

Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Actionable Strategies for Women's Advancement to Senior Academic Positions at a Semi-metropolitan South African University

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EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 28 April 2025

Revised: 14 September 2025

Accepted: 31 September 2025

Published: 29 October 2025

Copyright:

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DOI: 10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.2.18

Abstract: Although advancements have been made in gender equality, women still occupy fewer senior academic positions, especially in semi-metropolitan universities. This research examines practical approaches to promote women's career advancement in universities, emphasising the institutional and systemic obstacles that impede their development, such as limited access to mentorship, bureaucratic funding procedures, and implicit gender biases. The research begins by framing the ongoing gender inequalities in academia, highlighting the necessity for targeted measures. The issue underscores the gradual progress of women in attaining leadership positions, even with current policies advocating for gender equality. An interpretivist research design was adopted for this study, employing a qualitative research approach with an explorative research design. The study was conducted at a selected university in Limpopo. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to select twenty female academics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Gender equity theory and feminist theories were applied in this study to challenge male-centric frameworks. Thematic analysis was em-

ployed to identify essential strategies for the advancement of women. offering workshops to improve leadership abilities, the significance of institutional support, the specific training necessary to prepare women for higher positions, and the relevance of gender-sensitive training in addressing implicit biases and workplace discrimination. The study's results carry important implications for university leaders and policymakers, highlighting the necessity for structured mentorship initiatives, policy changes, and resource allocation to enhance gender equity. By implementing these strategies, the university can help break the glass ceiling and foster a more inclusive environment in academic leadership.

Keywords: Gender equity, Gendered barriers, women's advancement, Glass Ceiling, women in academia.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide now prioritise the advancement of women into influential academic positions and their empowerment (Kezar, 2023). Despite the progress made towards gender equality, significant inequalities persist, particularly in leadership roles (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). The "glass ceiling" represents a multifaceted challenge arising from both institutional biases and organisational obstacles (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023). In South Africa, there is a significant gender imbalance in the representation of women, especially in vice-chancellor positions, where women comprise just 23% of vice-chancellors, while men hold 77% (Kela et al., 2024). This disparity emphasises the persistent obstacles to achieving gender equality in high-ranking university leadership positions. The Semi-Metropolitan University, located in Limpopo Province, faces challenges similar to those of other universities in striving for gender equality in senior academic roles.

The scarcity of women in senior academic positions represents a major global issue that affects both developed and developing countries (Shavha & Shasokela, 2021). O'Connor (2019) posits that the

How to cite this article:

Muleya, A. (2025). Shattering the glass ceiling: Actionable Strategies for women's advancement to senior academic positions at a semi-metropolitan South African University. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 7(2), a18. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2025.vol7.2.18>

absence of women in academic roles has emerged as a fundamental challenge for higher education institutions worldwide. The academic sphere continues to exhibit substantial gender disparities, despite women's progress in education and workforce participation (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023). Women encounter significant obstacles when pursuing senior academic positions, a situation that impacts both developed and developing countries (Magaua, 2023). The barriers to women's advancement stem from various structural components, cultural factors, and institutional barriers that need to be addressed. Bracken et al. (2023) contend that women in academic fields face considerable obstacles and discriminatory practices that hinder their progression to leadership positions within these structures. Achieving gender equity in academia necessitates the identification and resolution of these specific issues.

Patriarchal systems maintain gender norms by creating prejudice against women through established expectations. Adongo et al. (2023) articulate that traditional male-dominated academic positions represent barriers that prevent women from attaining senior academic roles. Women have been excluded from the world's oldest and most prestigious educational institutions over successive generations. Research indicates that women remain underrepresented during promotional processes in both developed and developing countries (Muleya & Maqubela, 2025). Wiesner-Hanks (2024) concurs that patriarchal systems exhibit strong resistance to change across the globe. The global implementation of strategies that support women in academia is essential for dismantling obstacles and establishing gender equality in higher education institutions.

In many developed countries, efforts to address gender disparities in academia have been ongoing; however, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles (Murphy et al., 2022). In the United States, for instance, women make up nearly half of the academic workforce, yet they are significantly less likely to hold senior positions, such as full professorships (Fox Tree, 2022). The rise in women's involvement in higher education has not altered their representation in senior university positions, as evidenced in Australia; this trend is also observed in other Western nations (Muleya, 2023). In Australia, the professional advancement of female academics halts at a lower point compared to their male counterparts. The situation regarding women's access to senior management roles in Nigerian universities mirrors that of other universities in certain countries, as they encounter identical obstacles in their academic career advancement. Academic positions in Nigerian universities are predominantly held by men, with women making up less than 35 percent of the total faculty (Kaymakcioglu et al., 2024). Among the seven public universities in Kenya, only three female deans have been appointed, by Kenyatta University and Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology, respectively (Muleya, 2023). The statistics above reflect how the representation of women in higher positions still lags worldwide.

