



## Causes of Gender Discrepancies in Academic Promotions in Higher Education in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe.

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the causes of gender discrepancies in academic promotions in higher education institutions in Masvingo Province: Zimbabwe. It was hinged on four thematic areas, namely: gendered discourses in Masvingo's higher education institutions, disabling perceptions of gender equity in Higher Education in Masvingo, disabling gendered practices in Higher education in Masvingo, and role of higher education institutions in addressing challenges of gender discrepancies in higher education promotions in Masvingo institutions. The study was premised on the social constructivist perspective. Qualitative research methodology was employed for the study and an interpretivist philosophy was adopted. An ethnographic design was adopted and data were collected through personal interviews, observations and critical discourse analysis. The population of the study included both male and female academics who have been teaching in universities in Masvingo for more than five years. Sampling methods used for identifying the sample from two universities were convenience as well as purposive sampling. From each university, ten participants (five females and five males) were purposively selected, giving a total of twenty participants. Data were analysed using the thematic approach. Findings highlighted that gendered discourses, disabling perceptions and disabling gendered practices all contribute to gender discrepancies in academic promotions in Masvingo's higher education institutions. Findings showed a lag in time between age of promotion for male academics and female academics, with female academics receiving promotions to senior lecturer and professorial grades at later ages than their male counterparts. The study highlighted that higher education institutions have a central role in addressing challenges of gender discrepancies in higher education promotions in Masvingo.

**Key Words: Gender, Academic Promotion, Gender disparities.**



## INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that women are significantly underrepresented in leadership in Higher education institutions globally (Idahosa, 2019; Mott, 2022). This has been attributed to curriculum and narratives of many education institutions which are hegemonic products of cultural influence (Henao, 2017). Gender discrepancies, therefore, have become evident in several areas that constitute academic discourse like academic promotions. As the number of female academics increases, inequalities have become hidden, hard to detect and difficult to address. Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo (2021) lament that gender gaps appear to emerge despite comparable investment in human capital and similar self-reported aspirations to reach leadership positions. Complexities associated with addressing gender disparities have resultantly increased. Initially, gender inequalities were perceived to be a factor of socio-cultural variables and structural causes. This is reflected in findings by Mugizi and Masheija (2019), who attribute the gender discrepancies to unequal advancement opportunities for females as compared to their male counterparts, motherhood responsibilities, career immobility for women as a result of family responsibilities and the ethic of care that is expected of them, dominance of males in leadership network, negative attitudes from society, disrespect from male counterparts, and marginalization

from career advancement networks. However with the rise in knowledge sources, it is evident that gendered conceptions of inequality are rooted in more in-depth factors than just the socio cultural domain.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the inception of the UN, laws, treaties and conventions regarding women's rights have been adopted. The central effort towards inclusion of women in all facets of the economy was the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1967. CEDAW is the cornerstone for gender equality action worldwide and it constitutes the central and most comprehensive bill of human rights for women (Benedek et al., 2002; Mott, 2022). Article 2 of CEDAW notes the obligation placed on governments to pursue by all appropriate means a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and Article 3 notes the need to take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development and participation of women (Mott, 2022). It is against this commitment by the international community to close the gender gap across all sectors of the economy that in Africa, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights was instituted. Article 18 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights calls on all States Parties to eliminate every discrimination against women and to ensure the protection of the rights of women as stipulated in international

declarations and conventions (Organisation of African Unity, 1986). Central to the African Union's commitment on gender equity was the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2003 and entered into force in 2005. It states the need for all States Parties to combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional and other measures (African Union, 2005).

In 2004, the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy was adopted. The Zimbabwean National Gender Policy Implementation Strategy and work-plan (2008-2012) asserts that Zimbabwe has signed and ratified the Protocol of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the rights of women in Africa. It has also signed the solemn declaration on gender equality in Africa. Zimbabwe has also signed, ratified and acceded to United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and women empowerment. These efforts are all positive steps in closing the gender divide in all forums of the global, continental and local socio-economic and political landscape. However, fifty-six years after the institution of CEDAW and nearly twenty years after the adoption of Zimbabwe's National Gender Policy, it seems that the excitement that characterized the formative years of addressing the gender challenge in

