# Evolution of South African Woman in Higher Education: Past, Present, Future

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**Abstract.**

The rise of South African women in higher education is a story of perseverance and transformational change. South African women, particularly black women, were historically marginalized and excluded due to colonial and apartheid-era policies, posing significant barriers to higher education. The early twentieth century saw the gradual emergence of women's colleges and limited access to higher education for white women, while black women were largely excluded. Following World War II, the landscape began to shift gradually as social and political movements advocated for women's rights. The end of apartheid in 1994 was a watershed moment, resulting in legal reforms and policies aimed at redressing historical injustices and promoting gender equality. The new democratic government's initiatives, including the National Policy on Gender Equity in Education (1997), resulted in a significant increase in the enrolment and employment of females in higher education institutions. By 2019, women made up most students in South African higher education institutions, marking a significant shift from previous decades. Despite these advances, current challenges remain, such as underrepresentation in STEM fields, gender-based violence, and economic barriers. The government, universities, and civil society organizations must continue to work together to address these issues and ensure that women have equal access to and success in higher education. This evolution highlights the dynamic interplay of gender, race, and education in South Africa, emphasizing the need for ongoing advocacy and policy intervention to achieve true gender parity in higher education.

**Keywords:** Woman, Higher education, apartheid, democratic government, evolution, South Africa.

# 1      Introduction

The journey of women in higher education has been marked by significant milestones and transformative changes. From being largely excluded from academic institutions to now representing a majority in many universities worldwide, women's progress in higher education reflects broader societal changes and ongoing struggles for gender equality (Altbach and Hazelkorn, 2018). The journey of South African women in higher education reflects the country's complex socio-political history, characterized by colonialism, apartheid, and the ongoing efforts towards gender equality and social justice (Badat, 2009). From early exclusion and marginalization to the significant strides made in recent decades, the progress of South African women in higher education highlights their resilience and determination in overcoming systemic barriers (Chisholm, 2009). For instance, prior to the 1990s, discriminatory laws and cultural beliefs and severely restricted the access of women, especially black women, to higher education (Lues, 2005).

As a result, Universities in South Africa have undergone a revolutionary process over time with the goal of correcting historical injustices and advancing gender equity (Badat, 2009). In the centre of this trans-formation agenda is the essential of creating, expanding, and fostering of an inclusive intellectual environment. The implementation of affirmative action regulations, scholarships, and support programs has been crucial in affording women and other historically oppressed groups with opportunities (Mdleleni et al., 2021).

However, gender inequality is still a persisting problem in South African higher education, despite the advancements made. Women continue to face obstacles in the workplace, and advances, in achieving gender equality in academia has been slow (Blackwell, 1852; Mdleleni et al., 2021). Dealing with these obstacles demands a comprehensive strategy encompassing the efficient enforcement of policies, focused initiatives, and a dedicated dedication to achieving social justice.

As South African universities progress on their path to transformation, they must prioritize empowering women, amplifying their voices, and fostering an environment conducive to their development and leadership capabilities (Mabaso, 2023). By embracing diversity, creativity, and collaboration, South African higher education has the potential to lead to a fairer and more prosperous future for all.

## 2    Early Exclusion and Marginalization

In the early 20th century, women faced significant barriers to accessing higher education globally, including in South Africa (Mabaso, 2023). Higher education in South Africa was largely inaccessible to women, particularly black women (Mabokela and Mawila, 2004). The colonial and apartheid regimes enforced policies that severely restricted educational opportunities based on race and gender (Ramphele, 1995). Institutions of higher learning were predominantly reserved for white males, with limited opportunities for white females, and even fewer for women of other racial groups (Ramphele, 1995; Thobejane, 2013). The ex-tended exclusion of women from higher education directly opposed Victorian ideas about women's societal roles, and numerous institutions

resisted demands to transition to a coeducational model (Walker, 2005; Thobejane, 2013).

During apartheid in South Africa, racial and gender discrimination deeply influenced society, leading to widespread inequalities. Women bore the added weight of gender-based discrimination (Mabaso, 2023). Even today, research indicates that the disparity in gender equity in higher education persists globally, with Africa trailing behind other parts of the world (Evans et al., 2020). In South African higher education, women are significantly underrepresented, constituting only about 43% of permanent academic staff in public institutions (SADE, 1997; UNESCO, 2020). This disparity worsens at senior academic levels, where women make up approximately 18.5% of professors and 29.8% of associate professors (UNESCO, 2020; Mabaso, 2023). Despite possessing strong publication records and qualifications, women encounter numerous barriers contributing to this issue:

- Lack of recognition and support for women's talents.
- Gender disparities in academic labour roles, with women often relegated to organizational tasks while men occupy leadership roles.
- Persistent traditional stereotypes affecting women's career advancement, such as starting at lower academic ranks than their male counterparts.
- Deep-seated cultural beliefs and discriminatory practices that hinder women's progress.

