

Patriarchy: A case of Women in Institutions of Higher Education

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This article presents research on women's experiences of patriarchy in a Higher Education Institution X. This is a qualitative study located within the interpretivists' paradigm. The research problem of this study is articulated through the following research questions: how do female academics experience patriarchy? How does patriarchy impact on their upward mobility? And, how does patriarchy affect their academic output? A purposive sample of eight Black female academics that have experienced the phenomenon under study participated in this research. Data were collected by means of an interview schedule and through self-written stories of experiences that have been thematically analysed. The findings revealed that women at Institution X experienced male supremacy, disempowerment, and disrespect of womenfolk. Another finding is that patriarchy impacts on their upward mobility and deprives them of promotions they deserve. The participants also felt that the reigning patriarchal environment does not only impact on their academic output but also on their intellectual and emotional wellbeing and their person. Suggestions for corrective measures were put forward for use by the Department of Higher Education, Higher Education Institutions and other stakeholders.

Key words: Patriarchy, transformation, gender equality, power analysis

Introduction

Educational transformation is a buzz word in South African educational circles. It is driven by the quest of South Africa on behalf of all citizens of the country, not only to access education in any institution of choice, but to quality education. Indices that underpin transformation include gender equality. Dieltiens, Unterhalter, Letsatsi and North (2009) argue that gender equity is one of the fundamental principles underpinning the transformation of the South African education system.

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Women in particular are targeted for education due to the intricate link between the education of women and girls and sustainable development. This is expressed in a common saying: “When you educate a woman, you educate the nation.” In the academic environment this expression does not hold because women appear to be an endangered species. According to the authors a saying that can express this observation appropriately is: “When you educate a woman, you pose a threat to male power.” In essence it means that the issue of transformation and equal rights should be broadened to include patriarchy, particularly in the academia.

The quest for equal rights of women in South Africa dates as far back as the 1950s, when women in the African Congress raised the question of gender discrimination as a gross violation of human rights. As violation of human rights was linked to apartheid, their quest for equal rights continued up to the time that democracy arrived in South Africa in 1994. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (1995: 29) states succinctly, with regard to women’s rights, that “parties should take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure equal rights with men in the field of education.” Fifteen years after the dawn of democracy, it is appropriate and very necessary to examine the socio-cultural norms associated with patriarchy, as these threaten our democracy – particularly in institutions of higher learning. The South African Constitution considers equality of men and women as a fundamental part of its human rights, which should be observed in all sectors of the country, including Higher Education institutions. However, Pennefather (2008:81) is concerned that “...despite the enormous positive changes in South Africa after 1994, the country is still characterized by great inequalities.”

Ramani and Malema, in the *Mail & Guardian*, 13 to 19 April (2012), commenting in an article titled “Sisters in the academic struggle,” say: “That there continue to be many disparities between men and women at universities is clear from many publications, including the Council on Higher Education’s 2007 report on the status of women in academia.” They highlight the point that “...despite progressive legislation on employment equity and other initiatives aimed at the advancement of women in academia, many factors make it difficult for women to achieve success in what has traditionally been and remains a male-dominated field.” The authors opine that disparities due to pervasive patriarchal attitudes are a major barrier to women academics. These manifest in various forms, such as blocking women from climbing the academic ladder, exclusion from research supervision, and production of knowledge, among others.

Survey data, as reported by Gumbi (2006), showed that in 2003, nine years after South Africa achieved democracy, the average percentage of women in senior management positions was only 24% across all the HEIs in the country. It was also surprising and disappointing for the authors to note that the HESA Magazine for 2009 featured men only, while it is known that there were at least three (3) women Vice-Chancellors in the country at that stage. This apparent exclusion of women’s voices in the magazine may appear patriarchal to observers. Kiamba (2008), in describing

barriers to women obtaining leadership positions, states that traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role of women in society are still prevalent in the African context and that these act as deterrents to the promotion of females. At face value men at Higher Education Institutions tend to mask patriarchy and pretend to treat women as equals (Miroiu & Dragomir, 2002).