Zimbabwe has dwindled. Thus, inequalities continue to exist between male and female academics' participation in upper level university academic management. While gender discrimination happens to both men and women in individual situations, discrimination against women is an entrenched, global pandemic, inherited from pre-historic times and passed on from one generation to the other (World Bank, 2018:30). Alan, Ertac, Kubilay and Loranth (2020:263) show that the scarcity of females in leadership positions persists in spite of much improvement in societal norms and institutional barriers. A study by Workneh (2020) shows that in Sub-Saharan Africa, inequality and gender-based discrimination are not only found in traditional societies but also in modern political and economic systems. In South Africa, with respect to universities, in 2016, only 27.5% of their professorial staff were female. The figure was slightly higher for associate professors, with a female representation of 39.5%. At the senior lecturer level, women occupied 45.1% of 4,900 posts, while at the lecturer and junior lecturer levels, they constituted 53.3% (out of 8,498 posts) and 56.6% (out of 1,035 posts), respectively (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, while there are more women than men at lecturer levels, the same is not true for senior levels. UNESCO (2021) attributes this to the gendered research output in higher education. It found out that the regional averages for the share of female researchers for 2017 was



31.1% for Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, there is a gender publication gap which directly affects rates of academic promotion.

Another factor noted by Galan-Muros, Bouckaert and Reser-Chinchilla (2023) was the transition from Master's to PhD levels which they saw as the first measurable explanation for women's lower global representation in academic positions. They show that there is generally a lower transition from Master's level to PhD level for female academics than for male academics. Thus, Idahosa (2019) rightly notes that despite progress made regarding inclusion of women in higher education, they continue to be underrepresented, particularly in senior academic positions in African universities. Therefore, this study was done against a background of persistent gender disparities in academic progression and promotional grades between male academics and female academics in higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe.

In their study of Zimbabwean universities, Machibaya and Ndamba (2023) found that out of the twenty-one universities in Zimbabwe, only two have a female Vice Chancellor. Muchabaiwa and Chauraya (2022) found that the Education 5.0 framework is gender-blind and tends to obstruct the promotion opportunities for female academics. This is so because frameworks and standards may be instituted in an environment where the

“knowers” have become too accustomed to “rhetoric” which recreates attitudes negating contemporary discourses. This can be attributed to prolonged periods of interventions which are resisted by the wider academic population which constitutes the “knowers” within academic communities. Thus, Mott (2022) argues that higher education is an ideal vehicle for perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities in the realm of policy, social norms, attitudes, access to resources, dialogue and capacity building.

However, this scenario is against a backdrop of concerted efforts globally, continentally and locally to address the gender challenge. Shava, Tlou and Mpofo (2019) in their study in Mberegwa District of Zimbabwe, highlighted the essence of institutionalized gender roles as central to the existence of gender discrepancies in institutional practices. In their study, they found out that women leaders were often seen as violating their prescribed feminine roles, while men in leadership were seen as in compliance with their prescribed masculine roles. Therefore, higher education should effectively address practical barriers that disproportionately affect women academics because of their positions in society (Mott, 2022).

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It has been noted that the level of inclusion of female academics in higher education practices remains very

low as compared to their male counterparts in Masvingo Province's higher education institutions. These practices include academic promotions, academic management and knowledge creation communities. Mugizi and Masheija (2019) attribute the gender discrepancies to unequal advancement opportunities for females as compared to their male counterparts as a result of motherhood responsibilities, career immobility for women due to family responsibilities and the ethic of care that is expected of them, dominance of males in leadership network, negative attitudes from society, disrespect from male counterparts, and marginalization from career advancement networks. While Mugizi and Masheija's research examined the problem in Zimbabwe from a socio-cultural perspective, this research will examine institutional causes which include gendered discourses, disabling perceptions, disabling gendered practices, and role of Higher education institutions in addressing challenges of gender discrepancies in higher education promotions in Masvingo institutions.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper is guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways do gendered discourses cause gender discrepancies in academic promotion in higher education institutions in Masvingo?

