

'Marginalised Access' in South African Higher Education: Black Women Academics Speak!

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Abstract

Within the complex social dynamics of transformation in South African higher education, increasing access of previously marginalised groups of black people and women cannot be over-emphasised. The need for higher education institutions in South Africa to open their doors to all and specifically, to black women academics has been an issue of discussion by the Department of Higher Education and scholars since the dawn of democracy in 1994. Drawing on critical race theory in analysing the lived experiences of black women academics in a historically white university, this study seeks to understand their perspectives about how the university manages the increasing number of black women academics and, most importantly, whether it ensures their successful participation in institutional spaces. While access of previously marginalised groups to higher education has increased, the findings of this study indicate that social and cultural practices, as well as institutional structures at the university act as a barrier to black women's successful participation.

Keywords: Black women academics, marginalisation, higher education, access

1. Introduction

Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific spaces...Some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined politically, historically, and conceptually circumscribed as being 'out of place'. Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders (Puwar 2004, p. 51)

This excerpt from Puwar (2004) illustrates an important issue of social exclusion or the marginalisation of people within a social space in which some are considered legitimate members or citizens, while others are considered less legitimate and do not have an equal footing in the daily activities of the community. This excerpt scrutinises the concepts of sharing and citizenship, which should underlie any successful endeavour regarding access to higher education. Citizenship is not only reflected in the presence of diverse constituencies within institutional spaces, but is gauged by how much individuals are involved and valued; whether they are considered legitimate participants in the social space. However, focusing only on physical access to institutions of higher education can overshadow the critical question of the quality of access; whether daily institutional practices affirm and validate the presence of previously excluded or marginalised people in higher education. This paper argues that, while institutions of higher education in South Africa, particularly previously white Afrikaans-medium (language) institutions, have opened their doors to historically marginalised groups, there are social and cultural practices and institutional structures that invalidate the presence of black women academics.

Access to higher education institutions by black women academics, both in South Africa and internationally, is an important issue and has drawn much attention from scholars (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Altbacht, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Bunting & Cloete, 2008; Rockquemore & Lazsloffy, 2008; Mirza, 2006). While South African higher education needs to redress the inequities of the apartheid past, the importance of access of previously marginalised groups to institutions of higher education is vital. The Department of Higher Education and Training strives to ensure that such a mandate is taken seriously by institutions. Policy documents produced by the Department, which are concerned with institutional transformation, indicate that access to institutions of higher education for black women academics is an issue of great importance in South Africa (DOE, 1997).

The importance of access in higher education is further articulated by many scholars in South Africa who believe that genuine transformation can only be attained if doors are opened to previously marginalised people to participate in

higher education (Badat, 2010; HESA, 2011; Herman, 2011). Many scholars focus on black women academics as the social group that higher education institutions in South Africa need to consider in their transformation plans. As faculty members, black women, not only in South Africa but in most higher education institutions globally, face marginalisation when they gain access to institutions of higher education and seek to participate in the everyday activities of the institution (Harries, 2007).

When addressing the quality of access or successful participation, Maguire and Hoskins, (2011) and Wright, Thompson and Channer (2007) point out that while institutions of higher education have opened their doors to black women academics, the institutions have systemic barriers in place that disallow their successful participation. These barriers include institutional racism and gender issues that inhibit women from realising their full potential in the institutional spaces of higher education (Mokhele, 2013; Portnoi, 2009; Mirza, 2006). According to Harries (2007), these barriers put some black women academics in the precarious position of having to define and defend their presence in institutions once they have gained access.

In South Africa, black people and women are referred to as previously marginalised groups in need of redress because they were not afforded the opportunities under apartheid to participate in most institutions of higher learning (Bunting, 2006). According to Wangenge-Ouma (2012) the apartheid government 'naturally neglected' (p. 12) the issue of access for everyone who was non-white. For example, prior to 1994, before South Africa gained democracy and the higher education landscape changed, the number of black women academics entering institutions of higher education was very low, with only a small percentage entering predominantly black institutions and almost none admitted to historically white institutions (Bunting & Cloete, 2008).

2. The Status of Access in SAHE

Despite the challenges in SAHE, the access of black women academics to previously white Afrikaans-medium institutions is improving. These institutions heeded the mandate of the national government to redress past inequities created under apartheid by rigorously engaging in transformation processes that ensure there is greater participation by black women academics (DOE, 1997; Herman, 2011).

