

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

The Importance of Mentorship Opportunities for Women in Academia: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This paper aims to review the literature on the importance of mentoring in academia, specifically focusing on enhancing women's careers in academia. This study focuses on studies published between 2000-2023. Due to gender imbalance in academia, mentoring of early-career female academics has been recognised as instrumental in improving their aspirations. However, this tool is not receiving the recognition that it deserves, especially for women in academia. It further briefly discusses how mentoring is used as a resource to foster institutional change and decolonise entrenched academic promotion practices of paternalism. Radical feminist theory underpinned this study as this theoretical position helps explain the power inequalities that occur in higher education institutions (HEIs) and women's communities and how these in turn inhibit the progress of women in academia. Furthermore, the African philosophy of Ubuntu is also used to explain how women can be supported in academia using indigenous African epistemology. A systematic review approach was used by searching for studies that focused on the importance of mentoring in academia. The findings of the review revealed numerous significant challenges that women in academia encounter. In addition, various benefits of mentoring were uncovered and discussed.

Keywords: mentorship; academia; women; higher education institutions

Introduction

There is a need to assist early-career academics with navigating the academic environment, as well as, coping with the strain of explicit and implicit expectations in the academic world that transcend beyond teaching, administration, community participation, and research. According to Iversen *et al.* (2014), mentoring is one of the most effective approaches for assisting early-career academics in their career development, regardless of gender. Thornton (2014) mentions that mentoring is the development of a connection between junior academics (early career) and senior academics (proficient seniors) in which knowledge, abilities, guidance, and support are transferred from mentor to mentee. Academic mentoring, according to Kashiwagi *et al.* (2013) primarily entails orientation, assistance for new academic transition positions within the faculty, faculty development, career development, career progression, work satisfaction, and retention. According to research (Ingersoll *et al.*, 2012; Abugre and Kpinpuo, 2017; Bredella *et al.*, 2019), academics who receive mentoring exhibit greater levels of work satisfaction, self-efficacy, productivity, and staff retention compared to those who are not mentored. According to Cross *et al.* (2019), mentoring indicates efforts to adapt to the constantly evolving higher education environment, which is a corporatised global knowledge sector. The casualisation of the workforce, high workloads, lack of funding from the government, and pressure on academics to meet the anticipated escalation in teaching and research performance are the legacies of corporatisation and managerialism in HEI. Due to their vulnerability to casualisation, female academics traditionally experience unparalleled job instability as they rely more on part-time, temporary adjunct, or sessional roles that exclude them from climbing the ladder of academia. This practice of patriarchy in higher education institutions has eroded working conditions and job satisfaction and has created unprecedented job insecurity that led to attrition of academics (Magoqwana *et al.*, 2019; Kena *et al.*, 2016).

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According to Zikhali and Maphosa (2012), a lack of mentorship and networking opportunities at universities contributes to some of the problems and challenges experienced by female academics in their career progression. This is in line with the results of Shava and Ndebele (2014), who demonstrate that the lack of mentorship opportunities in higher education contributes to the challenges experienced by female academics. Some female academics' careers stagnate because there are limited mentorship opportunities in the academic world. The South African higher education sector is a good example to demonstrate how few women are in leadership roles. Such a stark image shows that even though South Africa celebrated its democracy in 1994, 29 years later, it is still far from achieving gender equality. Out of twenty-six (26) South African higher education institutions, only six universities are led by women. This is the reality not only in South Africa but more broadly across Sub-Saharan Africa where women only constitute 24% of academic staff and 2.5% of vice-chancellors (Naidu, 2018). Therefore, universities need to formalise and prioritise mentoring female academic staff to transform their paternalistic academic culture.