The researchers are of the opinion that female students and women employees in tertiary education need female role models in terms of professors and administrators in senior management. It is therefore clear that the issue of gender equality and patriarchy deserve serious attention from the powers that be.

Purpose of the study

Patriarchy is of concern to the researchers because of its negative impact on women. In many ways it prevents women from reaching their potential. This study therefore explores the experiences of Black female academics that have been exposed to patriarchy in a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) – Institution X.

The paper mainly seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Black female academics experience patriarchy?
2. How does patriarchy impact on the upward mobility of Black female academics?
3. How does patriarchy affect the academic output of Black female academics?

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to unravel the state of patriarchy of the HEI identified as “Institution X” in this study.

The secondary objectives are:

1. To determine how Black female academics experience their existence in a patriarchal environment.
2. To determine how patriarchy impacts on the upward mobility of Black female academics.
3. To research the effect of patriarchy on Black female lecturers’ academic output.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

There are several theories which attempt to explain “the how and why questions” of patriarchy. Of the existing ones, the researchers chose the the Theory of Gender

and Power. Connell, 1987 states that the theory of Gender and Power addresses the wider social and environmental issues relating to women, such as gender-based power imbalances. Connell (1987) further argues that self-protection by women is swayed by economic factors, abusive partnerships, and the socialization of women to be sexually passive and ignorant. The rationale for choosing this theory is that it offer more insight into the origin of power relations between males and females in HEIs.

The power analysis theory examines the social structures through which men collectively dominate women through bureaucracy. The typical practice in bureaucracy is to appoint men in top positions while women are concentrated in the lower positions despite their qualifications, experience and potential (Martin, 1990). Martin explains that bureaucrats ensure that they use their power in bureaucracy to keep women in their subordinate place. This manifestation of bureaucracy, according to Martin (1990), takes place in several ways, including, for example, exclusion of women in top positions (when they qualify); discrimination against women (in hiring and promotion); promotion of the bureaucratic value of emotional aloofness and technical rationality as a reason for deterring and restraining women, and to claim that men operate best in a given environment.

The gender role theory relates to gender roles that are inculcated since birth. Men use gender roles, including stereotypes, to maintain their positions, to exclude and to discriminate against women at all levels. According to this belief, men are portrayed as leaders and women as subordinates (Taylor, Peplau and Sears,2000:331).

The rationale for this action is usually that these are roles that cannot be altered. Socialization is used to endorse patriarchy. Women are restricted to roles of nurturing, where they are given responsibilities such as, for example, looking after children and caring for everybody at home – the responsibility which often extends to the work situation.

Patriarchy is indeed “one of the strongest ideologies in cultures worldwide and in the context of the modern Western culture it is operative on more or less the whole spectrum of hyper normative discourses” (Visagie, 1997:7). It is a system of gender domination by males over females and has been institutionalized to emphasize the preservation of roles, attitudes and social stereotypes between males and females (Bhasin, 1993:3). Witz (1992;1) argues that to speak of the patriarchal structuring of gender relations is to describe the ways in which male power is institutionalized within different sites of social relations in society. Boonzaaier and Sharp (1998;155) define patriarchy as a system of domination over women which transcends different systems, eras, regions and class. It is a social group or system ruled or controlled only by men (Longman Contemporary English Dictionary (1985). According to Mngxitama (2010), patriarchy is part of sexism. It puts the interests of men before those of women and uses culture, religion, tradition and even love to justify the enslavement of women. It reduces women to being the property of men. According to Jones (2006:27), men are a prized commodity, yet there appears to be no clear consensus

on the type of skills and qualities they exhibit besides being physically different from women.

Patriarchy in this study refers to an ideology that elevates males to positions of leadership and to a status of recognition of importance and superiority over women, which ignores their ability, qualifications and potential, among others.

