

EDITORIAL:

Advancing African Women in Academia: Charting Modern Solutions

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Editorial Note

There is a gross underrepresentation of women in teaching, research, and leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) globally. Despite the fact that a few studies have reported some gains in gender balance in HEIs, there are still glaring inequities of women in higher education, particularly in Africa. These challenges include but are not limited to, barriers to academic progression and career development, intersections of race, gender and motherhood, and identity and belonging. While several authors have revealed these gender gaps, it is valuable to understand the lived experiences of woman in academia on the African continent. African women encounter multifaceted challenges in academia. Structural barriers such as limited access to education, gender bias, and cultural norms that prioritise domestic responsibilities over career pursuits hinder their advancement (Founou *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the scarcity of female role models and mentors exacerbates feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome, further deterring women from pursuing academic careers. These challenges contribute to the underrepresentation of African women in leadership positions and fields traditionally dominated by men.

African women are still underrepresented in academic institutions throughout the continent (Waruru, 2023); as of 2022, at the national level, only six out of the 26 higher education institutions in South Africa – a country that houses many of Africa's top universities, were led by women; and, in Ghana, only 8% of professors at public universities were women (Klege, 2022). In order to empower and elevate African women in academia, there is a need to address this disparity and find creative solutions as we negotiate the intricacies of the modern world. To effect meaningful change, it is vital to adopt a multifaceted approach, such as implementing a range of interventions that target different aspects contributing to the disparity and challenges faced by women in academia. Such approaches include, policy reform, education and training, financial support, cultural sensitisation, networking and collaboration, and advocacy and representation. By adopting a multifaceted approach that addresses systemic barriers and cultural norms simultaneously, it becomes possible to create a more inclusive and equitable environment that empowers African women in academia to thrive and contribute fully to their chosen fields. Likewise, academic institutions must implement policies and practices that promote gender equity and inclusivity, gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion processes, and a collaborative culture providing support for work-life balance, and fostering a culture of care, self-reflexivity and respect. Mentorship programmes specifically tailored to support African women in academia can provide guidance, networking opportunities, and emotional support crucial for professional development.

This special issue, *Advancing African Women in Academia: Charting Modern Solutions*, is both insightful in its epistemologies and examples, and advances the call by African women in academia to think, live, and work ethically and differently. The special issue draws on a range of conceptual and theoretical pathways to extend, deepen, and reconfigure the gender dimensions of academic work in our context as well as others, to imagine and reimagine the past, and to generate different stories of women gendered lived experiences. This special issue explores modern approaches that will enable the advancement of women in academia. Premised on the notion that Africa, and Africans, possess significant peculiarities that could hinder or promote women career development

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in HEIs, this special issue takes on an Afrocentric approach of modern solutions to the problems of (un)intended marginalisation of women in the higher education space. The themes for this special issue include women and leadership in higher education; lived experiences of women in higher education institutions; gender, identity and belonging; career development and growth; and mentoring opportunities for women in academia.

The three found poems composed below are elicited from the different scholarly pieces by African women researchers, authors, and educators in the issue. Across these articles, their hopes and despairs pull and jolt at the intersections of both fragility and resilience, as they play ceaselessly within the light as well as within darkness of academic cultures.

My hijab covers my mane, not my mind.

Marginalised, misunderstood, discriminated
Gendered Academy
Gendered decision-making
Travelling a lonely academic journey
Often-exclusionary landscape
Isolation and feelings of inadequacy
The academic culture
Emotions and Expectations

How do women academics, entangled in a nexus of history, structure, and practice, rethink knowing and being? Going into the veiled, idiosyncratic stories and narrative accounts embedded in our colonised histories, but with surprising laboratory promise, can provide new ways of seeing, which, in turn, fashion new ways of being and knowing.

Beyond academia, roots "Ubuntu"

Your sister's keeper!
Sisterhood in academia?
Collaborative spaces "for us, by us!"
A sense of belonging
Making Space
Practice an ethics of care.
Self-development
Self-care.

New ways of being are, ultimately, an ethical challenge. Creating theories of knowledge that enhance and recognise tacit and embodied feelings of sisterhood and spirituality is what care for the self-entails. The need for a broadening of collaborative spaces for self-reflexive scholarship for the development of African Women in Academia is pressing. Collaborative scholarly practices framed by an Ethics of Care and affective engagement offer women academics opportunities to "transform our [own] mode of being" (Foucault, 1985: 30) and to surface different voices and other marginal self-narratives as part of a process of doing ethical scholarly work.

Envision Knowing Sisters

Capable, deserving leadership
Gender dynamics and institutional differences
Mentoring transformation
Diverse, inclusive mentoring
Creating a culture of reflection
Understanding conversations
55-word story
The individual and collective

Portrayals of African women's academic career trajectories through self-reflexive work highlight how one can reflect, collaborate, and work against the oppressive, marginalising discourses of university culture, re-narrate the self, and seek intellectual well-being in a troubled academic landscape. Imaginative glimpses of what is possible through African women's lived experiences and how they could navigate the often-exclusionary spaces of academia can also provide opportunities for humour, excitement, achievement, and insight. While we appreciate

that concepts of self and identity are not stable and fixed, recreating, resisting and revising academic women's selfhood and identity that systems of gendered power distorted and denied, is a compelling endeavour. The epistemological and ontological history handed to us—as colonised subjects—provoked, in different ways, disembodiment from self and the other. Against this, we acknowledge our embodied knowledge, the ethic of care, and scholarly conversations as an enactment of self-transformation and "a means through which care for others can occur," within and beyond academia. This revered responsibility, which the African concept of *Ubuntu* embodies and exalts, is a necessary ethical imperative.

Advancing African women in academia is not just a matter of social justice but a necessity for sustainable development and progress. Charting modern solutions that address systemic barriers, promote inclusivity, and celebrate success stories enables us to create a more equitable and vibrant academic landscape that harnesses the full potential of all individuals, regardless of gender. It is time to unite in our efforts to empower African women and pave the way for a brighter future for academia and beyond.

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