According to Montgomery and Page (2018), mentoring in academia is an important means of supporting the retention, success, and well-being of women in the academic space. In addition, mentorship provides opportunities for women to understand the 'covert rules of the game' for them to be successful as academics. Referring to interactions between minorities and majorities in institutions of higher learning, the function of networks, and power dynamics help to justify the necessity of mentoring women (Markle *et al.*, 2022). To smooth the journey for women in academia, different networks of mentors can support women so that they can be able to achieve their career goals, advancement, retention, diversity, equity, and inclusion (Edwards *et al.*, 2022). Mentoring initiatives that emphasise creating diverse networks of mentors have helped more women, particularly those in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) area to succeed (Deanna *et al.*, 2022). According to Hawkes (2012), the majority of institutions in the United Kingdom provide mentorship opportunities to women, while Devos (2008) came to the same conclusion about universities in Australia. It is also a frequent practice in Germany and Switzerland, according to Gottschall (2010); Zuber (2010); Jäger (2010). The National Science Foundation in the United States and the European Commission both have policies that support the creation of mentoring networks and programs for women (Rosser, 2010). African universities should take note of these policies and incorporate them into their policies in higher education institutions.

Numerous studies have emphasised the importance of using mentoring as a tool for advancing academic careers and steering academia toward diverse and gender-inclusive policies, even though these changes can only be made over the long term because they are the most challenging to implement (de Vries *et al.*, 2006; Fügler and Besson, 2011; Jäger, 2010; Thomas *et al.*, 2015). Gibson's 2006 study shows the value of including organisational structure in mentoring programs since it affects the mentoring experience. According to Harris (2022), academic institutions should mentor women, as having mentorship in their hearts promotes equality and better workplaces. De Vries *et al.* (2006) discovered that mentors learn about the difficulties that junior faculty members face and the impact of the gendering process on women in academia. This finding demonstrates how mentoring may serve to catalyse organisational transformation. However, Jäger (2010) adds to the findings of de Vries *et al.* (2006), demonstrating that while the advantages of both mentors and mentees are obvious, there is ambivalence and difficulty about the results of institutional transformation. Fügler and Besson (2011) discuss the usefulness of mentors' training and how its content might be developed to educate mentors on gender equality and institutional change. Similar to this, Thomas *et al.*'s (2015) research highlighted the significance of recognising problems in mentoring relationships that may serve as a starting point for reflection at the college level. Brennan (2000) emphasised the significance of doing away with gender discrimination in academics. She also claims that it is difficult to get women to participate in pilot projects, and these comments demonstrate how hard it is to transform the cultures of HEIs.

The radical feminist concept is used to explain the need for academic mentorship for women. According to Mackay (2015), the foundation of radical feminist theory is the notion that women are oppressed by a social framework that favours the subordination of women. The goal of radical feminism, according to Vukoičić (2013), is to identify and eliminate traditional patriarchal power structures and gender roles. Their beliefs are predicated on the idea that society's institutional structure has to be fundamentally altered, the patriarchy or the social system in which men have unequal power over women. Radical feminists contend that sexism may be eradicated by doing away with traditional gender roles and elevating women to positions of authority. Studies (Harris, 2022; Petrucci, 2020; Dashper, 2018; Grant *et al.*, 2015) have shown that mentorship programs for women successfully resolve gender inequality in the workplace, particularly in academics.

This paper is also underpinned by the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (humanness/humanity). *Ubuntu* is a Xhosa word that means 'I am because we are' also 'I am because you are', or 'humanity towards others' (Kayange, 2018) and is based on the notion that one should demonstrate his/her humanity through having relationships with others in the community and the community should recognise that (Gorjestani, 2010; Boaduo and Quan-Baffour, 2011). The saying '*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*' (IsiXhosa) means that a person's success is through others or 'I am because we are' (Quan-Baffour, 2014; Van Zyl *et al.*, 2011). This means that people are interdependent, we care, support, and celebrate each other. In an African society, working together as a team is valued. I argue that like an African proverb suggests '*Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili*' which means 'wisdom is learned or sought from the elders' (Cowling and Hamilton, 2020). In the same vein, early career academics should seek knowledge and support from senior academics. And the converse holds that senior academics also learn from junior academics. Mutual support of early academics (women) through mentorship programs is a symbol of solidarity and support (Mangaliso, 2001). If universities can function as communities of learning guided by the principle of *Ubuntu*, similar values can be harnessed and distributed through developing good relationships with early-career female academics.

Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative systematic literature review, which is an approach to gathering and analysing secondary data from earlier research projects (on a particular subject) that is more or less systematic. The secondary data included both academic and non-academic material, such as recently published journals, books, students' dissertations, and reports from African and global organisations on mentorship opportunities for female academics. The main focus was on challenges that women in academia encounter, as well as the benefits of mentorship as an intervention to alleviate those challenges. All published academic and non-academic articles that did not focus on mentorship for women in academia were excluded from this study. In identifying literature on female academics and mentorship, the author searched literature from three databases that are used frequently by researchers across different disciplines, and these include Science Direct, Sabinet, and EBSCOhost. Full-text articles were skimmed through to assess the quality and eligibility of studies. Some of the high-quality studies that were included in the review were online reports articles, books, and peer-reviewed journal articles.

Applicable information from each primary study included in the sample was gathered. Through the use of qualitative content and thematic analysis methods, data were collected from online articles and reports, academic articles, books, and students' dissertations. Several academic and non-academic material that shaped the direction of this study is provided in this section. In writing this paper, a total number of one hundred and three (103) studies have been reviewed and included in this study and this is made up of eighty-one (81) journal articles, both qualitative and quantitative. This paper also used two (2) students' dissertations. A total number of eight (8) online reports were also reviewed. Ten (10) book chapters also contributed to the development of this paper, as well as two (2) online articles were relevant to the topic of the study. Data were analysed in three stages: first, free line-by-line coding of primary study findings; second, grouping the free codes into related categories to create descriptive themes; and third, developing these descriptive themes into analytical themes. Since primary data collection was not included in this study, a review by an Institutional Research Ethics Committee was not required.

Findings

Reviewed studies are synthesised critically and presented according to the objectives of the study, which are to explore the challenges faced by women in academia and the benefits that mentoring has for women in academia.

Challenges facing women in academia

According to Obers (2014), career development generally tends to be challenging for women in academia. Women also tend to progress very slowly, if at all, in their academic careers compared to their male counterparts. There are complex issues that influence their career progression, and these are related to psychological, social, and cultural influences (Llorens *et al.*, 2021). Finding a balance between academic and family responsibilities is always difficult for women in academia. A study by Rathgeber (2013) in nine African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Botswana, revealed that women's family responsibilities take up most of the time for female academics in Ghana and Liberia, and as a result, this is viewed as the biggest barrier to their personal development. In contrast to their husbands, women in most African countries are seen as 'home builders' and are responsible for taking care of their families and homes on a far larger scale.

As it is difficult for women to leave their children for a lengthy period, this presents a problem for female academics (Morgan *et al.* 2021). Studies have revealed that female academics frequently feel pressure to balance their jobs as lecturers and researchers with their obligations in the family as partners, caregivers, wives, and parents (Moors *et al.*, 2022; Stefanova *et al.*, 2021). In general, it can be more difficult for women in academia to balance work and family responsibilities while advancing their careers (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2020; Rathgeber, 2013) compared to their male counterparts. According to studies, women in academia face numerous challenges, many of which are caused by institutional inequalities. These challenges include low recognition in publications, a lack of funding for research, and increased academic and domestic responsibilities (Salinas *et al.*, 2020; Budrikis, 2020; Astegiano *et al.*, 2019). Women are thus underrepresented in academia, particularly at high levels of senior lecturers, associate and full professors, and senior/executive school management positions. There are still certain challenges that women encounter in the workplace even after they have confronted and addressed the bias and begun to engage more in social life. In some regions of African higher education, including, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria, funding is one of the issues that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in higher education (Musundire and Mumanyi 2020; Drape *et al.*, 2016; Aploon-Zokufa, 2022).

