive leadership styles within universities. Institutional commitment to gender transformation, alongside global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), presents a pathway for women to attain leadership positions. The study stresses the need for continued institutional reforms that challenge traditional gender norms, foster mentorship, and promote work-life balance policies to achieve sustainable gender equity in academic leadership.

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Introduction

Women's underrepresentation in leadership positions within South African higher education remains a complex issue, shaped by structural, cultural, and socio-historical factors (Mukong, 2024; Mkhize & Idahosa, 2025). Despite gender equity legislation and transformation policies post-apartheid, women continue to face significant barriers in accessing leadership roles, raising questions about the true impact of these policies (Ncube, 2016). This study aims to explore both the barriers and opportunities women encounter in academic leadership, examining the intersection of institutional culture, gendered power structures, and policy frameworks. It evaluates whether transformation policies have led to substantive change or merely cosmetic progress. Key factors, such as institutional norms and societal expectations, contribute to the exclusion of women, while emerging opportunities like mentorship networks and inclusive leadership initiatives provide pathways for greater representation. This review seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of these barriers and opportunities, recommending strategies for meaningful transformation in South African higher education leadership (Mabaso, 2023; Cuthbert et al., 2025).

The enduring legacy of apartheid has profoundly shaped South Africa's socio-political landscape, embedding deep structural inequalities that continue to marginalize women and racial minorities (Ruiters, 2021). While the post-1994 democratic transition introduced progressive legislative reforms such as the Employment Equity Act (1998) and the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (1997), their implementation has been uneven, often failing to dismantle entrenched power structures that sustain gender disparities (Ngcobo, 2025; Mlambo & Maserumule, 2024). Higher education, in particular, illustrates this paradox. Despite

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institutional commitments to gender transformation, women remain disproportionately underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions, especially within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Mkhize, 2023; Ntombela, Ramabodu & Moloi, 2025). This persistent underrepresentation is not merely an administrative oversight but a symptom of deeper socio-cultural and institutional barriers that obstruct women's career progression (Harmse & Dichaba, 2025). Structural discrimination, implicit biases in recruitment and promotion processes, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work function as invisible yet powerful constraints limiting women's professional mobility (Nartey, Bahar & Nabunya, 2023). Additionally, the scarcity of mentorship and networking opportunities critical pathways to leadership further compounds their exclusion from decision-making spaces (Baraka, 2024). The question, therefore, is not simply whether gender policies exist but whether they are meaningfully disrupting gendered hierarchies or merely serving as rhetorical commitments to transformation. Without addressing these deeper structural inequalities, progress will remain slow and superficial.

One of the most pervasive manifestations of these institutional barriers is the concept of the "glass ceiling," which continues to prevent women from advancing into senior leadership roles within South African universities. This invisible barrier persists despite women's qualifications and competencies, reflecting deeply entrenched gender inequalities (Hillergård, 2024; Kapoor, Sardana & Sharma, 2021). Even highly qualified and experienced women encounter significant challenges, including gender bias, limited mentorship, and institutional cultures that favor male leadership styles (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Dyantyi, 2024). These challenges extend beyond individual experiences, highlighting the broader societal structures that continue to undermine the leadership potential of women (Cicero, 2024). Research within South African universities reveals that, irrespective of their qualifications, women are often overlooked for leadership roles (Seale, Fish & Schreiber, 2021; Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). Male-dominated leadership models further exacerbate this issue, creating environments that do not support or encourage female leadership (Meyer, 2024). Addressing the glass ceiling requires a comprehensive and systemic approach that tackles both individual and institutional barriers. Universities must implement targeted interventions such as mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and deliberate efforts to shift organizational cultures toward inclusivity (Adeniyi et al., 2024). Additionally, broader societal perceptions of gender roles must evolve to acknowledge and embrace women as capable and effective leaders in academia. Without these structural and cultural shifts, the leadership gap will persist, reinforcing existing inequalities.