There is an incremental increase each year in the number of women and black academics entering institutions of higher education in South Africa. Although full parity with white and male colleagues is far from being realised, there has been progress, especially in previously white Afrikaans-medium institutions. Figure 1 below shows how the demographic profile of staff at institutions of higher education has changed from 2003 to 2009. The data demonstrate that there has been significant movement towards achieving the goal of inclusivity and access for black academics.

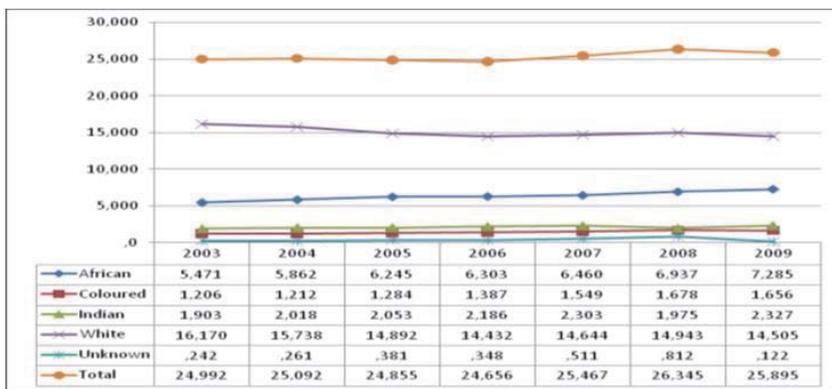


Fig 1: Academic staff in SAHE by race from 2003 to 2009

Figure 1 illustrates the increasing number of black people in institutions of higher education. As the graph indicates, there has been an increase in the number of black academics (African, Indian and Coloured) and a decrease in the number of white academics. That is, while the number of black academics has increased by about 25 percent, the number of white academics has declined by about 10 percent. The decrease in white academics may be due, in part, to retirements; positions which have then been filled by black academics. Because the data for black academics are not disaggregated

by gender, it is not clear what percentage of the total comprises black women academics. However, data compiled by *Higher Education South Africa* (2011) indicate a considerable improvement in increasing the number of women in institutions of higher education, from 40.6 percent in 2003 to 44.2 percent in 2009.

While access is important, the primary focus of institutional concern needs to shift from access to successful participation, which is considered a state in which there is "equity of access and fair chances of success to all" (Badat, 2010, p. 6; DOE, 1997, p. 13). While emphasising the need for access and equality, the *Council of Higher Education* (CHE, 2014) and the *Education White Paper 3* (DoE, 1997) state that institutions of higher education in South Africa should "promote equity and fair chances for success to the previously marginalized" (p. 14). This means that the culture and structure of institutions of higher education should support black women academics in developing their professional skills so that they can contribute to the advancement of the university.

Looking at the status of access for black women academics, Rabe and Rugunanan (2012) and Lindow (2011) argue that meaningful access has not yet materialised in South African institutions of higher education. They point out that there are still struggles pertaining to the concentration of black women in lower level academic positions, to challenges regarding the publishing process, to cases of non-recognition of their intellectual capital, and to exposure to white male dominated institutional spaces. A presentation by *Higher Education South Africa* (2014), which looked into the achievements and challenges faced by institutions of higher education after 20 years of democracy, points to a number of challenges institutions still need to surmount regarding the quality of access for black women academics. A study conducted by Mokhele (2013) indicates that 20 years after the new political dispensation, black women academics still face excluding attitudes from their white colleagues who continually question their competence and marginalise their qualifications.

According to Portonoi (2009), the problem is rooted in an institutional culture that privileges white competence and marginalises black competence. Mirza (2006) argues that this institutional bias reduces black women academics to commodities and objects that are used to satisfy the mandate of diversity programmes to increase the presence of black women academics in higher education. This kind of excluding practice nullifies the presence of black women academics and places them on an unequal footing with white colleagues. De La Rey (1999, as quoted in Rabe & Rugunanan, 2012) observes that black women academics face both racial and gender discrimination.