The University of Venda, situated in a semi-urban area, caters to a varied student body and occupies a significant position in the academic and socio-economic context of the region. Although the University promotes progressive policies and values diversity, it mirrors global patterns, indicating that women are not adequately represented in high-ranking academic roles. National data from South Africa shows that although women constitute a substantial part of the academic workforce, their presence diminishes at advanced academic levels (Akahome et al., 2020; Podreka et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in high-level leadership positions, including deans, department chairs, and professors (Cardel, 2020). In recent years, the necessity to address gender inequalities in academia has become undeniable. The University has initiated several gender equity initiatives aimed at promoting women's professional growth (Garcia et al., 2020; Okoro, 2025). Nonetheless, these initiatives have experienced variable success, highlighting the pressing need for a more thorough and strategic approach (Naciti et al., 2024).

Although gender inequality in South African higher education is extensively documented, limited studies provide specific and practical approaches for breaking the glass ceiling within institutions. At the selected university, no focused research has investigated how its specific organisational

frameworks, cultures, and promotion systems obstruct women's progression to higher academic positions. This research addresses that gap by creating evidence-based, context-oriented strategies for transformation. It explores the systemic barriers faced by women in academia and proposes strategic measures to create a fair and inclusive academic environment. The study aims to identify practical strategies that empower women to thrive and assume leadership roles within this setting. In line with this, the research question for this study is:

- What are the actionable strategies for women's advancement to senior academic positions at a selected South African University?

2. Literature Review

The underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions at higher education institutions is a widely recognised global issue. The "glass ceiling" continues to act as a significant barrier to women's career advancement (Magaua, 2023). This challenge is especially pronounced in developing regions, such as the Limpopo Province of South Africa, where traditional gender norms and power structures have historically marginalised women within the academic sphere. Existing research has identified a confluence of factors that contribute to the glass ceiling in academia, including unclear promotion procedures, limited access to research funding, and unequal leadership training opportunities.

The term "glass ceiling" denotes the unseen but unbreakable barrier hindering women from progressing to top leadership roles in organisations (Yadav & Yadav, 2021). Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) argue that the glass ceiling is a constructed barrier based on biases in attitudes or organisations, which still hinders qualified women from advancing into mid- and senior-level management positions in academic settings. Perssons (2024) concurs that the glass ceiling isn't a tangible barrier but an attitudinal challenge made up largely of unconscious biases and misunderstandings. This notion encompasses the biases in attitudes and organisations that hinder capable women from attaining the top levels of academia, regardless of their qualifications and accomplishments (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023).

Kapoor et al. (2021) contend that the ongoing glass ceiling obstructing women's progress to senior roles in higher education institutions continues to be a widespread challenge that necessitates thorough examination and focused action. Studies show that several women in high-status academic roles have identified self-created barriers, including difficulties related to motherhood, as contributing to this glass ceiling (Dahlvig & Longman, 2020). While some scholars conceptualise this barrier as primarily implicit and attitudinal, others demonstrate how it manifests in concrete institutional practices such as biased evaluation criteria and exclusionary networking. In the South African context, these barriers intersect with the ongoing transformation of higher education institutions following apartheid.

Many studies emphasise the significant impact of institutional barriers on women's advancement to higher academic positions (Khan et al., 2024). These barriers, often rooted in the frameworks and cultures of higher education institutions, create systemic challenges that restrict opportunities for women, regardless of their qualifications and achievements. Researchers like Griffin (2019) contend that numerous institutions possess deep-rooted power structures and hierarchies that typically benefit traditional male networks, resulting in skewed hiring and advancement practices, with men more frequently favoured for leadership positions, even when they have similar qualifications.

The absence of clear, transparent, and consistently enforced criteria for promotion and tenure decisions can foster an atmosphere that encourages bias (Lincoln & Stanley, 2021). Verrier (2021) emphasises the gender gap evident in the processes of advancing in academic careers. When evaluation methods rely significantly on subjective judgments or vague criteria, gender-related implicit biases can skew results. Hall (2021) discovered that women in STEM disciplines were less likely to obtain tenure compared to their male peers, even after adjusting for publication rates and

research influence. This suggests that factors beyond objective criteria are influencing the situation. Moodley-Diar (2021) posits that the South African higher education system faces a major obstacle to women's career advancement due to its lack of defined and uniform promotion and tenure standards. While the national policy framework supports equity in universities, advancement criteria remain unclear, and institutions apply different standards, which faculty members interpret variably.

Academic careers based on traditional models create challenges for women, as they require extensive work hours and intense competition while offering limited work flexibility, particularly for those with family caregiving responsibilities (Cohen-Miller et al., 2022; Simerick, 2024). The study by Fuller and Hirsh (2019) showed that insufficient parental leave policies, combined with limited childcare support and the unavailability of flexible work arrangements, forced many female academics to choose between career advancement and family obligations. According to Warren & Bordoloi (2023), this challenge contributes to the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, as women leave academia at higher rates than men, particularly during critical career transitions to tenure-track positions. Women with caregiving responsibilities face substantial challenges due to the lack of supportive systems for work-life balance in the workplace.

Mentorship and sponsorship play a crucial role in advancing academic careers (Ayyala et al., 2019). Nevertheless, women frequently face significant obstacles when trying to access these essential support networks. Studies show that women are less often invited to participate in informal mentoring connections with senior faculty, who are predominantly male (Ayyala et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2023). Moreover, even when women succeed in forming mentoring relationships, they may not receive the same degree of sponsorship, characterised as proactive support and endorsement by senior colleagues, as their male peers.