The barriers faced by women in academia are even more pronounced for Black women, who experience compounded discrimination at the intersection of gender, race, and class. Intersectionality provides a crucial framework for understanding these layered challenges, revealing how racial and gender biases converge to create uniquely hostile environments for Black women in higher education leadership (Tootle, 2024; McGee, 2024; Heilman, Caleo & Manzi, 2024). These women often face microaggressions, exclusion from academic networks, and a lack of recognition for their contributions, all of which impede their access to leadership positions (Pleasant, 2024). Despite possessing similar qualifications and experience as their White counterparts, Black women remain underrepresented in leadership roles due to systemic biases ingrained in institutional structures (Kim, Austin & Hess, 2024). An intersectional approach is therefore essential for designing effective strategies that promote equity and inclusion. Institutions must adopt policies that acknowledge the compounded disadvantages faced by Black women and introduce mentorship programs tailored to their unique experiences. Leadership development initiatives must also address both racial and gender dynamics to ensure that all women, regardless of race or class, have equitable opportunities for career progression (Johnson & Johnson, 2024). Moreover, recruitment and promotion processes must be critically assessed to eliminate biases and foster an academic environment where diverse leadership is valued and actively encouraged (Chikwe, Eneh & Akpuokwe, 2024). By addressing these intersectional challenges, higher education institutions can create a more inclusive academic culture, enabling women from all backgrounds to rise into leadership positions.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within higher education extends beyond individual career trajectories, influencing broader governance structures and institutional decision-making processes. Research consistently demonstrates that diverse leadership teams enhance institutional effectiveness, drive innovation, and contribute to more inclusive educational outcomes (Baker, Ali & French, 2021). Institutions that fail to achieve gender diversity in leadership risk perpetuating systemic inequalities, limiting the potential for transformative change. The absence of women in leadership not only reinforces existing disparities but also deprives academic institutions of diverse perspectives essential for informed decision-making and institutional growth (Abbas & Smith, 2023). Without intentional efforts to promote gender equity, leadership structures will remain stagnant, and the progress needed to create inclusive and forward-thinking institutions will be hindered. However, when women are adequately represented in leadership, institutions benefit from a broader range of experiences, insights, and leadership styles, leading to more holistic and effective policy development. To achieve genuine transformation, South African universities must go beyond symbolic commitments to gender equity and implement systemic changes that actively dismantle the barriers preventing women from ascending into leadership roles. Only through sustained and meaningful interventions can higher education institutions fulfil their mandate of equity, excellence, and transformation.

Mentorship and professional support networks play a pivotal role in empowering women to ascend into leadership positions within academia. Studies have consistently demonstrated that structured mentorship programmes provide essential guidance, advocacy, and career development opportunities for women (Emma et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). However, despite their proven impact, these initiatives remain scarce, particularly in institutions that lack a strategic commitment to gender equity. Research indicates that mentorship opportunities are significantly lower in environments where gender inclusivity is not prioritised (Joshi and Parmar, 2024).

Moreover, the success of such programmes depends on the active engagement of senior leaders who champion the professional advancement of women (Hozien, 2024). Notably, Ntshongwana (2024) found that when mentorship became a shared institutional responsibility rather than an initiative confined to women alone, the rate of female leadership progression increased substantially. This underscores the necessity for a fundamental cultural shift within higher education institutions, one that embeds mentorship as a collective leadership obligation rather than a peripheral initiative. By systematically dismantling barriers to women's access to leadership roles and institutionalising mentorship, higher education can cultivate equitable and innovative leadership teams that drive both academic excellence and societal progress (Dzingwa and Terblanche, 2024).

While mentorship plays a critical role in advancing women's leadership, it must be complemented by targeted leadership development programmes that address the broader structural and psychological barriers women face. Leadership development programmes tailored specifically for women can play a crucial role in addressing their underrepresentation in leadership roles within higher education (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024). These initiatives should extend beyond professional development to tackle psychological barriers such as self-doubt and imposter syndrome, which frequently undermine women's confidence in pursuing leadership positions (Nweje et al., 2025). By equipping women with the necessary skills and fostering self-assurance, institutions can create an environment that actively supports and nurtures female leadership aspirations (Zeiser, 2024). Furthermore, these programmes should cultivate a strong sense of community among women leaders, allowing them to share experiences and develop collective strategies for overcoming structural and cultural obstacles in academia (Bone et al., 2024). A collaborative and supportive network not only enhances women's career progression but also reinforces institutional commitment to gender equity in leadership (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024). Without such targeted interventions, leadership structures in higher education will continue to perpetuate exclusionary practices that hinder women's advancement.