An analysis of the university system in South Africa shows indisputable evidence of gender discrimination but the impact thereof on women was filtered through a rigid system of race discrimination such that white women would have been negatively affected, but black women would have been subjected to the combined negative impact of both gender and race discrimination. (p. 2)

Even though black women academics face the harsh conditions of exclusion in South African institutions of higher education, there is a dearth of research on their experiences with regard to excluding practices in these institutions. Most scholars prefer to focus either on race alone or on gender alone, and provide insufficient attention to the inextricable link between gender and race in the marginalisation of black women academics in South Africa (Odhav, 2009; Bezuidenhout & Cilliers, 2011; Zulu, 2013). Even when the focus of research is shifted to the experiences of black women academics, they are often reported through the 'male gaze' (Wright, Thompson & Channer, 2007, p. 146), which silences women's voices. Wright, *et al.* (2007) and Hoskins (2011) contend that since the voices of black women are largely absent from the discourses on race and gender, it is imperative that black women scholars focus on adding their voices to the conversation. This article, which reports on the experiences of black women academics with regard to the quality of access to institutions of higher education in South Africa, is a response to this need. The question that informs this research is: What happens inside the institutional spaces of the university once black women academics gain access?

3. Theoretical Framework

The study explores the access of black women academics to institutions of higher education in South Africa through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Ladson-Billings (2013) argues that social realities are such, that disparities are created among different race groups due to the issue of legitimacy. In CRT, legitimacy is concerned with the fundamentals of belonging; of who belongs where, and how the presence of an individual is validated. This issue is vital in addressing access, which mandates that individuals have an equitable right to institutional space and citizenship, and to be treated as legitimate members of their academic communities. Employing CRT in the study made it possible to interpret narratives of the lived experiences of black women academics, of their perception of being rendered illegitimate in institutional spaces, juxtaposing them with the institution's standing with regard to access. The notion of illegitimacy, which has its roots in the apartheid past, and appears to have infiltrated the post-apartheid higher education system,

implies that black women academics are not considered citizens of these institutions, and therefore have no legitimate right to access and meaningful participation.

4. Methods: Participants, Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study included 12 black women academics, at least one from each of the eight faculties on the main campus, and two from a subsidiary campus, of a university in South Africa. Participants were involved in individual interviews and focus group discussions. The latter were specifically meant to be reflective sessions in which issues that arose in individual interviews could be discussed by the group. The purpose was to determine how each member was affected by the points raised and to deliberate on possible ways in which black women academics could remediate the situation for themselves (which is not part of this discussion).

It has been noted that individuals tend to identify with persons who are like themselves regarding salient group identity characteristics (Welch, quoted in Patton, 2009). As a black woman academic who could have faced similar challenges at the institution, my identity may have increased trust and a willingness of participants to share personal experiences. Interviews and focus group discussions were taped and later transcribed to identify general themes that emerged from the data. Latent content analysis was used to identify common threads of information that helped the researcher make meaning out of the data sets (Fulcher, 2005; Given, 2008; Stead & Bakker, 2010). According to Given (2008), latent content analysis is used mainly when the researcher looks for patterns that form relationships in the participants' responses. This type of analysis assisted in identifying similarities (and differences) in the experiences of black women academics concerning the quality of access at the university.

5. Findings

Although the university opened its doors to previously marginalised groups, the findings indicate that social, cultural, and institutional practices create barriers that hamper the successful participation of black women academics. Concerns were raised by participants that point to what I term 'marginalised access', in which black women academics enter institutional spaces in large numbers, but through conscious or unconscious practices, their presence is not validated. In this case, the concerns of black women academics focus on opportunities for professional development, which was also raised by the *Council for Higher Education* (2010) in evaluating the status of women in higher education. The main points of concern raised by participants were grouped into three key themes relating to feelings of marginalisation: issues pertaining to *upward mobility*, *epistemic validation*, and *white male domination*, which are discussed in detail below.

5.1 Upward Mobility

The struggles of black women academics to climb the ladder in higher education globally are well documented (Mabokela, 2004; Llyod-Jones, 2009; Daniel, 2009) and which the participants viewed as the most important issue regarding access. Participants reported that within the university, most black women academics are concentrated at the junior lecturer and lecturer level, are scarce at the senior level, and are almost completely absent at the professorial position. In contrast, senior level positions at the university are mostly occupied by white males. Participants indicated that they would like to see "*proper representation, which reflects the society within which the institution exists, the society which is actually diverse in terms of gender*" at the upper levels of the institution. While only a few black women academics qualified for promotion at the time of the study (since most of them did not have scholarly publications), in their view, the critical question centres on what the institution is doing to equip them to meet the criteria for promotion and to participate successfully in higher education. One participant said that

The university would transform if they addressed issues of equity, especially in senior positions... what is this university doing to develop the black female academic? Are there any gender offices within management that look into the issue of the development of the black woman? For me, the whole issue of access is about the institution responding to these critical questions.