The overall environment of an institution impacts women's professional development in ways that extend beyond formal organisational rules. A "cold climate" describes an environment where women experience continuous yet understated discrimination through stereotyping and micro-aggressive behaviours, resulting in their exclusion and marginalisation (Hughes et al., 2023). Women encounter various forms of exclusion at work, including meeting interruptions, dismissal of their ideas, uncredited work, and biased distribution of teaching responsibilities and committee positions. These seemingly minor incidents accumulate over time, creating significant negative effects on women's workplace motivation and their ability to advance professionally. Researchers conducted a faculty survey, revealing that women reported less support and inclusion in their workplace than men, while documenting specific instances of gender bias during hiring and promotion processes and throughout daily work activities.

Gender equality in South African universities is influenced by the apartheid legacy, which established racial and gendered hierarchies still evident in hiring and advancement practices (Akala, 2018). Kela et al. (2024) state that although women currently represent a considerable portion of academic staff, they continue to be underrepresented in higher positions, holding approximately 27-30% of professorships and leading only a small number of universities. National data from South Africa confirms that although women constitute a substantial part of the academic workforce, their presence diminishes at advanced academic levels (AkaHOME et al., 2020; Podreka et al., 2024).

2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this research is grounded in a blend of intersectional feminist theory and gender equity theories. Intersectional feminism, as articulated by Crenshaw (1991), acknowledges that the experiences of women are influenced by the intersecting and cumulative impacts of gender, race, class, and various other social identities. In the context of South African higher education, these intersections are especially prominent due to the lasting structural

inequalities established by apartheid, where race and gender persist in influencing access to academic leadership (Akala, 2018). These viewpoints assist in examining and comprehending the obstacles and facilitators influencing women's progression to senior academic roles within the setting of a semi-metropolitan university. Gender equity theories emphasise the structural inequalities between men and women in different areas, including universities (Podreka et al., 2024). This theoretical perspective argues that women must have equal access to educational and professional growth opportunities as men, without facing discrimination (Mushibwe & Simuka, 2021). This framework helps to determine whether entrenched biases in university policies and practices obstruct women's attainment of senior academic positions. Feminist theories challenge male-centric frameworks and promote the transformation of educational institutions to stimulate greater inclusivity (Arora, 2024).

The research design was directly influenced by these frameworks. The research question emerged from the frameworks to study actionable strategies for women’s advancement. The research methodology was guided by these frameworks, resulting in the selection of an explorative qualitative approach that focuses on participant perspectives to reveal complex experiences. In gathering data, the interview protocols were crafted to draw out strategies that highlight systemic injustices and intersectional experiences, while the analysis employed thematic coding influenced by themes connected to feminist critiques of male-dominated systems and gender equity’s emphasis on structural change. These frameworks provided a perspective to analyse how gendered norms influence recruitment, advancement, and leadership selection procedures in academic institutions within this study. Integrating gender theories and feminism into this study enriches its depth and significance by providing a critical viewpoint on the obstacles to women’s academic progress. These theories offer explanatory strength and actionable strategies to ensure significant transformation in leadership frameworks within institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, applying feminist theory in this study ensures that both the voices and experiences of female academics are at the core of the investigation.

3. Methodology

The interpretivism paradigm was used to understand the strategies for career advancement and to capture rich, detailed narratives from female academics. A qualitative research methodology was employed for this study, using an exploratory research design to extract in-depth interviews with female academics at the institution under study. The study involved a sample of 20 female academics from a semi-metropolitan university located in Limpopo Province. The individuals in this study were from various age groups, spanning 25 to 60 years, and hailed from distinct faculties at the university; their degrees, acquired from various higher education institutions, also reflected their employment status, as displayed in the table below.

Table 1: Participants' profile

PSDY	age	Marital Status	Qualifications	Y of E	Y of P	L of E
P- A	41	Married	Master’s degree	2011	2016	Lecturer
P -B	42	Married	PhD degree	2010	2014	Senior lecturer
P -C	59	Single	PhD degree	2010	2015	Senior lecturer
P- D	37	Single	Master’s degree	2013	_____	Lecturer
P- E	43	Single	PhD degree	2009	_____	Lecturer
P -F	53	Single	PhD degree	2013	2019	Senior lecturer
P -G	58	Divorced	PhD degree-	2002	2008	Senior lecturer
P- H	41	Married	Master’s degree	2008	2014	Lecturer
P- I	44	Single	PhD degree	2015	2017	Ass prof
P -J	36	Married	Master’s degree	2014	_____	Lecturer
P -K	38	Single	Master’s degree	2013	_____	Lecturer

P- L	28	Single	Honours degree	2016	_____	Junior lecturer
P -M	43	Single	Master's degree	2005	2019	Lecturer
P -N	39	Single	Master's degree	2013	2015	Lecturer
P -O	37	Single	Honours degree	2015	_____	Junior lecturer
P -P	48	Married	Master's degree	2010	2012	Lecturer
P- Q	47	Married	PhD degree	2009	2017	Associate Prof
P- R	57	Widow	Master's degree	2011	2016	Lecturer
P- T	44	Married	Master's degree	2004	2019	Lecturer
P- S	36	Single	Honors degree	2016	_____	Junior lecturer

Source: Formulated from participants' biographical data

PSDY-Pseudonyms-, MS-Marital Status, Q-Qualifications, Y of E- Year of employment, Y of P-Year of Promotion, and L of E-Level of Employment.