However, even with mentorship and leadership development programmes in place, the broader institutional culture within universities remains a significant determinant of women's access to leadership roles. Many South African universities continue to operate within rigid hierarchical structures that favour male-dominated leadership styles (Raji, 2024). These entrenched norms create an unwelcoming environment for women, reinforcing the perception that leadership remains an exclusive domain for men (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024). To effect meaningful change, universities must actively dismantle these outdated cultural frameworks and embrace diverse leadership styles that reflect the realities of contemporary academia (Maduforo et al., 2024). This transformation necessitates a critical review of institutional policies and practices, alongside the promotion of open dialogue about gender equity and inclusion within academic spaces (Eden et al., 2024). By fostering a culture that values diverse leadership approaches, institutions can encourage broader participation and ensure that leadership pathways are equally accessible to women (Ntshongwana, 2024).

A hostile institutional culture is further exacerbated by the pervasive issue of gender-based violence and discrimination, which directly impacts women's ability to enter and thrive in leadership positions. Gender-based violence and discrimination contribute to an environment of fear and insecurity that deters women from pursuing senior positions (Bowen, 2024). The pervasiveness of gender-based violence in South African society underscores the need for institutions to take an initiative-taking stance in safeguarding women within academic environments (Bazaanah and Ngcobo, 2024). This entails implementing clear reporting mechanisms for harassment and discrimination, as well as providing training programmes to raise awareness of gender-related issues (Akter et al., 2024). Institutional leadership must also demonstrate an unwavering commitment to gender equity by not only endorsing policies but actively participating in their enforcement and evaluation (Zainal, 2024). By embedding gender equity into institutional priorities, South African universities can create safer, more inclusive academic environments that empower women to rise into leadership roles, transforming the higher education landscape for future generations (Zainal, 2024).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review to analyze secondary data from existing research on women's leadership in academia, focusing on barriers to advancement and opportunities for alleviating these challenges. The data gathered included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations, and opinion pieces, primarily published in recent years. Only literature directly addressing women's leadership in higher education was considered; studies outside this scope were excluded. The literature search was conducted across three widely used academic databases Google Scholar, Sabinet, and EBSCOhost to ensure a broad and comprehensive review. Full-text articles were reviewed to assess the quality and relevance of each study. High-quality sources were included, such as peer-reviewed journals like Gender and Education (Routledge), The Journal of Higher Education (Taylor & Francis), and Studies in Higher Education (SAGE Publications), along with books and other academic resources. This systematic approach allowed for a thorough exploration of the barriers and interventions related to women's leadership in South African higher education, ensuring that only the most relevant and scholarly sources informed the study. Data from each primary study included in the sample were carefully collected and analysed using qualitative content and thematic analysis methods. The sources of data consisted of a variety of materials, including online articles, academic journal papers, books, and students' dissertations. A total of 130 studies were reviewed for this research, comprising 90 journal articles, which encompassed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Additionally, 5 students' dissertations, 10 opinion pieces, 20 book chapters, and 5 online articles were also considered as part of the analysis. The data were processed in three distinct phases: initially, a line-by-line coding of the findings from the primary studies was performed; next, the codes were organised into related categories to form descriptive themes; and finally, these

themes were refined and developed into analytical themes. Since this study did not involve the collection of primary data, it did not require approval from an Institutional Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

The reviewed studies are critically synthesised and organised in alignment with the study's objectives: to examine the barriers women face in leadership positions within academia, as well as the opportunities available to them in these roles.

Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership Positions in Academia

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within academia is a result of deeply embedded structural, cultural, and institutional challenges that persist worldwide, including in South Africa (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023). Despite the increased visibility of women in academic settings, they remain vastly underrepresented in senior leadership positions such as vice-chancellors and deans (Macupe, 2020). The root cause of this disparity lies in gender bias, traditional gender roles, and a male-dominated leadership culture. Women continue to encounter bias in recruitment, promotions, and leadership selection, which often leads to the perception that they are less capable of leadership or possess leadership styles viewed as less effective than those of men (Lee, 2021). This bias is evident in both more overt ways, such as fewer career opportunities, and more subtle manifestations, such as the undermining of women's contributions in academic environments (Macupe, 2020; Hlazo-Webster, 2023). The slow pace of gender transformation in academia only serves to perpetuate these inequalities, preventing women from reaching leadership positions, even when they are highly qualified and capable (Macupe, 2020).

According to Shen et al. (2022), one of the most prominent challenges faced by women in academia is the absence of adequate mentorship and support networks. The lack of senior female mentors often forces women to navigate the complexities of academic leadership without guidance, making their journey more difficult. This issue is exacerbated by the prevalence of male-dominated networks in academic spaces, which limits women's access to informal networks crucial for career development (Kele & Pietersen, 2020). Women in these environments often struggle to gain visibility and access the opportunities required for career progression, particularly in male-dominated disciplines. The scarcity of formal mentorship programs in many academic institutions further intensifies this challenge, leaving women without the structured support they need to reach leadership positions (Kele & Pietersen, 2020; Toni & Moodly, 2024). As a result, women are frequently isolated in their academic careers, which hinders their advancement to leadership roles.

A significant barrier identified by Ali et al. (2024) is the challenge of work-life balance for women aspiring to leadership positions in academia. In South Africa, women are expected to manage both their academic careers and familial caregiving responsibilities, a burden that is gendered by societal norms (Liani et al., 2021). These demands often force women to sacrifice career opportunities, particularly when senior positions require long hours and extensive travel (Shober, 2014). The lack of policies supporting work-life balance in academic institutions, such as flexible working hours or parental leave, further exacerbates this challenge (Shober, 2014). This disproportionate expectation on women, which is not placed on their male counterparts, significantly hinders their ability to pursue leadership roles (Kele & Pietersen, 2020). Rosa (2022) argues that the lack of institutional support for work-life balance reinforces these barriers and limits women's progress into senior leadership roles in academia.

Ndinda and Ndhlovu (2022) argue that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class introduces additional layers of complexity to the challenges faced by women in academia, particularly for Black women in South Africa. Research has shown that Black women experience compounded discrimination due to the overlapping disadvantages of race and gender, often referred to as the "double glass ceiling" (Macupe, 2020; Agbede, Govender, & Pillay, 2023). This dual discrimination subjects' Black women to both racism and sexism, which significantly hinder their career advancement. The intersection of these forms of bias results in Black women being excluded from leadership roles, as they face societal and institutional barriers that marginalize their contributions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). The "double glass ceiling" means that Black women not only face gender-based exclusion but also encounter racial barriers that prevent them from accessing senior academic positions, further perpetuating gender and racial disparities in leadership (Agbede, Govender, & Pillay, 2023).

Finally, the persistent male-dominated culture within academic institutions continues to undermine efforts to achieve gender equity in leadership. Despite the introduction of gender equity policies, such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998, academic institutions in South Africa remain male-led (Toni & Moodly, 2024). Women are often excluded from critical decision-making spaces, particularly in informal networks where key leadership decisions are made (Hlazo-Webster, 2023). This gendered culture excludes women from accessing leadership opportunities, as the prevailing institutional norms prioritize male leadership styles. Women's leadership styles, which are often more inclusive and collaborative, are undervalued in environments that favour hierarchical, authoritative leadership models (Kele & Pietersen, 2020; Yahya, Anwar, & Zaki, 2024). The slow pace of gender transformation and the lack of recognition for women's leadership styles contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership positions, underscoring the need for comprehensive institutional reforms that challenge traditional gender norms and promote gender equity.