Unfortunately, South Africa mirrors these systemic challenges. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, with only five out of 26 universities having ever been led by female vice chancellors (Mabaso, 2023). This contrasts with enrolment figures, where women constitute many students, yet they do not see proportional representation in leadership positions.

Despite South Africa's strides in enhancing women's status through various legislative and policy frameworks, implementing these measures has proven difficult (Omodan et al., 2019). Achieving gender equity remains a crucial national goal, but these policies have not been effectively applied in higher education. Persistent workplace barriers have led to uneven female representation, leaving many female academics still far from realizing the dream of gender equality in academia (Mdleleni et al., 2021).

# 3   Apartheid Era: Struggles and Limited Access

During the apartheid era (1948-1994), the education system was segregated by race under the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (Blackwell, 1852; Ramphele, 1995). This policy further entrenched racial inequalities and limited access to quality education for black South Africans, including women. Black women faced the double burden of racial and gender discrimination, which restricted their educational and professional opportunities (Blackwell, 1852; Ramphele, 1995). However, despite these oppressive conditions, many black South African women exhibited re-markable resilience. They engaged in activism, formed women's organizations, and participated in the broader struggle against apartheid, all

while striving to pursue education under extremely challenging circumstances (Thobejane, 2013). Notable figures, such as Mamphela Ramphele, who became one of the first black South African women to earn a medical degree, serve as inspirations (Ramphele, 1995).

Jagger (2022) states that the term apartheid is not easily defined, he states that apartheid has evolved into a worldwide symbol that is used to highlight unequal power and income distributions in a variety of con texts, rather of just serving as a line drawing separating South Africa under the national party's during 1948 to 1994 reign. While Jagger defines apartheid from 1900 to 1960, Morell and Clowes (2016) argue that the Anglo-Boer War, which the British eventually won, had an impact on South Africa. During this time, aggressive state policies solidified the use of the English language. The most well-known author of the time was a woman named Olive Schreiner, whose first novel "The story of an African form (1883)", highlighted issues of gender inequality and racial discrimination, additionally, by the end of 1980s feminist awareness had begun to take hold, influencing Penelope Hetherington's writing, which centred on two main themes: "black women" as "op- pressed victims" and the other being capitalism manipulated by the state and the other being honouring the "heroic resistance of women against such oppression".

Research titled "History of apartheid education and the problems of restrictions in South Africa" was carried out by Thobejane (2013), the history of SA is extremely delicate, Mr Hendrick Vorwoerd Spearhead-

ed the policies that brought Bantu Education in 1953, an inferior education system designed primarily for the black population. The native education act was introduced by Mr JH Hofmey, who also appointed a commission on native education led by Dr WWM Eiselen. The com-mission's primary goal was to investigate problems associated with including African Americans in a common educational system that was costly to maintain, as a result, minister WA Maree was appointed as Head of Bantu Education in 1959 (Goldin, 2006). A healthy education and higher education system were amongst the many areas affected by the Bantu education systems detrimental effects on the nations socio-economic development.

In a 1983 study, Bazzoli investigated the role of women in South Africa by researching Marxism, feminism, and patriarchal studies conducted in the country. These studies found that capitalists have a significant impact on patriarchal relations for women of various backgrounds, and that family structures are crucial to comprehending the various levels of female oppression and the indicators of gender hierarchy in emerging capitalist system.

## 4   Post-Apartheid Era: Transformation and Progress

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a significant turning point for South African women in higher education (Lues, 2005; Shiela et al., 2020). The new democratic government, led by the African National Congress (ANC), prioritized education as a means of redressing past injustices and promoting equality (Badat, 2009). Policies and programs

were implemented to increase access to higher education for all South Africans, particularly marginalized groups (Chisholm, 2001). The Higher Education Act of 1997 was a critical legislative milestone that sought to restructure and democratize higher education institutions. It emphasized inclusivity and aimed to increase the representation of women and black South Africans in academia (SADE, 1997). Affirmative action policies and bursaries specifically targeted at disadvantaged groups helped to create more opportunities for women to enter and succeed in higher education (Sumida, 2021; Khumalo, 2023).

After Post-apartheid a study conducted by Booi, Vincent and Liccard (2017) revealed that black academics experience feeling of exclusion, invisibility, and rejection especially black female academics. In addition, their comprehension of the essential characteristics of prevailing institutional practices and cultures that are based on race, class and gender is severely restricted. Walter, Mehl, Piraino, Jansen, and Kriger (2022) agree, stating that there is a significant gender disparity due to historical factors, institutionalized and systemic reasons for inequality, and that the weight of inequality has an immediate impact on women's mental well-being and academic careers, even during the famous COVID 19 pandemic lockdown.

According to Mama (2003), hierarchies of power are sexualised in ways that are consistent with conservative gender ideologies, one such example is the unequal distribution of labour between the home and professional area of study. Female employees who do not advance to

leadership positions are frequently found working in the fields of student welfare, human resources, and other administrative and support jobs that are thought to benefit from a "feminine touch" because these jobs resonate with women's traditional roles as careers and home makers and nurturers.