An exploratory research design was applied to investigate practical strategies for promoting women into senior academic positions at the Semi-Metropolitan University of Limpopo Province. A qualitative method offers a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of female academics as they navigate the glass ceiling in the academic field.

A non-probability sampling method was used to select participants, integrating purposive and convenience sampling strategies. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of female scholars with relevant experiences regarding career advancement and leadership challenges in academia. Participants were chosen based on their roles, experiences, and perspectives on the institutional environment. Additionally, convenience sampling was employed to select participants who were accessible and willing to take part in the study during the specified period. Twenty female academics participated in this study, providing a range of viewpoints on the obstacles and enablers of career progression in a semi-metropolitan academic environment.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and perspectives while ensuring consistency in essential discussion topics. The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted in the participants' offices, the most conducive environment for them. The collected data were analysed through thematic analysis, a qualitative method that recognises, arranges, and interprets patterns within the dataset. The examination adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-stage framework. The codes were organised logically around the research question. Each theme was described and connected, ensuring that they contributed to a cohesive narrative. Themes were analysed for their content, important elements, and core message.

All ethical considerations were strictly followed to protect participants' rights and maintain the integrity of the research. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, with password protection for participants' files. The significance of voluntary participation was emphasised, and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time. The institutional ethics committee overseeing the study granted ethical approval. The positionality of the researcher is that of an outsider.

4. Discussion Of Findings

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews was conducted, identifying four primary themes that could enhance women's progress to senior academic positions: establishment of workshops, institutional support, training and re-training, and gender-sensitive training workshops.

4.1 Theme 1: Establishment of workshops

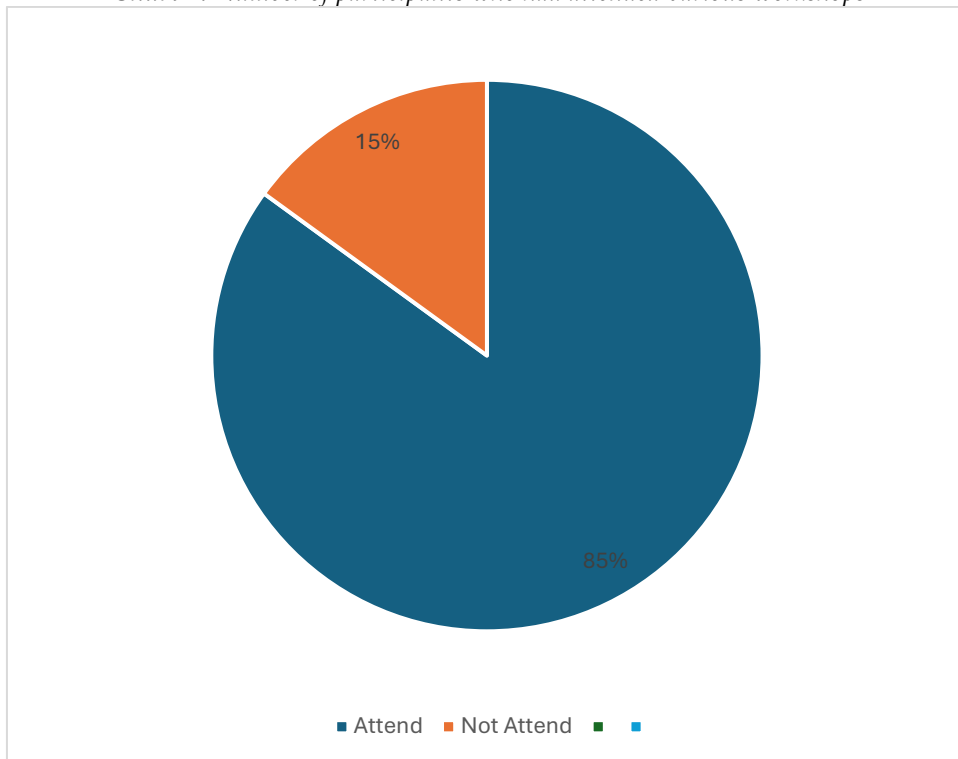
In this section, I aimed to examine the University's support for academic staff members regarding career progression programmes and assess whether these programmes enhance their growth. To explore this, I posed the question to the female academic participants- *"Have you ever taken part in any workshops on article publication?"* The majority (85 percent) of participants reported having participated in multiple workshops, highlighting the significance of these workshops in enhancing their career growth and leadership abilities. This is supported by the quotes below:

"I have participated in multiple workshops each year, our faculty holds workshops for article writing that I ensure to attend whenever I have the time, so I don't miss out".
(Participant N).