For participants, the critical issue is about building capacity (which they believe other groups have at the university), that enable black women academics to work on an equal footing with white colleagues. As one woman put it

If you say you are expecting me to write articles for me to get promoted, you should ensure that I am capable and

competent to handle article writing ... they [the institution] cannot just say 'jump' because if you don't know how to jump, you will break your leg and get frustrated.

Another participant used an analogy to emphasise the need for capacity building with regard to writing for publication.

You see, it's like taking a street-child straight from the street and putting him in a boarding school and saying 'look at the other children'. What about you? You are not like them. I mean, this child doesn't know anything about table manners; can't read and can't write. No rehabilitation; doesn't know how to use a toilet or a shower and then you start blaming him. 'Look, but these guys are your age and they can do it'.

Participants felt that the university was not creating enough opportunities for professional development that could foster growth and assist in their professional journey in the academy. The failure of universities to create opportunities for professional growth is highlighted in the *Report on the Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation* (DHET, 2010), which argues that institutions should have mechanisms in place to increase the capacity and opportunities to help black women academics realise their full potential. The report suggests that institutions establish developmental programmes to assist 'young African academics' to improve their professional capacity.

In the focus group discussions, participants stated that the institution should, in addition to ensuring that black women participants are promoted to senior positions, also consider allocating positions and meaningful portfolios that give women "a voice in the decision-making processes of the institution". Participants felt that the university engaged in practices that marginalised the voices of black women academics and rendered them academically dysfunctional in the institution. Such practices include putting more weight on the white male voice in official meetings. The two participants, who were senior lecturers at the time, felt that their voices were still muted and that they occasionally "need a male voice to strengthen and back up [their] voices in meetings where decisions were made." Black male academics often served as allies of black women when the women convinced them in advance of a meeting that the point she intended to raise was valid. Otherwise, participants reported that black male academics typically remained silent or actively supported the views of white male academics, which contributed to silencing the voices of black women academics.

Participants felt that the institution accepted the fact that black women academics could be good leaders but nonetheless, created barriers that prevented them from acting powerfully once they assumed senior positions. They felt that white males at the university have a biased view about black women academics: "She is a good leader, but we should make sure that she does not row the boat too much". This view contributed to participants feeling that they are not wanted in the institution and that the institution is simply tolerating them. They believe that the system of exclusion, in terms of climbing the academic ladder and silencing the voices of those in senior positions, is meant to frustrate black women academics and make them feel unwelcome in the academy. Such a system, they believe, has been created to push them out so the institution can remain mostly white. One participant cited an example of a black woman professor who resigned to join another institution in the area.

The [institution] does not recognise us, and makes it a point that we leave because we are not good enough. If not, how did they let go of Prof X who was such a powerful young black woman academic? They did not even give her an exit interview. What does that indicate? Hmm? Honestly, I also feel I need to leave; this place is so toxic you feel as if you are losing yourself staying here.

The issue of institutional structures that restrict opportunities for professional development and upward mobility for black women academics was also raised in terms of placements in departmental committees. Participants believe that committees assist people to grow and afford them an opportunity to improve their professional knowledge in different areas. Of particular significance was the Research Committee, which participants believe helps members understand research because it is charged with the task of approving students' proposals and evaluating colleagues' articles for departmental funding to attend conferences. However, participants indicated that they were typically placed on Equity Committees. Although they did not have any disregard for Equity Committees, they felt that the placement did not give them an opportunity to grow professionally. They perceived the Equity Committee placement as a kind of tokenism that displayed their presence at the institution, without adding much value to their advancement as academics. This is how one participant felt about her placement on this committee.

In the thirteen years that I have been with my faculty, I've never served on any committee. Only this year I was appointed to serve on the Equity Committee of the Faculty. I really feel bad about it, because it's as if I have been appointed a spokesperson for the black and women constituency. I went to my Head of Department and asked if I could be placed in another committee. That has not happened.

Upward mobility at the university relies heavily on research outputs and to a lesser extent on teaching and learning, and community engagement. This means that black women academics must engage in rigorous research to have any prospect of being promoted. The process of publishing is daunting, given that most black women academics are junior lecturers and lecturers who carry a heavy teaching load of undergraduate courses with very large enrolments, some of which meet every day of the academic week. One participant pointed out that it was difficult to publish and get promoted with such a heavy teaching load.