For Semela *et al.* (2017), a lack of networking is one of the most typical obstacles to the advancement of female academic careers. This may be because most female academics are not included in the larger social and informal networks of HEIs, making it difficult for them to develop strong professional networks (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012; Baker, 2016). Furthermore, compared to their male counterparts, female academics have fewer and smaller networks. This may be because there are fewer opportunities for women to join or participate in academic networks (Sagebiel, 2016). Moreover, women in academia do not have a feeling of belonging in the male academics' networks even though such networks are open and available to them, they see those networks as monoculture or exclusively male, which is defined as the social ties between persons of the same sex (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014; Sagebiel, 2016). In this regard, the majority of available networks primarily included male academics, making it difficult for women to feel like they belonged there. The fact that female academics are frequently unaware of the subtle prejudices and unwritten rules, norms, and regulations in male-dominated and patriarchal HEIs adds to these networking-related problems (Levine *et al.* 2011; Baker, 2016; Meschitti and Smith, 2017). Therefore, female academics are more likely to experience marginalisation and to miss out on possibilities for career advancement (Meschitti and Smith, 2017) by being excluded from the 'boys club' in academia.

Men and women are treated differently in numerous spheres of life (Miller and Borgida, 2016). Since Higher Education Institutions implicitly or explicitly support the patriarchal system and reproduce traditional colonialist gender roles, women in HEIs, like women in any other institution, face several obstacles as a result of their gender (Yousaf and Schmiede, 2017). Even in this day and age, there remains a gender gap between men and women in HEIs, which is a result of social gender norms. According to Kuagbedzi *et al.* (2022), the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions is continuing to decline in some regions of Africa, including South Africa, Uganda, and Ghana, despite improvements that the government has made over time regarding access and representation of women in higher education. Meanwhile, the number of men holding leadership positions in the majority of African universities is rising. Martin (2011) asserts that this decline continues to influence policies, practices, and beliefs about the potential of women in academia to lead. This also becomes a disadvantage for early-career female academics who need mentorship and support to become leaders, as there are few women in leadership positions (Dandan and Marques, 2017).

Benefits of mentorship

Mentorship as a strategy and a powerful mechanism to help early career academics with their career progression has several benefits for the organisation, the mentor, and the mentee (Iversen *et al.*, 2014). However, for this study, the focus is on the benefits for the mentees only, because this study unpacked the challenges that women in academia face, including early-career academic women, and the role that mentorship plays in helping them cope with their challenges. Five distinct subthemes emerged, and they are discussed below. Female empowerment, academic career advancement, and autonomous leadership in their fields are all dependent on mentoring (Tsang and Lanusi 2022). According to Perry and Parikh (2017), the major objective of mentoring is to establish a setting that will encourage empowerment between a mentor and mentee so the mentee/female academic and mentor may both thrive in their professional growth. By increasing their understanding of the conditions for advancement, mentoring increases the authority of women in academics (Prozesky, 2006). By guiding work-life balance and managerial goals, mentoring helps women become more involved in academics (Turnbull and Roberts, 2005). As

a female who is an early career academic, I argue that mentorship is not only important for academic growth but is also equally important for personal growth and development. It offers a safe space for one to interact with a senior academic, who then connects the female early-career academic to others within the academic space. For example, I received both formal and informal mentorship and through that, I received funding for my postgraduate studies. Also, through the support and exposure, I was able to complete my postgraduate studies in record time. I was also able to create my academic networks. In 2023, I received Female Academic Leaders Fellowship (FALF), and I am looking forward to mentoring female postgraduate students. In essence, mentorship as a networking tool unlocks professional and personal opportunities for both the mentors and the mentees.