2. What is the role of disabling perceptions in constructing gender discrepancies in academic promotions?
3. To what extent do gendered practices contribute to gender discrepancies in academic promotions?
4. How can higher education address challenges posed by gender discrepancies in academic promotion?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this paper, the author is guided by the social constructivist theory. The social constructivist theory was quite instrumental in unveiling the pervasiveness of the issues of gender within higher education practices in Masvingo Province. Macartney (2011) shows that this theory highlights that individuals can exercise agency through their participation in social construction and interpretation of the world. The theory is important in explaining the agency of human beings in construction and deconstruction of belief systems, which are central to the discussions in this paper.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research was premised on the interpretivist philosophy. The interpretivist philosophy makes an effort "to get into the heads of the subjects being studied so as to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning

he/she is making of the context” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In this endeavour, the researcher makes every effort to try and understand what the participant thinks of their own situation rather than what the researcher thinks. This, therefore, means that qualitative methodology is the one that was deemed relevant to this type of study. Omona (2013) argues that qualitative researchers believe that humans are complex, somewhat unpredictable beings and those individual differences and idiosyncratic needs override any notion of universal laws of human behaviour. This was critical to this research as it sought to find out whether gendered discourses, disabling perceptions, gendered practices have an impact on academic promotions in higher education in universities in Masvingo. Ethnography was adopted as it takes the researcher into the actual world of the participants in order to reveal cultural knowledge as it is actually lived and enacted through the participants (Yan & He, 2012). It refers to naturalistic observations and holistic understanding of cultures and subcultures. The author indicates a need to share the stories and aspirations of those people who society marginalises because of their gender. Thus, transcripts are widely used to show real experiences of participants. This is done so that a holistic perspective is gotten from lived experiences of people who are negatively affected by the disabling discourses of gender, perceptions and practices.

## DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Interviews were used in data collection in this study. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) define the interview method as “a form of consultation where the researcher seeks to know more of an issue as viewed by the person being asked.” In this definition, the element of consultation is emphasized as the researcher does not give his or her own opinions about a phenomenon, but consults with people affected to get deeper insights.

The study also adopted observation as a data collection tool. Observation was used to measure consistency of interview results with what people really do and say outside the interview situation. Marshall and Rossman (2006) contend that combined with observation, interviews allow the researchers to understand the meaning that everyday activities hold for people. The researcher was involved first-hand in one of the institutions under study as a participant observer. The aim was to hear, see and experience reality as lived by participants.

Critical discourse analysis was also used as a method of data collection. As understanding how discourses cause gender discrepancies in academic promotions, critical discourse analysis was central to this study. Critical discourse analysis deals with long-term analysis of fundamental causes and consequences of issues (Mogashoa, 2014). The researcher chose critical

discourse analysis as a data collection tool because discourse is a central theme in this study. Locke (2004) shows the central role played by CDA in gender research by noting that, “CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between discursive practices, events and texts and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes.” Critical discourse analysis is a tool to help members of a profession understand messages they are sending to themselves and others and to understand the meaning of spoken and written texts (Mogashoa, 2014). In this study, it was therefore pertinent to analyse spoken and written discourses. This was important as revealed by Morgan (2010), who shows that CDA has the ability to reveal often unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour making salient either hidden or dominant discourses that maintain marginalised positions.

### **SAMPLE AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE**

The sample consisted of ten (10) males and ten (10) females from two higher education institutions in Masvingo Province. They were chosen using purposive sampling procedures. Creswell (2007) defines purposive selection as a method of sampling where the researcher selects individuals who will best assist him or her in understanding the research problem and questions. Five males and five females were chosen from those who have

reached promotion stage and five males and five females were chosen among those above the professorial grade. This was done to cover a wide range of perspectives from the varied quotas of the sample. Out of the three universities in Masvingo, two were selected using convenience sampling.

### **DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE**

The thematic approach was used in analyzing data. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) show that thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. It emphasizes identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning with qualitative research. It is a recommended approach when trying to find out something about people’s views, opinions, knowledge, experiences or values from a set of qualitative data (Caulfield, 2023). The study utilized the deductive approach which involves coming to the data with some preconceived themes (Caulfield, 2023).