Research design and methodology

The study is located in the qualitative approach, because it provides in-depth information on the experiences of individuals (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). It is also positioned within the interpretivists' paradigm. According to Robson (1994), interpretivists believe that truth and reality are socially constructed. In this sense, participants were afforded an opportunity to present the truth within the framework of their understanding and beliefs about the phenomena under investigation. The researchers identified a purposive sample of eight Black female academics that had encountered patriarchy in their departments. Individuals were researched with respect to their own experiences of patriarchy in the HEI. Data were collected by means of an interview schedule and the method used was an unstructured interview of the narrative type. The participants narrated their experiences of patriarchy in the workplace, stated how patriarchy impacted on their mobility as academics and gave their perceptions on how patriarchy affect their academic output. Four participants opted to write down their experiences rather than talk about them only. Before the subjects participated in the investigation the researchers discussed with them the need to talk about patriarchy if it is to be exposed and dealt with. The participants were also assured that their participation was voluntary and that the findings derived from their analysed responses would be used to highlight the situation of women in HEIs and to influence the gender policies, including promotion and employment policies. The subjects were also informed that information derived from their analysed responses would be disseminated to the professional community.

Qualitative data was thematically analysed using the following steps:

1. all the descriptive responses were read several times;
2. the responses to each question were examined separately to ascertain similarities and differences;
3. names were given to categories descriptive of responses;
4. the themes identified were explicated to reveal the respondents' responses to how female academics experience their existence in a patriarchal environment; how patriarchy impacts on their upward mobility and their academic output.

Thematic interpretations were obtained in relation to their experiences. Both common and contrasting responses were included, thus enabling qualitative research findings to be inductively derived

(Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Findings

Findings of the data collected from the eight female participants are presented following interviews with them. The interviews focused on examining the experiences of Black female academics in a patriarchal environment and the impact that patriarchy has on their upward mobility and academic output. The results have been categorized according to the aims of the study. The following themes were identified with regard to experiences of patriarchy: male supremacy, disempowerment, disrespect of women folk, and insensitivity to women's issues.

Two themes relating to impact on upward mobility were identified. These are withholding promotion and manipulating promotion criteria so as to favour men.

Experiences of Participants in a Patriarchal Environment

Male supremacy

Interviews conducted with women who have experienced patriarchy revealed that patriarchy is the order of the day in some faculties within Institution X. This situation is typical at institution X. All eight of the women in the study have experienced this oppression from all male management, seemingly for the sole purpose of ensuring male dominance and female submission. Three participants had the following to say, respectively, on this point:

"...it is a known fact in my department that if you are a woman you must know your place... that is, you are a woman and therefore you are a subordinate, irrespective of your rank and qualifications."

Another woman added the following: "I have been subjected to male domination and humiliation since 2006 to date and the head of the faculty is not taking my issues seriously."

And:

'He (the manager) called a staff meeting one day and instructed that nobody must utter a word, nor ask questions. The subject of the meeting was another female colleague who was present in the meeting and we had to look on helplessly as a colleague was dressed down... Yes, he acted as a real traditional man wielding power in his homestead... what a privilege!'

Miroiu (2003) argues that patriarchy is part and parcel of the organization of institutions and daily practices. Miroiu highlights the point that patriarchal

organizations make men, at any level of society, “bosses” of women. The assumption is that men’s supremacy at the workplace has been intentionally institutionalized by men to perpetually entrench it and to strengthen men’s power base.

Disempowerment

Interviews showed that female participants were prevented from achieving goals related to their tasks by excluding those responsibilities which will empower them or by destabilizing them in their study endeavours. All the female participants expressed concern that they are deliberately disempowered by senior male colleagues in various ways:

“...I have experienced a situation where I decided to further my studies and he pretended to support me but at the time when I was about to taste success, he dumped me.”

“... If you want to be in good books of these males, you must ensure that you remain less qualified than them.”

“...those who seem knowledgeable are enemies to male leaders to be specific.”

“... obstacles to prevent success are always placed on ones way.”

All participants agreed that disempowerment was also expressed in a form of excluding women participating in committees, decision making and perpetually allocating them teaching loads with abnormal numbers of students.

Disrespect of women folk

According to the findings of this study, the participants stated that male leaders did not respect them. One of them expressed their concern as follows:

“Students would be encouraged to write petitions of false accusations about me by the male manager.”

Still on the same issue, another female participant had this to say:

“If a manager feels that according to his perception you have crossed his path, he will embarrass you by calling the protective services personnel to remove you from his office as though you were a criminal.”