These criteria are meant to create anxiety in us. They will tell you that in order for you to be promoted, you need to have published so many articles and attended so many conferences; something one can never do with the workload that we have.

Participants felt that preparing lectures required a lot of time, and left them exhausted and with little time to conduct research. Institutional requirements make it especially difficult for wives and mothers, who must improve their positions, while also fulfilling their social responsibilities and performing household duties. Balancing and juggling '*being an academic and a mother [was] very challenging*'. One participant pointed out how the dual role of black woman academics puts them at a disadvantage to men.

The institution should do a needs analysis and identify our needs, see what would work for women as mothers and wives, because really, women's circumstances are different from those of men.

When this reality is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that upward mobility is particularly difficult for black women academics who are wives and mothers. Their main complaint is that white colleagues, who are mainly in senior positions, enjoy the privilege of having time to publish because they are given mostly post-graduate courses which consist of smaller classes, and supervise Master's and PhD students. Participants consider the supervision of post-graduate students less demanding than teaching large undergraduate courses, partly, because it does not require supervisors to meet with students on a daily basis. This allows senior colleagues more time to conduct research. Despite having significantly different teaching loads, the yardstick for promotion is the same for all academics. Participants stated that they felt as though they were put in the spotlight as non-performers in terms of their research, which led some black women academics to experience burnout when trying to fulfil all of their academic and social responsibilities.

Well, the other thing is also that sometimes I experience that you feel as if you have to prove yourself more. You feel as if you have to work five times harder than your white counterparts, because you have to prove that you can survive. Deep down you know you can't do as well as the professor but you feel this urge inside to also compete... academia is not meant for us, let's face it.

The above statement shows that black women academics are not only alienated by social and cultural practices, but must also grapple with structural barriers that place impossible demands on them. This structural barrier, which exists in all public institutions of higher education in South Africa, puts black women academics at a disadvantage and under tremendous pressure to produce research. The result is that many black women academics find themselves barely surviving in the academy.

5.2 Epistemic validation

Epistemic validation deals with issue of whose knowledge counts in higher education. In institutions of higher education dominated by white male academics, the question of whose knowledge is considered valid and legitimate, and whether the knowledge that black women academics and others bring to the institution is valued and embraced, is of vital importance (Portnoi, 2009). Scholars report that the struggle around knowledge validation leaves black women academics at the margins, where they feel as if they do not have much to contribute intellectually (Mabokela, 2004; Mirza, 2006). Participants reported that their intellectual ability was continually under scrutiny by white colleagues, that both the spoken and the subtle messages they receive say they "*are not good enough*." These messages serve as a reminder that they are simply tokens meant to satisfy equity figures, to play the "*numbers game*", but are not taken seriously as people who can contribute valuable knowledge and experience to the university. One participant in the focus group said

The institution is busy working on the equity targets and when we are here they are happy, because they have something to put on their report for the government, but that is as far as it goes.

Another participant said

[the institution] uses us as fishing rods to fish for black students and to address equity...we are not recognised as people who could be resourceful.

Marginalisation of the intellectual depth of black women academics was felt to be even more challenging for those at the 'other' campus of the university who considered themselves as unrecognised by colleagues on the main campus. Participants from the subsidiary campus, which is predominantly black, stated that they felt their situation was worse. They have to travel to the main campus for Faculty Board meetings, but stopped contributing at the meetings because they felt their contributions were not valued.

I sometimes don't feel like a member of the staff at the institution, I don't feel as if I am at my workplace, especially when I am at the main campus. I feel like a member of the 'other' campus, which is an appendage to the main campus. We always have to come to the main campus and if we try to contribute in discussions, our contributions are never taken seriously. I think people at the main campus even feel that our colleagues who have doctorates are still not equal to their doctorates on that side... but it's just a feeling that I get, that subtle feeling which you will not understand because I can't explain it.

Validation of the intellectual competence of black women academics surfaces in two areas: in terms of the content knowledge needed to engage successfully and effectively in teaching and learning, and with regard to their ability to conduct meaningful research.

