Reflecting on the Journeys of Women in Higher Education Leadership: A Case Study in South Africa

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Abstract: Indra Nooyi (2021, p. 273/4), former Chairperson and CEO, PepsiCo, wrote in her biography on why she accepted as many invitations as possible to conferences in support of and to advance women: "These events are important for keeping society's inequities in the spotlight and for supporting women as they manoeuvre in tough careers. But they do more than that. They build our sisterhood. Women share. We gain resolve when we hear others' stories and meet people who sympathize with our struggles". This paper shares the stories of four women who have achieved the highest levels of leadership in South Africa's public universities. The sharing the journeys and experiences of two deputy vice-chancellors and two vice-chancellors, pick up on themes that echo through time, in supporting and advancing equity in and towards leadership. In a society where patriarchy still dominates and holds a violent, oppressive grip over women and girl-children, women's stories of struggle and achievement need to be told. In their navigation and victories over their own challenges, these women become the role models for young women and girl-children. Their achievements affirm women, their resilience and strength. Their determination and courage in taking up apex positions in universities, affirm women as equal members of society, debunking patriarchal notions of gendered roles and spaces. The paper highlights their lessons learnt, and contributes to the body of knowledge on the intrinsic and extrinsic attributes and drivers that women develop and adopt on these journeys.

Keywords: Commonalities, Ethics, Patriarchy, Experiences, Decisions

1. Introduction

Thirty years after the first South African democratic elections, despite one of the most democratic constitutions (South Africa, 1996) which embeds gender equality, South African public higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to reflect dismally in the number of women in positions of senior/executive leadership. Literature and engagements with leadership in these HEIs hold the promises and intentions of active engagement and the establishment of supportive and enabling structures towards advancing women in leadership Moodly, 2022, 2021a and b, Toni and Moodly, 2019, Moodly and Toni, 2017, a, b and c). However, gender equity in leadership has not been achieved. In 2014 (Moodly, 2015), 17 percent of HEIs were women. Ten years later and thirty years into the South African democracy, though there has been an increase to 26, 9 percent (as per a desktop review), the figure is way below fifty percent despite women being 51.3 % of the population (World Data Atlas, 2023).

Women in leadership are critical towards the advancement of a more socially just and equal society. Women contribute to the socio-economic advancement of society, and it is common knowledge that, amongst others, they are also heads of households, and are more often than not single/sole income earners carrying their families. Yet, as expanded in the literature below, women and girl-children continue to be viewed and treated as unequal to men and boy-children, in the home, social and workplace contexts. This is an injustice to women and girl-children and hold women in positions of subjugation. This is destructively and sadly manifested in the alarming and unacceptable acts of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF). Tragically there continues to be an increase in GBVF in South Africa. Clifford, Nair and Sefara, (2022), reported that, "quarterly crime statistics released in June 2022 for January to March, showed "murders of women rose 17.5% year on year, with 898 women killed in the period. Rapes increased 13.7% with 10, 818 reported cases". They associated GBVF with the inequalities of a predominantly patriarchal society. It is for this and several reasons that it is argued that women must be encouraged and supported towards and within spaces of leadership. In challenging and debunking these views of women and girl-children as inferior and subservient, government and general society must act to stop patriarchy and its associated oppressive practices. As more women take up spaces of leadership beside men, and at times may outnumber men in these spaces, these positions of power and influence must be used responsibly towards a more just and equal society. It is in physically occupying spaces of authority and leadership, that the strongest message reverberates that women occupy these spaces as capable and competent and are deserving of acknowledgement. The paper does not seek to subjugate men nor boy-children. It seeks to affirm and position girl-children and women as equal members to men and boy-children in society.