One of the participants outlined some of the different workshops that the University was offering to academics, besides article writing workshops:

"I have attended various workshops at this university, including training for assessors and moderators, postgraduate supervision, promotion sessions, women and leadership events, teaching and learning workshops, and proposal writing seminars" (Participant B).

Chart 1: Number of participants who had attended various workshops



The above chart indicates that 85 percent of participants attended various workshops, while a small percentage reported never having the opportunity to attend any workshops.

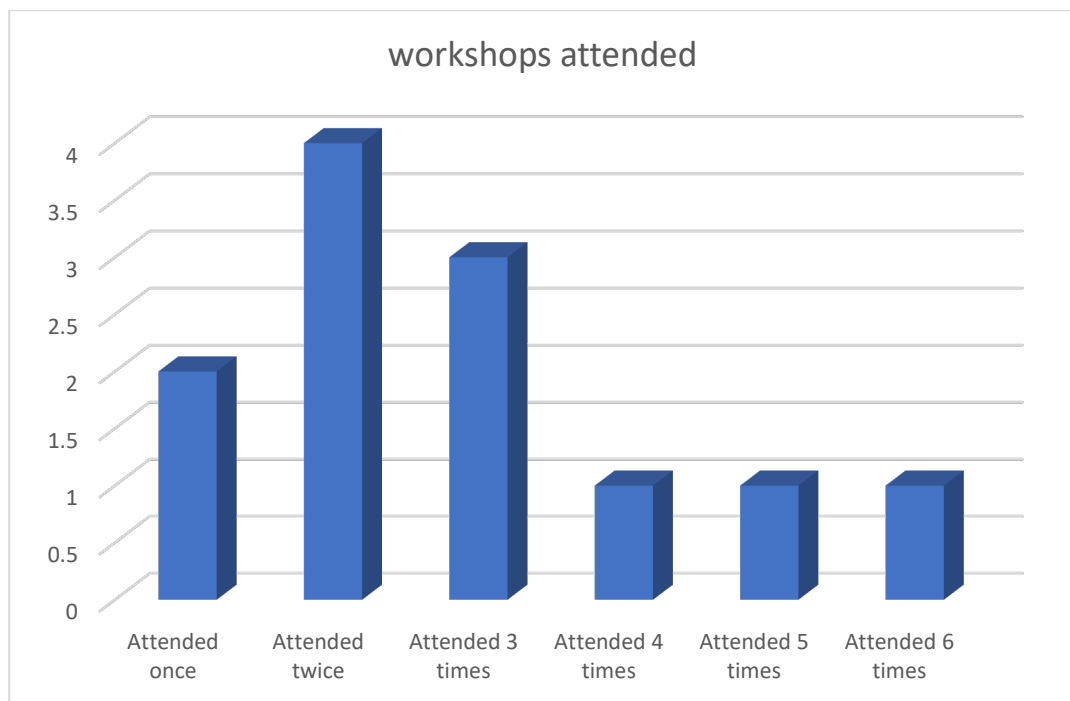


Figure 1: Total number of workshops attended

The number of participants who had taken part in multiple publication workshops was quite limited, as reflected in Figure 1 above. This was either because the workshops were rare or not sufficiently advertised, hindering attendance. Additionally, due to significant teaching and administrative duties, many female academics struggled to find time for workshops. Akahome et al. (2020) support this finding, noting that women, unlike men, often lack time to write articles for publication because their time is consumed by multitasking. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the individual who attended multiple workshops was a senior lecturer, as shown in Figure 1 above. This may be due to senior lecturers having fewer classes, a point supported by Participant G.

"I have participated in various workshops that greatly assisted me in gaining confidence about publishing, and during these workshops, I received mentorship to support me in writing articles".

However, 10 percent of participants acknowledged that, although they had attended the workshops, they did not track the exact number of sessions attended, as indicated in the quotation below:

"I can't remember all the workshops I've attended, but I know for sure that I've participated in many since the Institution encourages us to join whenever they hold them; unfortunately, I didn't keep track" (Participant E).

After discovering that most participants had taken part in workshops, I was eager to learn from those who had attended developmental sessions whether they had gained any benefits from them. Consequently, I asked if the workshops had provided them with any help or support. The subsequent replies were gathered from the participants:

The workshops provided valuable insights on writing various kinds of articles (research papers, review articles, etc.). The organisers urged each participant to submit at least one article before the workshop's conclusion and to maintain a record of the uploaded manuscript. That was very beneficial for me, as I can now review articles and compose research papers without any difficulties (Participant N).

"Indeed, the workshops were quite beneficial and fruitful for me, as they offered a chance to gain knowledge about academic writing, which allowed me to create articles since we were motivated to submit them to accredited journals" (Participant Q).

The observation demonstrates how targeted professional development helps women academics gain the essential skills and confidence needed to advance their careers. Ayyala et al. (2029) point out that although workshops help address immediate capacity gaps, particularly in academic writing and publishing, they reveal a fundamental structural problem that exists because mentoring and training opportunities are not equally distributed across faculties and career stages. The benefits of these supports will remain individualized and short-term unless institutions commit to integrating them into formal promotion pathways, which would lead to systemic changes in the representation of women in senior-level positions. The participants further recognised the changes that occurred in their academic lives following their attendance at the workshops, as detailed below:

"The workshops have been essential, particularly due to the lack of mentors to direct us; while attending the workshops, we learned to align manuscripts with journal standards, which had posed a significant challenge for me" (Participant F).