5.2.1 Content Knowledge

Mabokela (2004) states that the content knowledge of black women academics is often marginalised as substandard. She argues that marginalisation becomes a threat to their potential to contribute meaningfully to academic debates and processes and stunts their professional growth. This happens because once black women academics get the message that they are inadequate, they refrain from participating in departmental debates and lose confidence in their ability to teach. The data show that black women academics in this study face a similar plight. The participants reported that their white colleagues, both male and female, often question their expertise and frequently expose their teaching practice to a level of scrutiny to which no one else is subjected. This scrutiny, which focuses on their knowledge and expertise in setting tests and examination questions and on their class presentations, reduces black women academics to a second-class status below their white colleagues who are regarded as knowledgeable and skilful. The experience of a participant illustrates the point.

I co-teach one module with a white female colleague. Whenever it's my turn to set exam papers, my papers get sent to Prof. X for scrutiny and my colleague tells me Prof. X says this paper is of a low standard. Surprisingly, Professor X, never takes time to explain why she perceives the questions I set as substandard. And you know what happens? My colleague always ends up setting a new question paper which Prof. X always approves. At times I feel that this is an attack on my being as a black person and the knowledge and skills I have.

Another participant, who was also co-teaching with a white colleague, had a similar experience in which the head of department failed to recognise her expertise when a white student had a question about the course she was teaching. In this case, the head of department dismissed the student because the white colleague was not in the office that day. What was striking about this example is that the white colleague has lower academic qualifications but was nonetheless recognised by the department head as having more expertise. The participant reported that

The head of department knowing perfectly well that I am around the department, that I'm the human geographer, said to a student 'Oh so unfortunately, so-and-so is not around. He was going to give you the meaning of this concept'. He made me feel so inferior.

What is striking is that the participant quoted above obtained her doctoral degree from the same department where the head of department felt that she lacked the content knowledge to explain work in her area of specialisation to students. This raises the question of the quality of the knowledge given to black students at the institution, and why it is not considered adequate for teaching to white students.

Stereotypes that marginalise the expertise of black women academics and render them academically unfit to succeed in classroom instruction have spilled over to the students, many of whom have a negative attitude toward black women academics and believe they are intellectually inadequate. One participant said

You see Dr X? My students always go to her to ask her questions when they don't understand something in my class. They just feel that she is more knowledgeable than I am, because she is white and I think they have learnt that she has taught the course previously.

This excluding practice from students impacts negatively on participants, who reported that they sometimes lack confidence when they go into lecture rooms because they know that some students do not respect them in the same way as their white colleagues.

What these students do at times is unacceptable. They make us feel so inadequate. I sometimes practically tremble when I go to the lecture because I know the students don't respect us as young black female academics.

As this statement illustrates, black women academics have to continually deal with students and colleagues who undermine their expertise based on negative stereotypes about their intellectual capacity and skills (Daniel, 2009). This behaviour supports the view of black women academics who see themselves as 'tokens' and whose presence in previously white institutions is meant to satisfy equity mandates, but are not considered good enough for the academy. A participant in the study indicated her frustration of being treated as a token at the university.

I always feel surprised because when I was appointed, the post clearly says we need somebody from a Health Science background, which I had and we need somebody who has an education background, which I had, somebody with a degree, which I had. But they plainly regard me as if I'm an affirmative action appointment and put me in the position of an underperforming person.

According to Harries (2007), this situation affects black women academics globally, who often have to defend their academic capabilities, and continually define and defend their professional identity, which is threatened by white colleagues who make them feel unworthy and ostracised in academia. Similarly, in focus group discussions participants claimed that the treatment they receive from colleagues is meant to demoralise them and make them believe they are *"not good enough to be in academia"*. While black women academics need to prove they are good enough to be in the academy, their white colleagues (who hold similar qualifications) are readily and unquestionably accepted without being under scrutiny for the kind of knowledge they bring to the institution. One woman felt that she had to work harder than white colleagues to prove her worthiness.

You got in on your qualification and everything. So that has to show that you are worthy. But still you feel that very subtle message that is being sent to you, that you do not deserve to be here. In all your presentations you have to work harder to prove yourself at the end of the day that you are worthy to be at the institution.

In an interview, one participant explained that she was told directly by a professor (head of department) that she *'was privileged to be at the institution'*. She explained that since the professor said that to her, she always feels as if she is not good enough, or that she has to prove the professor wrong.

Well, the other thing is also that sometimes I experience that you feel as if you have to prove yourself more. You feel as if you have to work five times harder than your white counterpart, because you have to prove that you can survive.