1.1 Gender

Though the paper does not seek to argue a position on gender, it is acknowledged that gender is referred to in binary terms of men/boy-children and women/girl-children. Gender identity may not always be experienced according to these binaries.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Women's Enfranchisement in South Africa

It may be something that South Africans now take for granted, but black people in general and white women did not always have the right to vote. Women of all race classifications were excluded from voting up until 1930, when white women were enfranchised. Black people (classified according to those of mixed race "coloured", Indian and African) remained disenfranchised under the apartheid (separate) system to early 1992 (Dall, 2022). In 1892, in the Cape House of Assembly there was a call to "enfranchise women". The response was "cheers and laughter" with traditional "sayings and scripture" quoted condemning the proposal "out of hand". In 1930 white women were granted the power to vote despite the objections of some senators, and reluctant acceptance by others who argued that "the bill was 'a movement away from the home', as a woman who 'occupied a professional position … kept a man out of a position, shirked the responsibility of marriage and prevented a man from marrying because he did not earn the income which would make it possible for him to marry". Though these senators were in the minority and the Women's Enfranchisement Act was passed, it is a disturbing thought that such patriarchal, sexist views still prevail. Sadly, though this Act signaled a move away from sexism, it was an indication of the rise of racism. It took a further 64 years before all South African men and women had the right to vote.

1.2.2 Marginalisation of Women

Women still suffer in all aspects, including economically and socially. Mazibuko (2022), paints a sad and pathetic picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's economic participation, quoting statistics that reflect that "women's economic participation has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, while men's had recovered by March 2021". She cites a report by the World Economic Forum that states that "it will take 132 years at the current pace of change to achieve gender equity" in the areas of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, as well as political empowerment. Whereas with the run-up to 2020, gender parity was forecasted within 100 years, with the 18 months of the pandemic "we have squandered 32 years' progress". She further states that all "five of the best -ranking countries in the WEF global gender gap report have a woman head of government". She concludes that "it's clear that one of our most important priorities for gender equality must be women's political representation".

Barkhuizen, E.N, G Masakane, and L van der Sluis (2022), state that even though more women are entering the SA professional job market, they continue to experience challenges to obtain "leadership or senior executive positions." Women only hold 23.5% senior management positions and 34.5% of executive positions. They further state that part of the challenges in the SA workplace is that it requires "female leaders to challenge patriarchal systems and foster pluralistic leadership cultures that embrace transformation". "The majority of gender inequality practices in organisations result from our societies". Society perpetuates women's marginalisation by fostering oppressive beliefs and values that continue to be unjust to women, with the "predominance of men in our social, political, cultural and economic spheres tending to "aggravate this". They go on to state that "a more significant representation of women leaders can improve (women's) self-perceptions of career progression and boost self-confidence in their performance in male -dominated environments". Significantly, they cite research which indicates that "it is possible that increasing the number of women in senior leadership positions will help to reduce incidents of sexual harassment" and that "companies with a higher representation of female directors experienced less female harassment". This re-affirms and extends the argument that women need women as role models and that women in positions of leadership, together with male counterparts, must exercise agency and positional power to amplify the voices calling for social justice for women, girl-children and those who are marginalised.

2. Four Women's Journeys Towards the Highest Levels of Higher Education Leadership

This paper presents part of a long-term project of conversations with men and women in HE leadership. In total, to date, six men and thirteen women in leadership, formed part of the project of individual conversations. This paper presents conversations focused on the pathways followed by four women. For anonymity they are known as Participants A, B, C and D. The women were identified as part of a broader process of identifying women in the positions of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) and Vice-Chancellor (VC) in the twenty-six public South African universities. Invitations were extended to participate in individual conversations on their journeys and experiences towards and within leadership.

2.1 Profiles

The four participants were all in the age group 50-65, at the time of the conversations. One declared her marital status as married, one as single, and the others did not share this information. Two had two children each, with one having one child and one having none. Participants A and C started out in middle management (as Heads of Department) in the early 2000s. Eventually Participant C took up an executive leadership role in 2019. Participant D took up an executive leadership role as Dean which she held for a number of years, after which in 2019 she became a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC), onwards to becoming a Vice-Chancellor (VC). Participant B had been in middle management in a faculty leadership position (around 2000s); then took up an external senior position in government, to come back to HE in a DVC position onwards to VC in the period 2017 onwards.

2.2 Methodology

Questions were based on themes as reflected in literature, with an open-ended approach to allow for in-depth probing or further sharing as the conversation flowed. An analysis of the questions as clustered according to themes, revealed areas of commonalities, lessons learned and challenges as outlined below.