A study by Mayer, Oosthuizen, and Surtee (2017) on Emotional intelligent in South African women leaders in higher education yielded some intriguing results. The study found that while the South African constitution emphasises on non-racial and non-sexist democracy, South African leaders in higher education institutions face challenges from the effects of society and educational issues arising from social gender ine-quality experiences of discrimination, disempower and the exclusion of women in leadership positions. Research has shown that women play a significant role in leadership in Africa and South Africa. Women in leadership in SA are recognised as having a resonance, developing a leadership style that consists of adaptive communication skills, mentoring abilities, collaboration, and cooperative qualities.

Managers, HOD's, Deans and University administration within the HEI's from various divisions and faculties should take into consideration that when black female academics enter or become newly employed, they are formally groomed by disadvantaged HEI's which has a significant impact on their confidence, as Mahope (2014) pointed out. It is important for leaders to acknowledge that black female academics often come from households that do not place a high value on their conducting in depth research. Departments and line managers should

guide and assist them as they transform into the new HEI's and eventually into prosperous jobs and positions. The conventional methods and approaches from the apartheid system are still a part of their daily rou-tine.

## 5   Achievements and Ongoing Challenges

Since the end of apartheid, there have been significant improvements in the participation of South African women in higher education. Interventions such as funding, research grants, mentoring projects and more opportunities of employment for females (Naicker, 2013) have been somewhat successful as reflected in CHE (2018-2021) data. Women now constitute most of the student population in many universities. According to the Council on Higher Education, by 2018, women made up approximately 58% of university enrolments. Recent data shows in-creased representation particularly of black South African women in HE. Moreover, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women attaining undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in various fields, including those traditionally dominated by men, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics as well as obtaining employment in HE (STEM-CHE, 2021). Women are also making strides in academic leadership roles, with an increasing number of female professors and university administrators. Despite these advancements challenges remain. Gender disparities persist in certain disciplines, particularly in STEM fields, where women are still underrepresented. Fewer females obtain doctoral degrees as well as senior academic and administrative positions relative to males (CHE, 2021).

Furthermore, women in higher education continue to face issues such as gender- based violence, balancing academic pursuits with familial responsibilities, and systemic biases that affect their career advancement (Naicker, 2013; Akala, 2018; Toni and Moodley, 2019).

## 6   Intersectionality and Rural-Urban Disparities

An important aspect of understanding the evolution of South African women in higher education is recognizing the intersectionality of race, class, and geography (Farmer, 2021). While urban women, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, have benefited significantly from post-apartheid educational reforms, rural women and those from impoverished communities still face substantial barriers. Black African females from rural and impoverished urban backgrounds are afforded fewer opportunities for access and success in higher education than their counterparts from an urban middle-class environment, especially white females (Ruswa and Gore, 2021). Although the number of black females obtaining an undergraduate degree has increased over the years, fewer black females from rural backgrounds obtain postgraduate degrees as well as employment in senior academic and management positions (Farmer, 2021). Increased access to higher education evidently does not tally with increased success, representation and recognition as rurality is said to influence decisions that pertain to employment (Trahar et al., 2020; Agumba, 2020; Khumalo and Sibanda, 2023). This is largely attributed to the lack of access to resources, poor infrastructure, low quality of basic education, low teacher quality, poor teaching of the English language and multigrade teaching in rural primary and

high schools (Murtin, 2013; Nkambule, 2014; du Plessis and Mestry, 2019; Omodan et al., 2019; Sumida et al., 2021; Agumba et al., 2023). Black African females that manage to pass through primary and high school, experience challenges with accessing tertiary institutions due to lack of information and stringent admission requirements that do not favour the rural poor. Those that end up in university are disadvantaged because of lack of funding for fees, food, accommodation, and transport (Nkambule, 2014). In addition to financial constraints, a proportion of black African females from rural and impoverished urban environments face difficulties in engaging with the curriculum due to language issues inherited from a poor basic education background (Nkambule, 2014). These barriers present a ripple effect on career opportunities in institutions of higher learning (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Nkambule (2014), in her account of experiences as a black female academic from a previously disadvantaged background narrated how she was perceived as less intelligent because of her race, basic education background and rural origins. Negative stereotypes reiterate the intersectionality of race, class and geography in the advancement of women in institutions of higher learning (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023).

In recent years, strides have been made to ensure representation and recognition and black females in higher education (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo, 2023). Efforts to address disparities include targeted scholarship programs, improved infrastructure in rural areas, and community outreach initiatives aimed at encouraging young women to pursue

higher education. These measures are essential for ensuring that all South African women, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to succeed academically.

## Conclusion

The evolution of South African women in higher education is a testament to their resilience and determination in the face of systemic challenges. From the oppressive conditions of the colonial and apartheid eras to the strides made in the democratic era, South African women have continually fought for and achieved greater access to education. While significant progress has been made, ongoing efforts are needed to address persistent challenges and ensure that all women can thrive in higher education. The future of South African higher education holds promise, with women poised to contribute significantly to the country's academic, professional, and socio-economic development.

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