5.2.2 Research

Participants in this study indicated that their research is not always considered credible. Black women academics who were engaged in their PhD studies reported that their research topics were at times 'rubbed' as non-research, especially when they dealt with the unsettling issues of race or gender that challenged the status quo of white supremacy at the university. Participants stated that at times, they struggled to register their research topics because senior faculty in their departments felt that the issues they wanted to interrogate were out-dated and did not warrant research. One participant, who had a passion for the area of ethics in higher education, reported that her topic was never registered because no one in her department was willing to take on supervision of the study. A supervisor from another faculty who agreed to oversee the study withdrew, claiming she did not want to stir up tensions between the two faculties.

Most black women academics in international higher education face a similar situation. Lloyd-Jones (2009) reports that in U.S. higher education, research conducted by black women academics is not given the same epistemic value as research conducted by white colleagues. As a result, black women academics often do not get the academic support they need for career development, which leaves them at the level of junior lecturer for prolonged periods. Bolah (2009) points out that the experiences of black women academics in research is most often negative, since their desire to articulate the standpoint of black women is suppressed by prevailing institutional knowledge validation processes.

6. White Male Domination

White male domination in institutions of higher education in South Africa is not the only challenge for the participants in this study. As was discussed earlier, access to higher education institutions is highly skewed, with a large number of white male academics concentrated at senior levels, while blacks and women academics occupy mostly junior positions.

Participants pointed out that there are "a large number of white males in those [senior] positions" and asked "Where are the black women?" Participants feel that the concentration of white males in senior positions perpetuates the stereotype that women, especially black women, are not adequate to lead or occupy senior positions. As a result, most white males in the faculties have a mentality that black women academics are not good enough. A participant related her experience in a department dominated by white males.

A person who comes from a nursing background and gets into the male dominated medical profession such as I, gets very frustrated...in the meetings and everywhere else they are right every time, because [according to them] they have more knowledge than anybody else in the faculty. You have to agree with their views every time because yours are not even worth listening to.

Participants claim that white males act as 'gate keepers' and decide on promotion criteria rooted in the experiences of white men at the university. They fail to consider how these policies disadvantage others since "there is no other alternative voice to give an alternative view" when they make decisions. Participants claim that white male gate keepers ensure that they do not allow too many black women academics "into the inner circle" for "fear that black women academics may take over some day."

Another disadvantage for black women academics is that permanent posts are not being vacated or created for diverse groups of people. As a result, most black women academics are taking up equity employments, which are contractual. The disadvantage of contractual posts is that the person remains employed only as long as equity funds are available. A participant on an equity employment contract illustrated how disadvantageous and marginalising this situation is for her.

I have been waiting for a permanent post for six years...I wanted to leave this institution, but I think I will be doing exactly what they want me to do, so I am not going to. I will go to CCMA (Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration) if they don't give me a permanent position this year.

According to Rockquemore and Lazsloffy (2008), the issue of who is given a permanent position is typically shaped by racialised assumptions about who is an insider and who is an outsider, as well as whose presence is welcomed and whose is merely tolerated. The impediments faced by black women academics at the university have been discussed, and I have suggested that some white academics at the institution may regard black women academics as immigrants who have not acquired the full rights of citizenship. As previously mentioned, two participants in the study who were in senior positions, felt that they struggled to express their opinions because the male voice was always considered more knowledgeable and legitimate. The defeatist tone with which one participant emphasised this point shows there is still a long way to go to ensure the successful participation of black women academics at the university. She said

Sometimes I feel I need a male ally who will back me up and make my voice heard. In senior positions we need the support of men because they are heard. We may push for the visibility of women in senior and powerful positions, but to me the question is always: Are they there in the decision-making processes?

7. Conclusion

This study has highlighted different social, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder the successful participation of black women academics in South African institutions of higher education, which result in marginalised access. These barriers, which advantage some constituencies while disadvantaging others, need to be taken into consideration at South African higher education institutions in order to heed the mandate for quality access. The results of this study indicate that white male domination, biased epistemic valuation, and inconsiderate promotions criteria, threaten progress toward the goal of quality access and the successful participation of black women academics, who continue to feel unwelcome in the institutional spaces of the university. Leadership at the university needs to create environments that are inviting and supportive and which foster the professional growth of black women academics in the academy.

If institutions of higher education overlook these critical issues that hinder the successful participation of black women academics, then the goal of creating transformed spaces that ensure equity will not be realised. Consideration of the well-being and particular circumstances of black women academics, especially in historically white institutions, requires that strategies be put in place to ensure their successful participation in institutions of higher education.

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