3. Findings

This section comprises areas of commonality and lessons learned. Commonalities are clustered as common positive areas and common barriers and challenges. The word count limitation permits only a selection of experiences for discussion.

3.1 Positive Areas of Commonality

The women in the came into the positions of DVCs and VCs from the period 2017, while in the age group 50-65. None were VCs during the Fallist period, in which many historically white institutions experienced traumatic and violent protest action and instability with VCs bearing the brunt of the pressures of the time (Jansen, 2017). All had been in middle management positions from the early 2000s for several years.

3.1.1 Positions of Leadership Start off at a Young age

Participant C was a monitor and a prefect at school. This grew to other positions of leadership such as deputy principalship, onwards to university positions of leadership at middle management level. Participant B was also a leader at school, though interestingly she stated that "school leadership positions found me". She had never thought of herself as a leader. She credits her university student leadership trajectory to her school leadership foundation. She had captained the sports team, was involved in student societies, where she was exposed to "leadership development". Still, she did not realise that it was "a significant part" of her "being". When she looked back, she realized that these roles were "raising the awareness within me" that this was leadership and with training, and a deeper awareness of a "body of knowledge" around leadership developed.

3.1.2 Developing an Identity of Leadership Through Career Trajectory

All participants had held various positions of responsibility within the university setting. Participant B, for example, had held various positions as a coordinator, also becoming involved in the broader university sector through projects. It was then only that she began to understand that "leadership was part of my identity".

3.1.3 Women are Supported Towards Leadership

A theme that also reverberates through literature, participants shared how through support within both a formal and informal nature, formed part of their journey and developed their leadership. Participate C indicated that an "astute head of department" gave "me opportunities". This included timetable coordination, in which some of the skills learnt included "negotiating with people". Participant D indicated that interventions were put in place, such as conference attendances and presentations. Exposure and collaboration contributed towards strengthening her career trajectory as she gained a more global perspective of her field, becoming an associate professor in the early 2000s. She started in a DVC position in 2019.

3.1.4 Mentors/ Lack of Mentors/ Role Models/Lack of Role Models

Participant B indicated that her journey to leadership started when she decided to become an academic. Her supervisor (a male) was a mentor to her, and at the time, there were not many black women in her field, so as "to engage" and "to understand the space (of work)". Her journey was "difficult" and there were not many black women as role models/ mentors in her chosen field, but she was "determined to become an academic.

3.1.5 Ethical Values

Participant C also shared that her "humble beginnings" made her the woman she had become. These beginnings taught her to be "assertive", "hardworking", "empathetic", "firm and steadfast of values", which were learnt. She cited her three key values, as "hard work", "integrity and dependability (*and)* respect".

3.1.6 Leadership is not Always Planned

Most participants indicated that they had not consciously thought of or planned to follow leadership paths in HE. Participant A indicated that nothing for her "has ever been planned", though her career was not "haphazard". What drove her were "issues of humanity" and "working with knowledge… in spaces it can make a difference". Working in academia was an opportunity to use knowledge to make a difference. Participant B described herself as a "reluctant leader" and that she did not "realise" that she was a leader. The vice-chancellor had encouraged her to consider a position of executive leadership. It was around 2012 when she started aspiring towards positions of HE leadership. This was as she was working within a university environment where transformation and policy matters were being addressed, and in which "an environment *was created*" where she could understand the milieu and the roles of a vice -chancellor. This gave her the courage to consider such a role and to see herself in such a position. With the fallist movement of 2015/16 and the protest action, she assumed that such jobs were for men and that she did not want to find herself in that space (of leadership during a time of violent protests). She did not want to be "terrorised". She acknowledged that men who held such positions at the time were experiencing a harrowing time and that she was not ready nor willing to put herself in such a position. However, in attending leadership courses as offered by HERS-SA (a higher education leadership academy established as a support structure for women in HEIs), she started planning for a career in HE executive leadership. Participant D indicated that her trajectory towards executive leadership was also not planned. Though she was in the HE space, she did not know what a VC was until "years later when she became a chair of department". As women move on an academic leadership trajectory, it is *then* that the idea of executive leadership becomes a tangible possibility that they start to consider. Participant D indicated that she wanted to learn as much as possible and to "volunteer for almost everything", and in doing so, she realized that "it *can* be done", that she could become a DVC and VC.