Most studies indicate that mentoring benefits the career development of women by creating valuable professional growth and promoting their careers. Cross *et al.* (2019) mention that mentoring provides a structured process for career planning and professional development and facilitates opportunities for exposure and visibility among academic peers. Additionally, mentoring supports women by creating a conducive platform so that they can reach their career goals and achieve academic success. Athanasiou *et al.* (2016) maintain that early-career academic women regarded mentoring to be important for their career development. On the other hand, senior academics perceived mentoring as beneficial in helping them plan their career paths more strategically. Thus, when mentors provide advice and psychosocial support, mentoring improves the work performance of early career academics. In most cases, job satisfaction is an indicator of the success of one's career, whereby the employee feels that his/her job responsibilities meet the career goals (Sabbagha, 2016). Jeffers and Mariani (2017); Kong *et al.* (2012) indicated that job satisfaction is sometimes a pleasant consequence of the mentoring that academics receive and is determined by the satisfaction of individuals in their careers/jobs. Chiaburu *et al.* (2013) further mention that employees may achieve career success when the job provides them with challenges all the time thus ensuring that duties are not repetitive and boring.

Mentoring provides a healthy work environment, and the mentors are there to support the mentees so that they can be able to complete their tasks to meet the organisation's goals and objectives (Haider and Riaz, 2010). I argue that with the help of mentors, the mentees develop a sense of belonging where they can share their challenges with the mentors. The mentors, therefore, provide an open and safe space for guidance to the mentees so that they can be able to cope with the challenges that are presented by their jobs. This also builds the mentees' confidence in their job. According to Cross *et al.* (2019), mentoring provides women with successful role models which in turn foster their assertiveness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence, and problem-solving. In addition, women have the opportunity to reflect on and reconcile/balance their academic basic principles with their aspirations within the secure environment of a mentoring relationship. These are the kinds of professional associations that build an academic's social or human capital (Ryazanova and McNamara, 2019). Strong networks are important for building a successful academic career, as they may result in research collaborations for early career academics. These create opportunities for early career academics to work collaboratively with senior academics (mentors) and their peers, as well as on research projects, grant applications, and article co-authorship.

Discussion

It is always challenging for women in academia to balance their academic and family life, as these two roles are demanding/mutually exclusive. As a woman, sometimes a wife and a mother, you are expected to play various roles at home and have to perform all the domestic work. Female academics usually internalise gender roles, and they feel responsible for their families and struggle to balance family and career life. Blair-Loy *et al.* (2015) found that even high-profile academic women experience inequality regarding gender hierarchy and division of labour. Similarly, Shreffler *et al.* (2019) argue that if one fails to balance these two demanding roles, one will experience role and ego conflict because of the pressure from these two roles. Ogbogu (2013) indicated that conflict between academic life is more prevalent and common in women. Consequently, playing dual roles often leads to stress and poor job performance, and this has negative effects on female academics, their academic and family relationships, and their well-being. Traditionally, academia has possessed all the hallmarks of a traditional patriarchal structure. In academia, women are consistently negatively impacted by neoliberal expectations of society and prejudices (Lewin, 2016). So much so that women are positioned as inferiors to complicated gendered inequities and power dynamics, although neoliberal cultures in academia supposedly apply to everyone equally (Magoqwana *et al.*, 2019). But as Hills *et al.* (2010) discovered that is not the case and in reality, women in academia generally earn less money and occupy fewer senior positions in international higher education environments. This demonstrates

that women are less successful with renowned funding organisations, which reflects their underrepresentation in several sectors that tend to get priority when prestigious and substantial financing comes up.

Furthermore, the neoliberal transformation of higher education has a significant impact on the careers of academic women. The challenges facing women in academia in South African higher education institutions, as well as internationally, are well documented, and the need to be seen to create change and promote gender equity fits within the neoliberal doxa of the individualised and performative university (Mbukanma and Strydom, 2022). Women are by no means absent from the contemporary academy, yet there remains an absence of women in influential decision-making and leadership roles, and gender-based discrimination and harassment persist (ESCAP 2021). However, radical feminism has helped shape many policy innovations and new governing rationalities, women's claims for equal rights and opportunities in academia have become 'mainstreamed'. Furthermore, academic women's careers have been significantly impacted by the neoliberal reform of higher education. The difficulties that women in academia face both in South Africa and internationally are well known and should be seen as advancing gender equity and change consistent with the neoliberal doxa of the individualised and performative university (Mbukanma and Strydom, 2022). While women are by no means absent in modern academia, they are underrepresented in positions of authority and decision-making, and harassment and discrimination based on gender are nevertheless prevalent (ESCAP, 2021). The demands of women for equal rights and opportunities in academia have, however, become "mainstreamed" as a result of radical feminism's influence on several policy innovations and new governing rationalities.

