



Are universities Serving Lunch before Breakfast through Staff Development Programmes? A comparative study of the experiences of female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities

B.B. Chitsamatanga*, S. Rembe, J. Shumba

Faculty of Education, University of Fort Hare, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative approach, the study examines the female academics experiences in academia and the hurdles they encounter in their career trajectories regardless of the Staff Development Programmes (SDPs). The sample consisted of two public universities in South Africa and Zimbabwe and ten senior female academics participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured face to face interviews. The findings revealed that indeed both universities had on and off the job SDPs. However, it emerged that both universities could still do more to ensure that the SDPs in place meet the female academics needs theoretically and practically through capacity building programmes and adequate human and financial resources. The paper recommends that adequate funding should be provided for the SDPs offered in both universities, identifying capacity building programmes to ensure that the training provided to the female academics will meet their needs and enhance their career mobility.

Introduction

According to Roberts (2018, 4) Staff Development Programmes (SDPs) in universities are gaining increased global attention. In Africa SDPs are viewed as an institutional strategy which builds capacity of university lecturers to cope with changes in higher education (Abeli, 2010, 3). Similarly, SDP is seen as an intervention strategy which could capacitate the higher education sector for it to meet graduate throughput (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007, 59). It is frequently argued that SDPs have the potential to empower university academics with the necessary pedagogical skills for them to cope with educational challenges encountered in higher education (Chabaya, 2015, 4).

An article by Naris and Ukpere (2009) underscores that SDPs cannot be understated, therefore, when planning for these programmes, universities must take into cognizance the development needs and training of individuals instead of offering the same solutions. However, the lack of detailed planning, monitoring and evaluation models for ongoing capacity development of staff members is seen as one of the contributing factors linked to slow development of institutional policies and plans for capacity building (Roberts, 2018). Baijnath (2010) describes SDPs available to staff as woefully inadequate and marginal thus, failing to unlock and develop talent of academics to promote high staff turnover.

The South African and Zimbabwean higher education context

Recent research conducted in South Africa shows that among the unintended consequences of having a culture that favours men is a lack of professional support and networks for the benefit of female academics (Moodly & Toni, 2017, 143). An earlier study conducted in 2002 by Mabileka suggested that creating an enabling environment for female academics, particularly black women in South African institutions of higher education was still fraught with immense challenges. Hence, a need for holistic and impartial working environment was paramount (Mabileka, 2002). Mazibuko (2006) also conducted research on female academics and acknowledged the importance of governmental policies as well as commitment of universities in South Africa to adopt and enhance gender and equity promotion programmes. Reason being, female academics continue to face copious challenges in the kaleidoscope of South African higher learning institutions (Bezuidenhout & Cillers, 2010). Unfortunately, this is worsened by the system which gives male academics a false sense of superiority over female academics which must be maintained to keep the prevailing system intact. As a result, female academics' achievements and their role in society are hardly acknowledged or recognised (Chitsamatanga, 2014).

For instance, statistics in both South African and Zimbabwean universities paint a bleak picture. In 2003, the University of Zimbabwe

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: 201104691@ufh.ac.za (B.B. Chitsamatanga).

had approximately 1200 academic staff and only 10% were female academics, with 1% holding management positions (Chipunza, 2003). A similar study was undertaken in Zimbabwe by Zvobgo (2014, 92) at Midlands State university on gender policy implementation in the promotion of women leadership in universities. The study concluded that, out of the 96 management positions women constituted (28%) and males (72%). The recommendations identified in this study were among others, encouraging female academics to attain higher degrees, implementing SDPs, having leadership training programmes particularly earmarked for female academics.

On the other hand, the statistics and experiences of female academics in South African universities are commensurate with the foregoing assertions. Writing from the South African context, Maboleka (2002, 185–186) posits that, a report by the National Commission of Higher Education in 1996 revealed that right in 1993, research and teaching positions were occupied by 32% of the female academics. Furthermore, emerging from this report was that the bulk female academics were employed at the lower rungs of the university ladder with 89% of females holding the position of junior lecturer and 45% held the position of lecturer. A recent study by Moodly and Toni (2017) highlights from a desktop review that from 2009 South African universities have increased from 23 to 26 universities yet the number of female academics who are vice chancellors remains pathetically low. Similarly in Zimbabwe, by 2012, with more than 12 universities, there were only 2 female vice chancellors from Zimbabwe Open University and the Women's University in Africa respectively (Guzura & Chigora, 2012). Though the number of officially recognised universities has grown for past six years to 14 universities, unfortunately, the desktop review done by the researchers indicates that, there continues to be dearth of female academics occupying executive posts subsists.