It was apparent from the interviews that women in one particular faculty do not have a voice and that those who are vocal about patriarchal issues are labeled “disrespectful” by male colleagues.

Another female participant stated (quoted verbatim):

“Colleagues in my section had told me to shut up not only in meetings because my challenging issues were blocking my upward mobility. I considered that to be unfair, for the reason that promotion should be based on identified criteria and on how rigorously one debates academic issues and perhaps treads on some sensitive toes.”

Insensitivity to women's issues

All of the participants agreed that Higher Education Institutions pay lip service to gender equity. There is usually a gender desk, which in most cases is not functional and not actively supported by top management, most of whom are male. In summary, the general sentiments of the respondents could be best expressed in the rather clichéd form, as follows (quoted verbatim):

“Males publicly support equity, but behind closed doors work to promote the interests of the boys’ club, while women are put in their place, in the kitchen where they belong. This is why women are not visible in the management structures of HEI. It has become apparent that the main function of the gender desks in Institution X is window dressing.”

Taylor, Peplau and Sears (2000: 326), state that gender roles are seen as binary opposites in some societies. The authors state that masculinity has become associated with ambition, dominance, independence, power, control, aggression, ambition and logic. Femininity is associated with attributes such as tactful, dependence, emotionalism, gentleness and talkative. Four of the female participants wrote about harassment by their male manager, who accused all of them of having slept with someone in order to obtain their positions. One of them said (verbatim quote):

“I shudder when I think about the day he told us that we had sex with someone in order to be employed.”

In other words, it should be accepted as typical of women to get their jobs through promiscuity. The women further mentioned that their complaints were reported to a senior male manager and their claims were dismissed, as one respondent puts it:

“The Senior manager said that I was lying and that I was aggressive and that I must behave as expected of women. I realized that he was defending his male colleague and the integrity of males.”

Issues regarding the academic promotion of women

Withholding promotion

The swelling numbers of young women in tertiary educations indicate the need for female role models – professors and administrators in senior management. Unfortunately professorship, particularly in some Historically Disadvantaged Institutions in South Africa, is a male domain as evidenced by the following utterances from three of the participants:

“A good example is one of the faculties in institution X, where there is not a single female professor. However, this is not due to a lack of capable women who have published and participated in the delivery of papers internationally. One typical chauvinist reason put forward for the lack of female professors, is that some of the women who qualify for promotion are emotional in meetings.”

Another one added:

"These are, in fact, women who challenge patriarchal tendencies. They are labeled and shamed in order to silence them in meetings, but we know from time immemorial that male chauvinists are inclined to use emotionalism in women as an excuse to silence women of substance."

And lastly, one participant testified that:

"Some positions that should be voted for are allocated administratively by the senior manager in order to avoid the power of the female vote."

The situation portrayed with regard to the progression status of institution X agrees with the exclusion model of the gender gap (Miroiu, 2003), which argues that women are excluded from well paid jobs (senior positions) for socio-cultural reasons and are identified as unimportant workers or second rate professionals. From data collected from female subjects who had a first-hand encounter with patriarchy, the authors are of the opinion that institution X is role modeling the exclusion model. All the women interviewed perceived the future of women in this institution as bleak, particularly in their section as they do not see a way of climbing the academic ladder even if they could meet the promotion criteria, because senior male colleagues manipulate the promotion criteria to suit their 'male buddies'."

Manipulating promotion criteria

All respondents complained about the fact that men rally around each other in order to ensure they retain power and senior positions undeservedly. This happens because, according to (Miroiu, 2003) these top academic positions which men have been holding for centuries, have enabled these men to structure these institutions to establish moral codes and to shape culture in ways that perpetuate the power of men over women by means of gender power. An example of this misapplied patriarchy, as mentioned by the respondents, is portrayed as follows (verbatim quote):

"Male superiors always ensure that they install other males in senior positions.... the appointment of male professors in fields in which they do not qualify is an open secret."

A similar case from another respondent was (quoted verbatim):

"One male had no qualms in admitting he did not qualify to be in his managerial post and had been given the post to protect him from being under women, although they were highly qualified."