According to Shanyanana and Waghid (2014), African universities appear to discard the expectation to promote the social interest of groups such as black women academics when it comes to issues involving women's active role in decision-making in the management and administration of higher education. The system instead displays limited access to knowledge production. Due to the greater dominance of men and the continuation of hegemonic institutions in universities, marginalised groups like black women who are researchers, lecturers, or students continue to exist on the outskirts of the system. This illustrates how women's voices continue to go unheard and how their varied experiences as scholars, mothers, aunts, and wives continue to be systematically disregarded as part of the universalisation of what it means to be a person and an academic. According to Shanyanana and Waghid (2014), the higher education framework, which declares to equalise voice within its system, may fall short of doing so because it subtly excludes members of societal subgroups like black women or the poor. After all, these groups lack the necessary cultural capital to improve and challenge the status quo of higher education. As a result, according to Chauraya (2012: 257), higher education policies and programs in Africa have remained gender-neutral, gender-blind, or gender-insensitive and consequently have failed to amend and delink the gendered colonial structure of patriarchy within the African HEIs.

Since women are unable to balance family and academic life, they have weak and limited access to networks, which leads to them having a low production of research outputs. Most senior academics are men and early-career female academics do not have expansive and well-developed social networks to develop and grow their potential in academia. Furthermore, this leaves excluded female academics vulnerable to developing negative thoughts and feelings which inhibit their work productivity (Ooms *et al.*, 2019). In addition, as Trower and Gallagher (2010) noted, there is also a lack of information, awareness of, and clarity on promotion requirements and processes from being left out of networks. Van Miegroet *et al.* (2019) argue for research on how these factors contribute to the gender gap in research output. As we have seen, mentoring has significant benefits for early career academics, especially when female academics are empowered through the support of effective mentoring programs. The African philosophy of Ubuntu suggests and emphasises the spirit of oneness, humanness, cooperation, and compassion regardless of gender. The support that mentors provide to female academics and colleagues implies the spirit of togetherness or collegiality, which is at the heart of Ubuntu (Geber and Keane, 2017). Thus, mentorship programs for women in academia provide increased and improved job satisfaction, tenure, and retention. The mentoring program provides support to early-career academics, not only on academic needs but also on their personal needs and this means that work/family balance is restored. Also, through mentoring programs, early career academics can create collaborative networks with other academics (Alshebli *et al.*, 2020).

Conclusion

In this study, the findings on female academics were explored from the perspective of understanding the importance of mentorship opportunities and networking for women in academia. This study was based on the notion that mentorship programs for women are limited in academia as was found in the reviewed literature. Also, women in academia encounter challenges to their work and life balance which have a negative impact on their performance and their visibility and optics in academia. Many academic institutions in Africa still have gender inequality where female academics are underrepresented in senior positions. Their lack of representation is perpetuated by cultural norms and gender inequalities. However, strategies and ideology of the radical feminism approach address these inequalities by calling for change and reconstruction in higher education institutions. This approach encourages women in academia to discover their true consciousness and voice. It gives power to women in academia to challenge the cultural imperatives that determine how institutions should be structured. In addition, the few women who hold leadership and management positions in HEIs play a substantive role in influencing the management and decision-making in HEIs. They are playing fundamental roles when it comes to the main purposes of higher education which include research, teaching, and learning. Nevertheless, to redress this power imbalance, there is a need for mentorship programs, especially for women in academia. People feel safer in their self-development and in their mentors' efforts to develop their knowledge and experience when they see that their worldviews are acknowledged during mentoring procedures rather than ignored and suppressed. One method to be relevant in diverse environments, particularly in HEIs, is through mentoring and being guided by Ubuntu.

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