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Resnik (2020), defines ethics as norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. It is the science of morality. There were basic broad ethical areas that were considered by the researcher in carrying out the study: voluntary participation, informed consent, honesty, confidentiality, respect of participant’s privacy and avoidance of any potential risk. Confidentiality and

anonymity were upheld as the researcher used pseudonyms rather than the real names of the participants to protect their identity.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was noted that in the studied higher education institutions in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe, there are marked gender-based discrepancies in progression to upper level promotional grades in favor of male academics, where all levels of upper management like Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellors are occupied by males. This is a direct consequence of promotional levels of academics at universities where females generally occupy lower promotional levels than their male counterparts. This is in line with Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan and Newcomb (2017) who argue that the lesser numbers of women in upper level management in education is as a result of the fact that female academics generally enter higher promotional levels at a more advanced age than males. Thus, it was concluded that this scenario slows the rate at which female academics move up the academic management ladder of universities resulting in higher academic management of the institutions being occupied largely by male academics.

**In what ways do gendered discourses cause gender discrepancies in academic promotion in higher education institutions in Masvingo?**

Potter in Yan and Sun (2020) defines the term ‘discourse’ as texts and talk in social practices. Zhao and Jones (2017) also contend that discourse not only incorporates language but also social practice. Thus, in this study the researcher, through critical discourse analysis, noted that academic discourses prevalent in higher education institutions were partly responsible for the gender discrepancies in academic promotions. Discourse analysis and interviews highlighted the following prevalent themes from participants in the two institutions studied: policies as they constitute textual discourses, and misinterpretation of human experience (hermeneutical barriers to promotion).

### **Policies as they constitute textual discourses in universities**

The two policies cited in this research are the Education 5.0 blueprint, which is the basis for the ZIMCHE Guidelines for Appointment, Grading, Tenure and Promotion of Academic Staff Ordinance (2023). The research sought to find out how academics comprehend the requirements of the policies. It was noted that generally, the policies were satisfactorily comprehended and appreciated. However, two academics: one male and one female from University A in the study noted the following:

MP1 (male participant 1). The participant is occupying a full professorial grade. He asserted the following:



*The steps taken by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science, Innovation and Technology Development are quite noble in ensuring quality Higher Education and the realization of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030. On gender discrepancies in academic promotions, I think the issue of raising the promotion bar is of concern especially where gender differences already exist. The issue of supervision of two Ph.D students before being awarded Associateship is also rather tricky as Ph.D candidates are required to be supervised by academics who are already professors. I agree that women are more disadvantaged than males as they already have long standing barriers in advancing academically and professionally. Putting these policies without consideration of the gender factor may be detrimental to advancement of female academics.*

From this excerpt, two issues were raised which were also echoed by most participants in this research which intersect. These are the social, where females already have long standing barriers, and the institutional, where requirements for promotion are raised in contrast to the gender equity initiatives which are in place. This point is highlighted by Martinez, Molina and De Cabo (2020), who show that there are biases that stem from organizational policies that create double standards in the promotion of women.

FP1 (female participant). This participant is occupying a senior lectureship post. The participant noted the following:

*I have been a lecturer in higher education for fifteen years now. I have already published 18 articles in refereed journals and I was thinking that I was nearly reaching the bar of applying for associate professorship. The policy has disheartened me as I can see that I will not be able to attain the promotional level before I retire. As much as I try to work hard and compete effectively with my male counterpart, I have more obligations as a woman which makes it difficult to reach the required standard of 25 articles, two PhD supervisions, innovations and patents as well as mobilizing funds from research activities for my institution. From my perspective, I think for a female academic who is trying to play the game on an uneven playing field, the game is more difficult*

Views from this excerpt are in agreement with views from MP1. It shows the retrogressive nature of current discourses in the form of expectations on gender equitability of access to promotional grades in higher education institutions in Masvingo.

From the two excerpts it is clear that two issues came out clearly as they intersect to slow academic progression of female academics to higher promotional grades. These issues are the social and cultural inhibitions exacerbated by institutional discourses

as they are entrenched in policy directives. The situation highlighted in these findings is also expressed by Harris and Trnavcevic (2020), who argue that it has been widely seen that for women, family orientation far outweighs career orientation. This, therefore, slows down the rate at which female academics advance in their academic careers as compared to their male counterparts. Against this background, it is seen that in most countries, women are faced with the unequal challenge of balancing the demands of a professional career with family obligation (Harris & Trnavcevic, 2020).