I am now able to write an article independently and have it published in a recognised journal. I found it challenging in the past. However, I gained clarity and understanding after participating in additional writing and supervision workshops (Participant B).

The workshops, particularly the article writing workshop, equipped the participants with the skills needed to select accredited journals for the publication of their articles, as demonstrated by the quote below:

"The workshops assisted me in selecting journals relevant to my field and in recognising predatory journals" (Participant P).

Additionally, other participants noted that the workshops assisted them in acquiring skills in conducting fieldwork for data gathering and the final write-up of their research projects.

The workshops not only helped me with publication processes but also made it easier for me to achieve my master's degree, even while I was participating in distance learning. Additionally, the workshops improved my writing skills and taught me how to solicit funds for projects and write for publication (Participant L).

Some participants noted gaining benefits not only in writing and publishing articles but also in personal development and obtaining certificates after attending the workshops, as explained in the quotation below:

"It's beneficial because, in the end, we receive certificates and learn how to write and publish. For instance, I attended an assessor course that helped me assess students" (Participant J).

4.2 Theme 2: Institutional support

Sustainable change remains elusive without strong institutional support when individuals attempt to break through the glass ceiling (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021). Institutional backing involves the development and implementation of inclusive policies, alongside active support from senior management and a genuine commitment to gender equality. This section aims to investigate the internal support available to academics in their career development. To gather insights, we asked participants the following question: *"What support does the University offer to assist academics like you in advancing your careers?"* Most participants (70 per cent) indicated that the institution had specific funds available for academics pursuing their PhDs. Ayyala et al. (2019) found that mentorship alone was insufficient; instead, incentives were necessary to motivate female academics.

What I know is that the institution has funds available for conducting research and writing articles. However, the process for accessing these funds is challenging, as the

requirements are very strict. It would be beneficial if they could release the funds without complications, as the current procedure is quite cumbersome (Participant A).

It has incentives; however, the university's system is not fair. They claim they can provide financial support, but when you try to claim the money and receive the necessary assistance, it appears that the university is only interested in numbers. Occasionally, they invite experts, but they are not the best in their field (Participant E).

The statements above indicate that, although financial support funds are available, accessing them is not easy due to restrictive and frustrating procedures. As a result, some participants argued that the situation is akin to not receiving any support at all, as the incentives in place are very hard to obtain. This perspective is additionally backed by the following assertion:

There is no kind of support that I can say I am receiving because the incentives that they say are available for article publication and for conferences, however, for one to be able to get it is not easy as the procedures put in place to claim for the money are very difficult and discouraging for one to go through (Participant C).

Additionally, participant T concurred that the institution had a developmental fund for staff members who wished to further their studies, particularly those aspiring to register for a PhD degree. However, this fund appeared to be difficult to obtain, discouraging and frustrating many female academics who sought to advance in their careers, as explained in the quotation below:

The Institution offers various workshops for publications and covers the expenses of articles upon submission. However, accessing funding for staff is quite challenging. I am currently pursuing my PhD and in the data collection stage. I received a staff research fund of R100,000, but I have been unable to access it due to the exhausting and confusing procedures. Every time I submit the claim forms, they are rejected, and I am asked to fill them out again, which is very time-consuming (Participant T).

The quotation shows that the monetary incentives intended to stimulate female academics to further their studies actually demotivated them due to the complicated claiming procedure, which needs to be revised. Additionally, other participants pointed out that although the institution had a gender-equity policy, women remained underrepresented, indicating a lack of enthusiasm for implementing the policy. This reflects how formal support mechanisms, according to intersectional feminist and gender equity perspectives, create inequity because procedural barriers prevent access to resources for those who already face multiple structural disadvantages. This aligns with Barnard and Crimmins (2022), who emphasised the need for a critical perspective on gender equality policies and practices for staff within institutions of higher learning. Bhopal and Henderson (2021) found that inclusive policies should be monitored and linked to cultural shifts to address the underlying causes of gender disparities in higher education.

They have gender equity, but they are still behind in terms of gender issues, which means they do not believe in implementing gender equity. This is proven by the continuation of the under-representation of women, and this is further illustration of lack of desire for implementation of the policy (Participant B).

I delved deeper into the responses and prompted the participants to elaborate further with the question: "Is there any support aimed specifically at women?" Most of the participants concurred that there wasn't specific support aimed at female academics, as the assistance provided was identical for both sexes. Muleya's (2023) study findings align with this, as it stipulates that institutions that do not deliver ongoing support through policy structures and implementation methods are likely to maintain tokenism instead of achieving real change. Magaua (2023) concurs that policies transcend being mere formalities; they become catalysts for change when combined with genuine institutional commitment. Bhopal and Henderson (2021) emphasise that for true institutional

support to take place, the policies should not only be documented but also implemented and supported by a culture within the institution that prioritises equity.

