

## **Women that work in higher education in Africa: A Southern feminist perspective**

As the continent with the second largest population in the world, counterintuitively when considering human potential, very little is known about Africa, its diversity and contributions to higher education globally. Africa may be erroneously considered as a continent that merely follows northern higher education practices, with the promise of rich gains to European and North American institutions wishing to expand their international markets. From an occupational psychology perspective, women's work and employment in the South African higher education sector has received research coverage (such as Jackson & Fransman, 2018). Much less has been published regarding women working in higher education on the rest of the continent. Notwithstanding the paucity of published research, women show low levels of representation in leadership, administration and academic jobs in Africa overall (Mbuh, 2006), similar to trends on women's higher education employment in the rest of the world (Hill & Wheat, 2017).

The experiences of women working in higher education (HE) globally has more recently been studied utilising assumptions of market principles, individual contribution, competitiveness, and resource scarcity (Webber & Rogers, 2018). Scholars have approached research reflecting on mainstream managerial practices and individualist discourses, with some focus on feminist theory. Whilst western or global feminism holds value (Ampofo, Beoku-Betts & Osirim, 2008) for the advancement of women's rights and standing within institutional contexts, western feminists have received critique for assuming that women's experiences and needs regarding gender justice are universally similar (Connell, 2015). These assumptions could render knowledge produced in Africa about women working in higher education, subject to comparison or interpretation against discourses and theory that may not be appropriate, applicable or fully appreciative of African contexts.

For purposes of this paper, *higher education work and employment* includes activity where individuals provide labour in exchange for money to a recognised institution of higher education such as a university. In this context, work takes place in the areas of research, teaching, administration, management, community involvement and leadership, and covers all organisational hierarchical levels but excludes the work of students, unless this work is done towards opening a career path in academia.

This paper reports on progress towards a proposed research agenda on women working in HE in Africa which is framed in Southern feminist theory. Specifically, the paper presents a review of southern feminist thought in order to derive a contextually sensitive outline with which to frame future research about women employed in higher education on the African continent. Application of the outline to a literature review covering the period 2000-2018, about women working in HE in Africa, produces insightful avenues for future research. In addition, thought on how the global research community could address the issue of sexual difference (Connell, 2018) in employment and work in higher education, is provided.

### *Background to a continent*

It may be regarded as ambitious and bold to suggest that a research agenda for women in higher education in Africa can be crafted for a continent comprised of 54 different countries

(African Union, 2017) where approximately 2000 different languages are spoken (Heine & Nurse, 2000). Africa is the world's second largest and second most densely populated continent, surpassed by only Asia in both categories. With 986 residential and government recognised universities (Unirank, 2018), language barriers may be one of the main reasons why Africa is poorly represented in global research databases. After considering indigenous languages, many African nations continue to officially recognise and utilise the languages of British and European colonisers such as English, Spanish, Portuguese, German and French (Greenberg, 1963). The complexity and richness of diversity of African higher education which is historically anchored in distinct educational traditions (such as: Islamic, Catholic, Portuguese, Von Humboldt, French and British traditions), provides the backdrop to this important study.

### *Review of research*

The paper provides an outline of feminist thinking that emanated from Africa and the global South (authors such as Huda Sha'aeawi, Amina Maman, Adeolu Oyekan) and proceeds with themes such as 'land rights and agrarian disposition' (Ossome, 2015); patronage networks; socio-centric and collective agendas (M'Cormack-Hale, 2015); race and coloniality, motherhood and religion's central role in women's identity. These themes inform the analysis and framing of the larger literature review for the period 2000-2018, focused on women working in higher education in Africa. The larger literature review, which is yet to be concluded, utilised keywords such as 'women', 'female', 'higher education', 'Africa', and 'gender' on the Web of Science, EBSCO Host, SA ePublications, and Emerald Insight databases. At the time of writing this paper, the search yielded 147 plausible articles which will be scrutinised for inclusion according to the definition of higher education work and employment. Since papers written in English were consulted, limitations to the review are noted for especially Francophone, Portuguese, Afrikaans and Arab publications.

### *Conclusion*

Globally researchers are exerting effort in the quest to produce knowledge that informs the attainment of gender justice and normalisation of sexual difference in the higher education workplace. Women working in higher education in Africa form part of the global higher education landscape, yet their voices are presently muted. Focused and contextually sensitive research by them and about them, may bring refreshing perspectives to the higher education community which sets out to democratise these workplaces and may set an example for the generations that follow.

### *References*

African Union. (2018). *Constitutive Act of the African Union*. Accessed at: <http://au.int/en/constitutive-act>

Ampofo, A. A., Beoku-Betts, J. and Osirim, M. J. (2008). Researching African women and gender studies: New social science perspectives. *African and Asian Studies*, 7(4), 327–341.

Connell, R. (2015). Meeting at the edge of fear: Theory on a world scale. *Feminist Theory*, 16(1), 49-66.

Connell, R. (2018). Keynote address at the Gender, Work and Organization conference, 15 June 2018, Sydney, Australia.

Greenberg, J. (1963). *The languages of Africa*. United States.

Heine, B. and Nurse, D. (2000). *African languages: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Hill, L. H. and Wheat, C. A. (2017). The influence of mentorship and role models on university women leaders' career paths to university presidency. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(8), 2090-2111.

Jackson, L. T. B. and Fransman, E. I. (2018). Flexi work, financial well-being, work-life balance and their effects on subjective experiences of productivity and job satisfaction of females in an institution of higher learning. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 21(1), a1487. <http://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v21i1.1487>

Mbuh, R. (2006). African women and higher education attainment in the 21st century: The challenge continues. *Asian Women*, 22(1), 1-26.

M'Cormack-Hale, F. A. O. (2015). Going beyond numbers: Reframing substantive representation of women parliamentarians in post-war Sierra Leone, *African and Asian Studies*, 14, 85-107.

Ossome, L. (2015). In search of the State? Neoliberalism and the labour question for pan-African feminism. *Feminist Africa*, 20, 6-22.

Webber, K. L., and Rogers, S. M. (2018). Gender differences in faculty member job satisfaction: Equity forestalled? *Research in Higher Education*, 1-28. [doi-org.ez.sun.ac.za/10.1007/s11162-018-9494-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9494-2)

Unirank, (2018). World universities search engine. Accessed: <http://www.4icu.org>.