And another adds:

"This is done in order to undermine female candidates who qualify in all respects and to continue locating power in men."

And another participant added:

"You can meet the promotion criteria, but if you pose a threat to males you will never be promoted, instead they will ensure that they use all strategies they have at their disposal to frustrate you."

It is in such situations where one finds constant harassment of women who are considered as threats to insecure managers. These women are abused to the point that they are forced to resign, or continue to work in extremely unfriendly environments because they are seen as “professional misfits”.

Impact on academic output

The researchers found that those female academics subjected to patriarchy work hard to satisfy students as their primary clients under these difficult circumstances. They also mentioned that the positive feedback that they receive from students keeps them going. Two of them expressed this satisfaction. One respondent said:

“Educating people is my passion and teaching and lecturing is a calling to me. My students cannot suffer because of problems that affect me at work because they are the reason for my survival and I am a reason for their future. I always make sure that I do my best... they appreciate my work...they give me positive feedback and they are proud of their performance...sometimes I feel pity for them when they are manipulated against me ... but they are mature because they understand.”

And another said:

“My students love and respect me because they claim I am one of the lecturers who come to class well prepared. That makes me proud that I can still cope despite the odds.”

Participants revealed that though they try hard not to affect their clients (students) with their problems created by a patriarchic academic situation, this does not suggest that patriarchy does not have a negative impact on their academic output.

One of them mentioned that:

“I experience difficulty in doing research because I am not supported, as some of these males sit in these committees and block whatever we as women attempt to produce as research.... I feel so sad and stupid when this happens.”

The participants were also of the opinion that as long as the institution is plagued by patriarchy, it means they will remain in the lowest lecturing positions:

“I will never see progression because my manager makes sure that he gives me huge classes both in the first and second semester; as a result I cannot do research.”

According to the findings of the study, the female participants felt that the reigning patriarchal environment impacts on their intellectual and emotional wellbeing and their person (Duczek, 2008). Their interpretations of reality become frustrated, to such an extent that they become restricted in their thinking (Schoeman, 1998).

Summary of findings

The study led to the following illumination of the experiences of women and the effects of patriarchy on both upward mobility and academic output. Generally,

the findings have revealed that an unfriendly academic environment prevails in respect of female academics at institution X. Women are victimized through the patriarchal culture, which this case study has shown is reinforced by cultural and gender stereotypes. This does not suggest that universities in other settings are immune from this tendency. The findings also suggest that women are reduced to the position of insubordinates through male supremacy, disempowerment, disrespect and insensitivity to their issues.

Patriarchy has emerged as a barrier to women's upward mobility, as evidenced by the fact that men exercise control by excluding them from participating in activities that would result in promotion. It is also clear from the findings that patriarchy "does not tolerate" opposition, and as a result females who oppose it are subjected to different forms of punishment, or are labeled "abnormal" or defiant. It deprives women of the opportunity to benefit from existing promotion policies as men tamper with these to enhance their superiority. Patriarchy affects the research output and the self-esteem of women as it affects their psychological wellbeing.

These findings imply that institutions of Higher Education must take stock of their employment policies and conduct impact studies on staff; by so doing they will be able to identify malpractice or injustices directed towards women.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that patriarchy is a historical reality that thrives not only in homesteads, but as part and parcel of academic institutions and the daily bread of female academics. It is not an easy task for women to challenge patriarchy, but this has to be done if women are to reach their full potential and aspire to those positions presently dominated by men. It is recommended that women vote other women into influential structures in order to ensure equality; in the present structure, this will weaken the dominance of men over women. Women should also mitigate the issues of equity, equality and discrimination against women by means of policy documents. Women should develop their skills by means of workshops and seminars so that they are able to develop additional skills and the necessary confidence to occupy various managerial positions. Men seem to be united in their patriarchal attitude towards women, while the opposite seems to be true with women. It is therefore recommended that the women, in the case study, must start women's groups. It is through such groups that women can promote agendas such as raising their research profiles through publications, refereeing journals and encouraging women to supervise research. It is also recommended that women in the academia should network with females at other academic institutions in order to overthrow patriarchy. Only the oppressed can free themselves.

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