MP2 had another view on the issue of gender discrepancies in academic promotion. He noted the following:

*The perceived equal access to opportunities is a pipeline dream. Yes, the structural barriers might have been minimized, but other factors which are socio-culturally based, still remain and are ignored when standards are set for advancement. The question is not about policies, the question is about the time it takes for a female to reach the required grades for promotion to management posts in universities.*

Critical Discourse Analysis of everyday talk in the institutions where the researcher was a participant observer also brought to light that discourses are sources of inequality in institutions. FP2, who is an Associate Professor, showed that when she

communicates with students who have never seen her and she signs her name as Professor X without the first name, students and other colleagues always assume that she is male. They refer to her as 'sir'. This highlights the fact that academic discourses have largely been inclined towards assigning most academic promotional grades to males and marginalizing female academics. Shava, Tlou and Mpofu (2019), in their study in Mberegwa District of Zimbabwe, highlighted the essence of institutionalized gender roles as central to the existence of gender discrepancies in institutional practices. In their study, they found out that women leaders were often seen as violating their prescribed feminine roles while men in leadership were seen as being in compliance with their prescribed masculine roles.

### **Misinterpretation of human experience (hermeneutical barriers to promotion)**

Participants noted that women experiences have been expressed in varied and at times contradictory ways, which has resulted in a 'recess' in addressing gender challenges in higher education institutions. On the contrary, standards have become silent on the gender dimension which reflect lack of a gender perspective in higher education developments. Female academics experiences are misrepresented and misinterpreted if taken in light of experiences of women in other sectors. FP4 noted the following:

*Female academics have experiences peculiar to them which need to be addressed in light of their academic experiences not the general experiences of the greater population of female professionals.*

On the issues highlighted in this excerpt, the researcher sought to find out in interviews and observations what attributes characterize female academics which set them apart from other professionals. The following was concluded from the study about female academics as reflected from interview responses from different participants:

- *They have the capacity to deal with complex situations as they are already in the pinnacle of academia thus they do not need any interventions to empower them.*
- *Academia is a preserve for highly intelligent academicians, hence there is no room for affirmative action in high level academic space.*
- *Female academics in higher education have already shown resilience and they can compete with males in any situation.*

All these responses were given by academics above the level of senior lecturer, both males and females. These assertions highlight the depth of misinterpretation of human experience as suffered by female academics. Harring (2017) argues that there are institutional misconceptions that women's attitudes, behaviors and

orientations are antithetical to being successful and promotable leaders.

FP6 shared her experience which showed that discourses in higher education institutions can disregard lived experiences of female academics resulting in gender disparities in academic promotion:

*I am one of those female academics who has been able to swiftly move from one level to another but suddenly halted in my academic endeavor because of other gender based responsibilities. I had risen swiftly to become a university lecturer, subsequently senior lecturer and was appointed chairperson of department. I was demoted as I did not move fast enough to acquire a doctorate and publish to the level of professor. My male counterparts were more swift than me and I was labelled lazy without anyone caring to hear my story. A male counterpart, who initially was far below me in the area of publications but because of less socio-cultural responsibilities, acquired a doctorate before me and swiftly increased his publications, replaced me and is now a professor. I am labelled as lazy.*

Therefore, the above findings highlight that experiences of female academics are often misunderstood or may be misinterpreted in communities of practice, as the 'knowers' might not have experienced the phenomenon. Thus, this complex intersectionality of women's multiple identities affects women's access to, and performance in,

leadership. Experiences of women in leadership at the workplace are, therefore, still framed within such discourses of gendered discrimination (Alberta Teachers Association, 2017). This might be a result of the academic perceptions of 'normality' which dictate what should and what should not be for an academician in higher education. Findings also attributed this to the ways gender issues are treated and addressed from an umbrella perspective, disregarding the peculiar challenges of female academics. Prejudices were seen to result in lack of commitment towards the issue of gender discrepancies in academic promotions in higher education institutions. It was noted that due to the lack of commitment, the gender concept is not well understood and there is inadequate training in institutions on gender issues (Kirima, 2019, p. 38).

### **What is the role of disabling perceptions in constructing gender discrepancies in academic promotions?**

Under this research question, three themes came up from the interviews, critical discourse analysis and participant observations. These are prejudices towards equity discourses (testimonial barriers), perceptions of adequacy of gender interventions, and inequality legitimacy.