Therefore, the need to have structured plans and support mechanisms which will serve as a compass for professional development of females in academia based on the preceding scholarly work cannot be understated. Thus, these studies indicate that, inequalities towards female academics continue to subsist in South African and Zimbabwean universities (Moodly & Toni, 2017; Nyaruwata, 2018; Zvobgo, 2015). This is despite number of policies, conventions and treaties that both universities have endorsed that are meant to address and resolve issues bordering on the importance of female empowerment and gender equality. Secondly, implementation of gender mainstreaming in both South African and Zimbabwean universities is premised on the need to recognise the importance of having in place a combined strategy which addresses issues related to the empowerment of females and using gender mainstreaming as a weapon for promoting gender equality (Guzura, 2017). Undoubtedly, this has led to SDPs in universities gaining increased attention as asserted by Roberts (2018, 40).

Statement of the problem

According to Webb (1996, 194) SDPs should encompass 'all activities, actions, processes, policies, programmes and procedures employed to facilitate and support staff to enable them to improve their performance that would result in the institution achieving its goals'. However, much of the scholarly literature shows that female academics are still under-represented and cannot reach the same level of career progression, promotion and leadership as their male counterparts (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa, 2015; Zvobgo, 2015) due to a dearth of comprehensive SDPs that can enhance their career trajectory. Thus, concerns have also been raised that there appears to be lack of detailed planning, monitoring and evaluation of SDPs (Roberts, 2018). In addition, Naris and Ukpere (2009) advance that universities continue to offer one size fits all SDPs at the expense of coming up with tailor made or customised training and development needs, that will suit a diverse need of the female academics. Undoubtedly, this has caused opportunities for career mobility for females to wane and be fraught with challenges because studies tend to build on statistics of female

academics and not what transpires behind the scenes (Makura, 2012). For instance Bajinath (2010) describes SDPs available to staff in universities as woefully inadequate and marginal thus, failing to unlock and develop talent of academics to promote high staff turnover. Thus failure to prove effective training and development interventions that promote staff member's knowledge, skills and attitudes focusing on the depiction of female academics' experiences and perspectives using a comparative study in Zimbabwean and South African universities is in dearth.

Research questions

Main research question: What are the perceptions of female academics on SDPs in South African and Zimbabwean universities?

Research sub-questions

This study proposes the following questions:

- What are Staff Development Programmes (SDPs) in universities?
- What SDPs do universities offer female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities?
- What professional support do female academics in South African and Zimbabwean universities need for their career development through SDPs?

Rationale of the study

The dearth of comparative studies on career development of female academics in developed countries creates a gap in useful empirical literature (Bhalalusesa, 2010; Nguyen, 2012). Therefore, this study seeks to bridge that information gap with the hope that its findings will help illuminate and reveal the experiences of female academics in developing countries. The reason for comparing Zimbabwe and South Africa is that female academics' perceptions may provide interesting lenses used to analyse the similarities and differences of SDPs to promote their career development taking into consideration the fact that these two countries have different academic and educational backgrounds. Literature on female academics is mostly about promotion prospects, research publications, barriers to gender inequality, ranks and work and family conflicts and leadership. Thus, there exists a gap in studies that address SDPs in South African and Zimbabwean universities. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its ability to supplement the existing research in developing countries on the perceptions of female academics with regard to their career development vis-à-vis SDPs in place thus, opening up spaces for previously silenced voices (Mertens, 2005). It is hoped that universities will understand the importance of empowering and promoting career development of female academics in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa by offering holistic SDPs that are tailor made to suit the needs of female academics in academia. This will assist in building knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as assist in unraveling and developing talent of female academics to promote high staff turnover.

Theoretical framework

The liberal feminist theory addresses women's lives and experiences. Also known as the egalitarian or mainstream theory (Babbie & Mouton, 2005) was adopted in this study in order to understand the perceptions of female academics on SDPs in South African and Zimbabwean universities. Moreover, the liberal theory enables us to realise that though female academics may encounter a number of hurdles in developing their careers in the academia, they are not spineless or inferior (Van der Poll, 2012). They have the urge to survive and adapt under stressful and challenging conditions. Hence their sole aim of achieving positive recognition of their careers and being promoted into meaningful and

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