3.1.7 Positive Experiences

Participant B indicated expressed positivity in "being able to get challenging things done, putting together new structures, and working collaboratively with people in these. In the COVID-19 pandemic context she had to find "approaches" other than face-to-face meetings to communicate, encourage and motivate academics. She looked at options of breakaways with HoDs and Deans, to form a "cohesiveness around the academic project". This included writing letters to academic staff during the lockdown. This assisted giving direction and making sense for herself and others of what everyone was experiencing during the pandemic. This was also more engaging than emails. Participant C found "being affirmed by those people" she regarded as "great in higher education", was a positive experience. Also, working with international scholars and being invited to do presentations and to apply for "key roles". Being acknowledged by being nominated for special awards was affirming. It also made one "reflect deeply on what you're doing and your purpose". Participant D indicated

that being in the academic space, presented opportunities which may not be presented in any other space. She cited the flexibility of not having to be at work all the time, but also having time to work from home without abusing the practice. Also, working with "brilliant academics", in a space of "ideas and knowledge". It was also a space of students who "who have a very interesting way of making you look at life in a very different way". This excited participant D.

3.1.8 About Being a Role Model

When asked whether the participants saw themselves as role models, the responses were as follows:

Participant B who had indicated she did not see herself as a leader for a very long time, indicated that she thought she had become a role model. She described herself as a "reluctant leader" until she had to take an "upfront leadership role". Her experience was of younger generation, particularly women approaching her and indicating they have been able to learn from her. They looked at her approach, followed her advice on literature, and they shared literature with her as well. Participant C was enthusiastic in her response, ÿes of course I am"…for all women, not only black women." She saw herself also as modeling (as in a role model) for men and young boys. Young people often sent her messages of support, thanking her for her mentorship and support. Participant D also agreed that she saw herself as a role model for young women, encouraging them and helping them to achieve their goals.

3.2 Barriers and Challenges as Areas of Commonality

3.2.1 Patriarchy and Male Dominance

All participants spoke of patriarchal experiences. Participant B described how her "male counterparts, with fewer qualifications were offered permanent employment", whereas she, with a Master's degree at the time, "battled to get a permanent appointment". Her environment was not particularly enabling" to women, being male dominated and she left as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Yet, she experienced similar challenges in her new environment. Not only was her workspace male dominated, it was also reminiscent of the apartheid era. She was on her own, pursuing a PhD without a "community of women" in her field, with whom she could work and who could encourage her. It was just her and her "ambition" and it was a "struggle". As she worked and read towards her PhD, her first supervisor was a white male, who met her once and when she told him what she wanted to do, he responded that she was "ambitious" and that it was not "going to happen". She got "discouraged" and did not tell her dean that she was no longer going to pursuit her studies. Her dean, a woman, somehow discovered that she had become discouraged, engaged her, listened to the challenges, picked up the phone and contacted her counterpart at the other institution, and got her a female supervisor (a white woman). Having a female supervisor who "understood" what she wanted to do, was a key factor to her successful completion of her studies, otherwise as she stated, "I would have given up".

3.2.2 Being Undermined as a Woman

Participant A, who at the time "managed teams of men", indicated that she tried to "mix" the team, but that there was always someone who "undermined you". This was as a "woman" and not necessarily as a "leader". However, she was not deterred. She addressed these matters in a "non-confrontational way", treating persons with respect as "you always want them to respect you back". She described herself as a "gender activist" and indicated that she used "the platform" (her position) to "speak to the issues". Participant C stated that she was undermined as a woman, and in particular, as a black woman. She cited the allocation of black students only in her roles as supervisor; as well as being excluded by language. Afrikaans (an indigenous South African language not spoken by all persons) was commonly used as a means of communication both formally and informally. Earning lower salaries than male counterparts was also part of the discrimination she experienced. This made her realise that "as a woman you would always be at the bottom", regardless of your portfolio. Participant C further shared that she worked well with men, and "as long as they got some benefits of some kind from that working relationship, it was fine". But when she became "assertive – when you spoke up against things you did not like… it (the relationship) was not so good".