### **Prejudices towards equity discourses (Testimonial barriers)**

Results from this study showed that there are prejudices towards equity discourses where some academics feel that the gender question has been dealt with and women are now fully equipped to compete effectively with males in all fields. Asked on why people ignore the gender dimension, MP2 noted the following:

*A lot has been done in the field of empowerment of females. It is because females are afraid to take up responsibilities that they remain underrepresented in positions of academic leadership in universities. You should rise up to the challenge and apply for the posts as they arise.*

The views of MP2 show the prejudices towards equity discourses. A female academic, FP3, views the prejudices from the perspective of some male academics trying to replicate the socio-cultural structures into the higher education institutions. She said:

*There are people who feel that female academics should remain in a subservient position to their male counterparts. This crops from the perceived male superiority over females as reflected in cultural practices.*

FP4 in University B agrees with FP3 that:

*There is a misconception that the gender issue has been done with in the management of institutions of higher learning. Knowledge communities are mainly occupied by male academics,*

*thus the way they address the gender barriers may be polluted with gender misconceptions. I have heard male academics saying that the gender issue is no longer central in higher education debates as the issue has been debated for a long time and interventions have been made to promote gender parity.*

From critical discourse analysis (CDA), it was noted that when talking about 'inclusivity', a number of institutions ignore the gender dimension. When asked about issues of inclusivity, most participants showed that they view inclusivity from the perspective of physical disability. Emphasis on inclusivity is to a large extent placed on issues of physical disability and gender inclusivity is ignored when debates on inclusivity are being done.

From the results, it is clear that, to a larger extent, there are misconceptions that women's issues have already been addressed through the several interventions that have been put in place. Ghafari (2008) notes that such an optimistic perspective emphasizes that women have long attained their rights for equal job opportunities, equal pay and equal rights to property. However there are implicit discourses that marginalize women from the centre to the periphery. In this light, Miranda (2009) argues that testimonial barriers consist of prejudices that cause one to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word. The research came up

with two areas where disabling perceptions on gender equity within higher education in Masvingo are highlighted. Discussions with participants have attributed this to perception of adequacy of intervention and inequality legitimacy in the area, thus watering down efforts aimed at closing the gap in academic progression and promotion between male academics and female academics.

### **Perceptions of adequacy of gender interventions**

One participant noted that most people are now of the opinion that lagging behind the promotion ladder is a matter of choice for women academics as the platform is now open for equal participation for both sexes. This reflects an inclination towards an explanation offered by Powers (2014), who notes that there are alternative explanations on exclusion and inequalities in social distributions. These explanations include social structural causes, voluntary personal choices, natural and personal causes, as well as social and personal causes. Participant FP9 noted that:

*It seems there is the absence of a moral obligation by policy implementors to address issues of naturally, biologically and socially rooted causes of unequal access to progression in higher education promotions. It seems most people have now adopted the narrative that female academics have the intellectual capacity to compete with their male*

*counterparts, which is true, but people are avoiding discussion around other intervening variables like point of entry of female academics into higher education academic discourses in relation to the point of entry of their male colleagues to the same discourses. It is clear that female academics are late entrants to the discourses due to intervening variables as biological and social obligation. Thus competing at the same level with males who are early entrants because they have fewer hurdles in their academic trajectory, is academic unfairness.*

It is from this perspective that this study has, therefore, noted that the abundance of policies and legislations on gender equity has led to a relaxation by higher education institutions to look further into the issues of justice in promotions.

### **Inequality Legitimacy**

Another issue that came up in the study is that of inequality legitimacy. This was attributed to the phenomenon of getting too used to rhetoric of gender equity, thus developing negative attitudes towards addressing the gender inequality challenge. Alzeiby (2021) asserts that attitudes form non-material hypothetical formations that are inferred through the impact they have. The author elaborates that attitudes determine behaviour and they are evident through behaviour, words and actions in line with the prevailing culture. The result is resistance to gender equity

interventions. The following excerpt reflects this scenario, which was highlighted by MP7:

*Quite a number of gurus in the academic landscape do not take the gender dimension seriously in practice as well as in policy formulation in institutions of higher learning. The policies are there in place in most institutions but they are not put into practice. The assumption is that the general standards have to be followed without consideration of the gender dimension. The present standards which have been adopted in line with Education 5.0 are surely going to widen the gap between promotability of male and female academics.*

The excerpt shows that cultural misconception of the legitimacy of gender inequalities are deepened by the perception of “level playing field” for both males and female academics where the same standards apply for promotion with no regard of the life cycle processes the different genders go through in their advancement. Shownmi, Moorosi and Woodhouse (2017) also highlight that women academics, despite having success in their careers, still grapple with more culturally-held perceptions about the traditional role of women, making it difficult not only to perform in leadership but also to take care of their physical and mental health.