Opportunities for Women in Leadership Position in Higher Education

Despite enduring challenges, the opportunities for women in leadership roles in higher education have evolved over time. Global and local movements towards gender equity are increasingly opening new avenues for women in academia, with particular progress being made in South Africa (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). Efforts to break down the long-standing gender imbalances in academic leadership are now yielding positive outcomes. South African universities, for instance, have implemented various policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity within the sector (Mbhalati, 2024). Faugoo (2024) highlights that the alignment of these initiatives with global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has strengthened the impact of gender equity policies. The resulting institutional focus on gender equality is providing a clearer pathway for women to access leadership roles in higher education (Macupe, 2020; Hlazo-Webster, 2023).

The increasing commitment of universities to gender equity presents a key opportunity for women in academic leadership. South African universities have made gradual progress in addressing gender imbalances at senior academic levels, with institutional policies playing a central role in fostering change (Fauzi et al., 2024). Legal frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act have been instrumental in facilitating women's inclusion in leadership and decision-making structures (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). These measures aim to correct systemic gender disparities that have historically marginalized women in academia. Furthermore, universities are aligning their gender equity objectives with broader global commitments to gender equality, further solidifying opportunities for women to advance into leadership roles (Naciti et al., 2024). The implementation of such policies provides an essential foundation for women's leadership development, demonstrating the transformative potential of institutional support for gender equity (Macupe, 2020; Hlazo-Webster, 2023).

Mentorship programs and professional networks represent crucial opportunities for women seeking leadership roles in higher education. These initiatives play a vital role in helping women navigate the complexities of academic leadership, offering guidance and support from experienced mentors (Ntshongwana, 2024). According to Kele and Pietersen (2020), mentorship provides women with essential skills, confidence, and professional connections that are critical for career progression. Moreover, these programs help women overcome common barriers, including gender bias and a lack of institutional recognition (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Beyond professional development, mentorship fosters a sense of solidarity, allowing women to connect with peers who share similar challenges and experiences. Recognizing the importance of these programs, South African universities are increasingly implementing mentorship initiatives tailored specifically for female academics to support their leadership journeys and address systemic barriers to advancement (Kele & Pietersen, 2020; Macupe, 2020).

The evolving nature of academic leadership is creating new opportunities for women to assume leadership roles. Universities are increasingly shifting towards more inclusive and collaborative leadership models, which align with the leadership styles often demonstrated by women (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Research by Kele and Pietersen (2020) highlights that women tend to adopt leadership approaches centered on collaboration, empowerment, and inclusivity qualities that are becoming increasingly valued in higher education institutions. According to Thelma and Ngulube (2024), the growing recognition of diverse leadership styles is essential for addressing the complex challenges faced by modern universities. This shift is gradually dismantling the dominance of traditional, hierarchical leadership models that historically favoured masculine leadership traits. As institutions embrace these changes, women are gaining greater access to senior leadership positions, positioning them as key contributors to the transformation of academic governance (Moodly, 2024).

Kohtamäki (2021) asserts that the global drive for gender equality in leadership has significantly advanced opportunities for women in academia. International frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocate for gender parity across various sectors, including higher education (Faugoo, 2024). This worldwide momentum has placed increased pressure on universities to prioritise gender equity, resulting in greater leadership prospects for women. According to Yahya, Anwar, and Zaki (2024), global advocacy efforts for women's empowerment have influenced institutions in South Africa and beyond, encouraging them to implement gender-focused initiatives such as leadership training programmes. These initiatives play a crucial role in equipping and supporting women in their leadership trajectories, facilitating their access to senior academic roles. The ongoing emphasis on global gender equality continues to expand opportunities for women in academic leadership, aligning with broader social and economic development objectives (Macupe, 2020; Yahya, Anwar & Zaki, 2024).

Drake and Svenkerud (2024) highlight that the increasing number of women entering academia and obtaining higher qualifications represents a significant opportunity for women in leadership. As more women earn advanced degrees, particularly in traditionally male-dominated disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), they broaden the pool of qualified candidates for leadership positions (George, 2024). This growing presence of women in academia is gradually reshaping the demographic landscape, enhancing the likelihood of female representation in senior roles. According to Lakhal et al. (2024), the rise in the number of highly qualified women directly correlates with their increased participation in leadership positions. This shift is not only transforming the structure of academia but is also creating new pathways for women to assume leadership roles in fields where they have historically been underrepresented (Yahya, Anwar & Zaki, 2024).