"There is no specific support directed at women, as the available resources are intended for both males and females, but it is primarily males who are benefiting the most." (Participant T).

"I am not aware of any direct support specifically aimed at women; in fact, the existing support is available for both men and women" (Participant A).

4.3 Theme 3: Training and re-training

Despite the support and programmes available to assist academics, female academics consistently lag behind in progressing to senior positions. Bracken et al. (2023) argue that, beyond general professional development, targeted training should focus on the distinct obstacles women encounter while advancing to senior academic roles. These obstacles include navigating institutional politics, strategic publishing, securing grants, and managing academic departments. In this subsection, I aim to gather the views and suggestions of the participants on how to improve the representation of women in senior leadership roles. Therefore, I asked, *"What kind of training programmes should be implemented to promote women to senior leadership positions in institutions of higher education?"* In response, most participants suggested that leadership training programmes should be established for female academics, enabling them to acquire the necessary skills:

"Training for academic leadership is not uniform; it needs to adapt to the challenges women encounter at the crossroads of gender, location, and institutional culture." (Participant A).

The observation supports an intersectional feminist perspective, as women's professional development needs require specific training approaches that avoid generic solutions. The combination of gender with geographic location and institutional culture creates unique leadership obstacles that necessitate customised solutions. Leadership training that ignores these intersecting factors perpetuates gender equity issues, as it benefits individuals whose circumstances align with dominant institutional norms. Therefore, leadership programmes must be designed with adaptability and context-specific approaches to ensure equal opportunities for career progression.

"In institutions of higher learning, training in management and leadership skills should be made available for women so that they can empower themselves" (Participant H).

Participants G and M reinforced this by stating the following:

"Workshops, particularly designed to coach and mentor women on leadership, should be provided. They will help to build self-esteem and boost confidence in women, especially those who aspire to be promoted to senior positions" (Participant G)

"Women leadership workshops should be established so that those who are interested can attend and get the kind of coaching they need, and if also possible, the promotion criteria should be reviewed" (Participant M).

The statements above indicate that women appreciate support programmes aimed at enhancing their leadership skills. This is supported by the findings of the study conducted by Mushibwe & Simula (2021), which posit that leadership development programmes, mentorship, and sponsorship initiatives should be considered effective strategies to increase the representation of women in senior positions. Muleya (2023) articulates that successful leadership training must deliberately tackle the systemic obstacles women encounter, particularly in underfunded and semi-urban university environments such as Limpopo. Consequently, these workshops will certainly serve as an inspiring influence for women.

4.4 Theme 4: Gender-sensitive training workshop

Implicit biases and systemic discrimination continue to hinder women's progress in academia. The participants emphasised that gender-sensitive training should be structured to enhance both individual professional development and institutional transformation. Jean (2025) argues that gender-sensitive training targeted at every employee is essential for changing institutional cultures and breaking down both obvious and subtle discrimination. The participants noted that academic training programmes lack specific content on gender dynamics, as they often employ gender-neutral approaches that fail to address women's unique challenges.

"Training that is aware of gender issues must not only equip us with leadership capabilities but also train us in managing the subtle and implicit biases that continue to influence decision-making in academic settings" (Participant A).

"When men are included in the training, it allows them to recognize the unseen obstacles we encounter, relieving women from the need to repeatedly clarify and rationalize these issues" (Participant N).

The participants further illustrated that gender-sensitive training should equip women with the abilities to overcome gender-related obstacles, including skills such as confident communication in male-dominated environments, securing resources through negotiation, and techniques for managing leadership alongside other duties. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of institutional training for all staff.

"There is a need for training aimed at the institution, focusing on all staff, including males, to enhance awareness of implicit bias, eliminate stereotypes and promote inclusive decision-making processes" (Participant M).

Participants proposed that training should be conducted by facilitators who possess both subject matter expertise and lived experience of gendered inequalities in academia. Ideally, this training would combine internal institutional trainers with external specialists to provide diverse perspectives. The training should be interactive, utilising real-life case studies drawn from the South African higher education context to ensure relevance. According to Mangwenya et al. (2023), participation could be incentivised through integration into professional appraisal systems, recognition in promotion criteria, or CPD (Continuing Professional Development) credits.

I also gathered the participants' sentiments on strategies to address the underrepresentation of women in higher education institutions. Most participants agreed that there should be measures to promote female academics into senior positions. The study by Tshipani (2021) supports these findings, indicating that women face numerous challenges that hinder their progress in climbing the academic ladder. Therefore, institutions of higher learning should develop concrete strategies and policies to facilitate their advancement. This is further underscored by the following quotes that support these recommendations:

"Leadership development programs specifically designed for women in academia should be offered, emphasising skills such as negotiation, networking, and self-advocacy, which are essential for career advancement" (Participant M).

"The institution should develop a strategy to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of women who have attained senior academic roles. This initiative can motivate other women academics and foster a positive and empowering culture" (Participant, N).

Participant Q argued that there should be a way to motivate women to strive for higher positions:

"Women must be encouraged to see value in leadership so that they can work towards occupying higher positions. This can be achieved through women empowerment workshops and seminars on leadership and management" (Participant Q).