**To what extent do gendered practices contribute to gender discrepancies in academic promotions?**

Under this research question, the research found out that academic practices within higher education institutions give rise to gender discrepancies in academic promotion. Generally, participants highlighted that some standards and procedures disable female academics from effectively and equitably competing with their male counterparts. FP10 from University B, who is an Associate Professor noted that in the institution she works, basic gender equity principles are ignored which result in the deepening of the gender divide in the 'promotability' of male and female academics. Mott (2022) argues that gender discrimination can happen by default and not by design when higher education institutions fail to notice and rectify for discriminatory social and cultural practices as well as failure to critique gendered life cycle trajectories for male and female academics. FP8 from University A noted the following:

*Failure to consider life cycles has resulted in raising the bar for advancement in universities. A lot is happening in the areas of research, with a lot of knowledge being created within higher education institutions. It is against that scenario that standards for advancement have been raised, which place a heavier burden on female academics who were catching up with their male counterparts and overcoming the socio-cultural barriers.*

This excerpt shows that when the 'knowers' are members of a more

privileged social group, then they can set standards that can disadvantage members of marginalised groups. As knowledge creation increases, so also does the promotion bar in higher education and gendered promotion discrimination is advanced implicitly. FP6 also asserted the following:

*This is done through very formal but yet implicit ways of side-lining marginal groups from participation. The marginalised groups are rendered unsuitable for certain promotions which hinder their upward progression in the academia.*

It was noted that female academics have to deal with a triple disadvantage as they try to compete in the academic field. These triple level disadvantages are socio-cultural, economic and gender. These compromise their epistemological agency, which results in their male counterparts making epistemological decisions which affect their progression. FP7, who is a Senior Lecturer, also noted the following:

*Who sets the standards for promotion? Are they female academics or male academics? Most higher education top management positions are occupied by male academics. Where is the female voice in decisions that affect both the female academics and the male academic? Knowledge creation has to a large extent been a preserve of male academic and stewardship of the academia is largely a preserve of male academics who, to a*

*larger extent occupy the higher echelons of academia in the country. There, is thus a tendency of preservation of academia against infiltration by the “other” groups. This is done implicitly through setting hard to reach standards, especially by groups with initial disadvantage.*

Views from this excerpt were generally shared by the majority of both the female and the male participants. The issues raised which generally cut across views by most participants include:

- *That locales of knowledge creation are to a larger extent occupied by male academics.*
- *Locales of academic decision-making are also largely occupied by male academics.*
- *Academic practices reflect a tendency towards preservation of high level academic space against infiltration.*

From these findings, the researcher concluded that epistemological injustice has to a large extent led to the exclusion of female academics in communities of practice. These epistemological barriers were seen to result in structural barriers to females’ academic advancement in promotions. Moorosi (2007, p. 41) argues that structural barriers to women’s advancement in education management have their roots in the fact that most organizations have been created by and for men and are based on male experiences. The author goes on to

say that organisations still define their competence and leadership on traits that were stereotypically associated with males.

This exclusionary tendency was highlighted by participant MP8, who is a Senior Lecturer at University B and revealed that the inequality was intensified by the formation of male only networks. He said:

*As male academics we have ‘old boys’ clubs where women are indirectly excluded from male dominated practices. These include clubs like ‘golfing’ where the who is who in communities meet and network on various levels. In these clubs women are implicitly excluded due to cultural obligations. That’s where we share notes as male academics.*

According to this excerpt, females’ slow progress in advancement in academia is located in social groupings like the networks. All female participants agreed to this point, while some male participants showed that that was not the case. MP5, who was opposed to the idea, showed that the networks are social and not academic. However, FP8 argued that culturally, females are confined to the home and to low profile women’s groups like churches. She argued that:

*Culturally a woman of integrity does not visit such places like golf, clubs and bars. It is these places where ‘big people’ meet and exchange information. Thus, this is an area where*