While challenges to women's advancement in academic leadership persist, numerous emerging opportunities are actively dismantling these obstacles. Institutional policies promoting gender equity, mentorship programmes, evolving leadership models, and global gender equality movements are collectively expanding pathways for women to attain leadership roles in higher education. These

developments are driving the transformation of academic institutions, fostering more inclusive, diverse, and equitable environments. By seizing these opportunities, women can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of higher education in ways that are more representative of broader social and economic objectives. However, to fully capitalise on these advancements, sustained efforts are essential to address the systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers that continue to impede women's progress in academic leadership (Macupe, 2020; Kele & Pietersen, 2020; Yahya, Anwar & Zaki, 2024).

Discussion

The underrepresentation of women in academic leadership roles is a persistent challenge, deeply rooted in both global and South African contexts. Although progress has been made in the representation of women across various academic disciplines, the gap in leadership positions remains significant. This disparity is not simply a matter of individual capacity or aspiration, but rather a reflection of systemic issues entrenched within institutional cultures and structures. Research has shown that gender biases, both explicit and implicit, continue to impede women's advancement to leadership roles within academia (Lee, 2021; Macupe, 2020). These biases are often seen in the recruitment and promotion processes, where women's leadership styles and capabilities are frequently undervalued in comparison to their male counterparts (Macupe, 2020). The academic environment perpetuates these biases, which often result in women being deemed less suited for leadership positions despite their qualifications and achievements (Hlazo-Webster, 2023). This entrenched gendered perception of leadership effectiveness directly contributes to the underrepresentation of women in top academic roles. To dismantle this barrier, institutions must engage in a comprehensive restructuring of leadership selection processes, promoting gender-neutral criteria and actively challenging biased assumptions regarding leadership abilities (Lee, 2021).

Institutional support, or the lack thereof, plays a crucial role in hindering women's career advancement in academia. One of the most critical factors here is the inadequate access to mentorship and professional networks, which has been shown to impede women's progression into senior leadership positions (Shen et al., 2022). The lack of female role models and mentors in leadership positions exacerbates this issue, as women often find themselves excluded from the male-dominated networks that remain prevalent within higher education (Kele & Pietersen, 2020). These networks are essential for professional development, career advancement, and the acquisition of key knowledge and skills necessary for leadership roles (Kele & Pietersen, 2020). Women are thus left at a disadvantage, often having to navigate their careers without the critical support structures available to their male colleagues. It is essential, therefore, that institutions do not simply pay lip service to the idea of mentorship but actively create formal mentorship programmes that cater specifically to the needs of women in academia. Moreover, universities must seek to dismantle the male-dominated networks that limit women's professional growth and instead foster inclusive, supportive environments where women have equal access to the resources necessary for career progression.

The challenge of work-life balance remains one of the most significant barriers preventing women from ascending to academic leadership roles. Women are disproportionately burdened with domestic responsibilities, often referred to as the "second shift," which limits their ability to fully invest in their professional careers (Liani et al., 2021). In the South African context, this issue is particularly pronounced, where societal expectations place a heavy burden on women to balance their professional obligations with family and household duties. These pressures, combined with the lack of institutional policies that support work-life balance, create a situation where women are often forced to choose between professional ambition and domestic responsibilities (Shober, 2014). This not only affects their ability to pursue leadership roles but also undermines their professional development. It is crucial that universities take initiative-taking steps to address these imbalances by implementing policies that accommodate women's dual roles as professionals and caregivers. Flexible working hours, parental leave, child-care provisions, and remote working options are just a few of the initiatives that would contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women. Such measures would enable women to pursue leadership roles without having to sacrifice their personal responsibilities, thus facilitating greater gender equality within academic leadership.