Participant E emphasised the importance of involving men in any proposed strategies. Persson et al. (2024) share a similar view, stating that the strategy should encourage collaboration between men and women without any obstacles. They further indicate that there is a need to transform the realm of academic authority; institutions must progress from mere awareness to genuine accountability. For this to take place, gender-sensitive training serves as the catalyst, while structural change is the ultimate goal.

"We have many policies regarding promotions, and perhaps we should educate men, so they better understand how to collaborate with women. Men should be involved at every level since they currently hold the power to determine who gets promoted" (Participant E).

The intersectional feminist approach to gender-sensitive training recognises that women face different barriers due to their multiple identities, which include race, class, and geographic location. Akala (2018) argues that training materials need to move beyond basic gender-related topics to explore how various social categories interact within South African academic settings. Gender equity theory supports the idea that achieving true equity requires both the elimination of institutional obstacles and the transformation of workplace cultures, ensuring that training serves as an active tool for cultural transformation and individual empowerment.

Some participants were aware of gender-sensitivity initiatives at other institutions, such as the University of Cape Town's "Man Engage Africa Training Initiative" programme, which includes mentorship and gender-awareness training, and Stellenbosch University's gender diversity and equality workshops. Evaluations of these initiatives suggest that follow-up sessions should be ongoing, that leadership should be supportive, and that gender awareness should be integrated into all professional development rather than treated as a separate intervention.

5. Conclusions

This study has illustrated the ongoing challenges women encounter in advancing to senior academic positions at the Semi-Metropolitan University of Limpopo, while also suggesting specific approaches to remove the barriers. At the core of this study's findings is the need for specialised workshops focused on enhancing women's leadership skills. These efforts not only provide women with the skills and assurance to navigate institutional structures but also foster a stream of competent leaders prepared to take on senior positions. Equally important is the role of institutional support in integrating inclusive policies and practices. Without a strong commitment from the university leadership to foster structural change, initiatives to promote gender equity may remain superficial. Therefore, institutions should pledge to ongoing, systemic change that values diversity and actively encourages women's presence in leadership roles.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the significance of customised training designed to equip women for the distinct challenges of high-level academic leadership. This training should focus on strategic decision-making, mentorship, networking, and negotiation skills, ensuring that women are not only present but also empowered to lead successfully. Moreover, tackling implicit bias and workplace discrimination necessitates the incorporation of gender-sensitive training at every level of the institution. These initiatives are essential in transforming organisational culture by raising awareness, confronting discriminatory practices, and encouraging accountability. Collectively, all these approaches create a multifaceted framework for breaking the glass ceiling and fostering fairer academic environments for women at the University of Limpopo and other institutions in South Africa.

Using an intersectional feminist perspective, the results confirm that gender inequality in academia must be viewed in relation to other intersecting social categories, such as race and class. The ongoing dominance of male-centric norms in leadership and decision-making structures validates the

fundamental principle of gender equity theory, which shows that formal equality measures are not enough to achieve change without cultural transformation. The findings demonstrate that policy reform needs to be combined with capacity-building interventions aimed at transforming organisational culture and addressing implicit bias. Beyond this specific university, these findings have implications for South African higher education institutions and other Global South institutions that encounter comparable structural and cultural obstacles to gender equity.

5.1 Recommendations

The institution needs to establish mentorship programmes that pair mid-career female academics with experienced professionals. Search committees must include equal numbers of male and female members, who should also receive training on bias recognition. The institution should perform workload evaluations to verify that teaching, administrative, and service duties are distributed fairly, as women currently receive disproportionate assignments. Women leaders should be viewed as individuals who foster inclusive environments for unity in rights advocacy, particularly within higher education institutions. They must challenge patriarchal systems to reshape power structures, rather than becoming part of the existing power structures that exclude them. Policymakers must design and implement strategies to address gender inequality in academic institutions. The institution should set goals for female academic representation while promoting gender-neutral recruitment methods and supporting work-life balance to help women succeed in their careers. The implementation of these recommendations requires specific financial support, alongside specialised expertise and dedicated time. It necessitates dedicated budgets, streamlined funding processes, and facilitators with expertise in intersectional feminist and gender equity approaches. Such funding targets the structural barriers identified by feminist theory, ensuring that reforms are transformative rather than merely symbolic.

5.2 Prospective future research

Future research needs to explore how multiple identities, including race, class, disability, and sexualities, affect women's academic leadership development. Such studies could reveal more about the organisational barriers that specific female groups face. Additionally, future research should analyse both the role of male academics and leaders in sustaining or dismantling gendered hierarchies and the development of academic allyship. Researchers should also examine how inclusive policies are implemented at different levels within academic institutions. Furthermore, it is essential to investigate the gap between established policies and actual implementation by studying who carries out the execution and what standards measure success.

6. Declaration

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding. Additionally, the Article Processing Charge (APC) was covered by the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Acknowledgements: I would like to acknowledge Prof T.D. Thobejane for reviewing the manuscript, and most importantly, I am grateful to the female academics who participated and made this study possible.

Conflicts of Interest: The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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