*women are left out in crafting their academic future in informal settings.*

Davies, Yarro and Syed (2019) postulate that men gain career advantage from peer networks of powerful, prestigious, and from influential in-groups of other men who control power.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions from this research are based on the following research themes:

1. **Gendered discourses:** The results of this research showed that persistence of gendered discourses in higher education has resulted in gender discrepancies in academic promotions. This involved policies as they constitute textual discourse as well as misinterpretation of human experience.
2. **Disabling gendered perceptions:** It was found that negative perceptions about female promotions still persist in higher education institutions. This was seen in prejudices of equality discourses (testimonial barriers) and inequality legitimacy.
3. **Disabling gendered practices:** The study highlighted disabling gendered practices which cause gender disparities in academic promotions. These included disabling standards and procedures constituting

epistemological injustice as well as gendered networks.

## **POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD**

The study came up with a number of recommendations based on research questions and key thematic areas under each research question. These recommendations emphasized the use of more informal approaches which should be inclined towards a heritage based perspective.

On discourses as sources of gender disparities in academic promotion, it was noted that misinterpretation of human experience can be central in marginalising female academics from academic promotion. Participants showed that this phenomenon can be addressed by revisiting the gender issue as part of the socialisation process. In this case, a gradual approach to impartation of gender knowledge should be adopted where children are exposed to age appropriate issues of gender. A heritage-based approach can be adopted where higher education institutions explore possibilities in traditional education systems which can be adapted to contemporary practices. The traditional approaches would include storytelling, song, dance, drama, use of proverbs and gender sensitive rites of passage. These gradual processes can replace the gender-insensitive approaches which created distinct social gender divide. Thus, higher education institutions, through their innovation hubs, can explore heritage-based

possibilities that can ground a gender perspective within the population.

The study also showed that perception of adequacy of gender intervention and inequality legitimacy can be addressed through advancing a more heritage-based inclusive approach. A heritage-based innovation may be incorporated within higher education institutions where the African proverb forms the basis of institutional philosophy. Where the colonial educationist used Latin mottos, the African university can replace them with critical African proverbs which are placed on all key documents of the university and even at the entrance of the university. Such proverbs include “*Kuziva mbuya huudzwa*”, which is literally translated to mean that you only know your grandmother after someone has told you that she is your grandmother. Literally, it shows that no one can come up with knowledge on their own but through interactions with other people. This is central to knowledge creation role of universities and especially critical in imparting a heritage based perspective of cooperation in knowledge creation. Other critical proverbs which can be central themes to include even on university billboards, university entrance and university key documents, with an emphasis on inclusivity include the Shona proverb “*Chenga ose manhanga hapana risina mhodzi*”, literally translated to mean that one should embrace all pumpkins as they all have seeds. Seeds are central in this

proverb as they reflect sustainability of a system. Thus, everyone should be embraced as they are a critical part of sustaining the system. These heritage-based interventions may be a critical means of moving away from the more formalised ways of knowledge impartation which result in information overload and, consequently, lack of will to address gender imbalances.

Epistemological barriers can be approached through the heritage-based “*dare*” concept. The ‘*dare*’ is a Shona concept where traditionally, knowledge was imparted to the male children on a specially set aside part of a homestead where males would gather every evening around a fire and informally share knowledge with the young male children. This was effective, as contexts were important in information that was imparted. Thus, the ‘*dare*’ concept can be central if it is adapted to present day discourses on gender. The ‘*dare*’ can incorporate both males and female to break the gender divide. This can be adapted to universities contexts where open discussions on gender can be discussed within a heritage based framework.

Testimonial barriers and hermeneutic barriers can be addressed by allowing women to speak out their own experiences within the heritage-based framework. “*Ngano*” (storytelling) can emphasize contemporary experiences of female academics. “*Ngano*” can be helpful in doing lifecycle analyses of female

academics so that interventions that are gender appropriate can be adopted. This can help in coming up with lifecycle analyses which are critical to understanding of women academics' experiences. Through this approach, academics find meaning in real experiences and testimonies rather than loads of book knowledge which might cause resentment towards the gender issue.

On networking, there is need to create forums where academics interface with each other. These can be informal e-platforms where both males and females interact. Universities can come together to create forums for academia in universities so as to avoid a gender divide in networking.

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