The issue of intersectionality further complicates the gender dynamics in academic leadership, particularly for Black women who face compounded barriers of both gender and racial discrimination. Black women in academia are often subject to what is referred to as the "double glass ceiling," where both racial and gender biases function as significant barriers to career advancement (Macupe, 2020; Agbede, Govender & Pillay, 2023). This dual discrimination not only limits their access to leadership positions but also results in their achievements being undervalued and under recognised, despite their qualifications and contributions. The intersection of race and gender exacerbates the challenges faced by Black women, creating a particularly hostile environment that discourages them from aspiring to leadership roles. As such, the need for an intersectional approach to gender equality within academic institutions is paramount. Gender policies must not only address gender-based discrimination but must also consider the unique challenges faced by Black women, who continue to be marginalised in higher education leadership (Agbede, Govender & Pillay, 2023). An intersectional approach would ensure that gender equality efforts are inclusive and equitable and would facilitate the creation of a leadership environment that recognises the diverse experiences of women in academia.

Despite these barriers, there have been notable steps towards gender equality in South African academia. Over the last few decades, higher education institutions have begun to implement policies aimed at increasing the representation of women in leadership roles. These policies align with global frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which advocate for gender equality and the empowerment of women (Faugoo, 2024). The South African government has also enacted legal

frameworks, such as the Employment Equity Act, to address gender disparities within the public and academic sectors (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). These frameworks have contributed to a more favourable environment for women's career progression, yet significant work remains to be done to ensure these policies are effectively implemented and result in long-lasting change. It is crucial that institutions not only introduce these policies but also rigorously monitor their impact, ensuring that they yield tangible improvements in the representation of women in academic leadership roles.

In addition to legal and policy frameworks, mentorship and professional development programmes specifically designed for women have proven effective in promoting women's advancement into leadership roles. These programmes provide women with access to the tools, resources, and networks necessary to succeed in academia, thereby breaking down the barriers that have traditionally hindered their career development (Kele & Pietersen, 2020). Moreover, the growing shift in academic leadership towards more inclusive and collaborative models provides a promising environment for women to thrive in leadership roles. These models, which emphasise inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration, are more aligned with the leadership styles commonly exhibited by women, thereby increasing opportunities for female academics to take on leadership positions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). As more institutions embrace these leadership models, women are better positioned to break through the barriers to academic leadership.

Furthermore, the increasing presence of women in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), offers additional opportunities for women's leadership development. The growing participation of women in STEM disciplines, combined with the implementation of gender-specific leadership training programmes, has begun to change the dynamics of academic leadership (Lakhal et al., 2024). However, for women, particularly Black women, these opportunities are still fraught with challenges. Despite significant increases in female representation, Black women continue to face systemic barriers that undermine their ability to achieve leadership roles (Drake & Svenkerud, 2024). While progress has been made, the path to leadership remains difficult, especially for women who experience both racial and gender discrimination.

While strides have been made to increase the representation of women in academic leadership, significant barriers remain that hinder their advancement. Gender biases, lack of institutional support, work-life balance challenges, and the compounded difficulties faced by Black women all contribute to the slow pace of change in academic leadership structures. However, with the continued implementation of gender-sensitive policies, mentorship programmes, and the adoption of inclusive leadership models, there is cause for optimism. Institutions must continue to work towards dismantling the structural barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership roles and ensure that all women, regardless of race or background, have equal opportunities to succeed. By creating more inclusive academic environments and recognising the diverse leadership styles and contributions of women, institutions can foster greater gender equality in academic leadership, thereby contributing to a more dynamic and diverse academic landscape.

Conclusion

The journey towards gender equity in higher academic leadership in South Africa is marked by enduring challenges. The barriers women face such as gender bias, lack of mentorship, and the struggle to balance work and personal responsibilities continue to shape the academic leadership landscape. However, the momentum for gender equity is growing, supported by institutional policies, mentorship networks, and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The development of more inclusive and collaborative leadership models is essential, particularly as women bring leadership styles that focus on empowerment and inclusivity, qualities that are increasingly valued in academic institutions. The alignment of local policies with international standards strengthens the institutional framework for promoting women's leadership. As more women ascend to leadership roles, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields, the demographic composition of academia is undergoing a transformative shift. To fully capitalise on these opportunities, South African universities must continue to address the systemic inequalities that impede women's progress. By fostering a culture that genuinely supports diversity and inclusion, academic institutions can contribute to broader societal change.

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