3.2.3 Balancing Family and Career

Participant A shared that challenges of balancing family and career were both "emotional and physical". She decided not to choose between the two but to "get all the help" that she could in navigating the challenges.

3.3 Lessons Learned

3.3.1 Managing People Issues and Making Firm Decisions – Finding the Balance

Participant B indicated that she had to find a balance between being firm and being caring, indicating that one had to be "encouraging…, reassuring" and "tough minded". It was initially difficult in the position of leadership with five men within her division and she also had to learn "assertiveness", which extended to the student leadership who had once "barged in" on a meeting. Participant C advised at looking at the positive side in challenging situations and how to these into opportunities, as well as not to "panic". She used informal mentors and "learning by watching" as strategies in the absence of appointed mentors. She got "involved" in projects and advised that one "work hard and keep your integrity." She encouraged focus and to "make it difficult for people who want to bring you down." Participant D emphasized on holding people accountable, but always being "humane", to be kind, and "not (to) compromise your integrity." Just as with participant C, she advised that one does what is right, and not what is popular. Decisions based on popularity are "not sustainable and may compromise you in the end".

3.3.2 Support of Family and at Work

Participant A acknowledged the support of her partner as her children were still growing up. She also described "an ecosystem of friends and colleagues" who supported her "symbolically" and through assisting with transporting children to and from school and other events/occasions. This taught her to "use help and reciprocate". Participant B spoke of support of HoDs, rotational responsibilities, working as a team and creating a supportive environment.

3.3.3 Watching /Observing

As in the case of participant C, participant B watched "different leaders to see what I could learn". Her VC at the time was a male, who could use his "height and voice to command presence". As she was short and soft-spoken, she had to learn to "use her voice more". She shared an experience where, with students during the fallist protest actions, she would assert authority in meetings through "having them sitting at table patterned in a circle with her standing in the middle, which gave her a "sense of height". It was "exposure to great leaders" in HE rather than mentorship and reading that assisted her in her leadership journey.

3.3.4 Exposure at the University Level

Participant C shared that getting involved in committees and representing the university in external meetings and with organisations prepared her towards leadership. She saw this as "good exposure" and a form of " "indirect mentoring". She also indicated that at a former institution, she was also encouraged to attend conferences to present papers (a non-negotiable as part of attendance). While at a Conference she was encouraged to visit other places such as universities and libraries to further develop herself. She co-published with her mentors, and "thrived on the positive words of great scholars and people in academia". Participant C acknowledged that it was positive words of encouragement, such as from one her former VCs (a man), that inspired her confidence. By being encouraged and being willing to participate in committees external to her university, the exposure to those "structures" and the people who served on them, also contributed to her growth. Participant C's decision to take up these opportunities also speaks to *exercising self-agency and making use of opportunities*.

3.3.5 Sheer Determination to Improve, Crisis and Leadership

For participant D, in the absence of mentors, it was her "sheer determination … to improve" that drove her, together with the help of the Dean. Participant B was in executive leadership at the time of the fallist movement. She described this as a "defining moment". This is where all her learning on leadership came together.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

From the themes it is argued that those in positions of power and influence are still the gatekeepers to women's pathways towards leadership. Part of the success stories of these women, is their intrinsic drive, but also the motivation, exposure and support by those in leadership. This power and influence, when positively exercised, encourages, supports and motivates women towards and in positions of leadership. The women who participated in these conversations also had the courage to use their agency, were driven and worked towards

their goals. They were propelled by others in leadership who guided and mentored them. This speaks to the journey of leadership as both an individual and collective one. Leadership did not start at the point of the positions towards which they aspired. It is their entire journey, from the time of their youth, and driven by decisions that they made, with guidance. From their journeys come the lessons to learn, observe, read and practice the ethical strategies of those who have achieved, despite patriarchy and its oppressive culture. The journeys also affirm that women come into leadership positions, not always through a conscious goal or trajectory, but arrive at this through their academic journeys, and as guided by others in leadership. Each person's voice matters. The achievements affirm women as capable and competent in leadership. It reaffirms that one should not give any person power over oneself and should not be deterred towards aspiring to the highest levels of academic leadership, not only as self-affirmation, but also as an affirmation of women and girl-children.

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