

# The journey of South African women academics with a particular focus on women academics in theological education

Linda Naicker

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Abstract

The aims of this article are twofold. Firstly, in this article, I shall examine the historical experiences of discrimination against women academics in higher education in South Africa, which will include discussing their experiences of discrimination in the present dispensation. Secondly, I shall hone in on a specific area within higher education – the historical experiences of women academics within faculties of theology in institutions of higher education in South Africa. I shall argue that their experiences constitute a dynamic narrative that challenges conventional understandings of the “breeding ground” of race, class and gender discrimination in South African institutions of higher education. I shall also propose two areas of concern which, if addressed, would make possible the creation of environments that would support, rather than hinder and prejudice, those most marginalised under apartheid.

## Introduction

Racial and gender grouping under the policy of apartheid profoundly shaped South African society and resulted in rampant inequalities. While women suffered more than black men, exploitation and discrimination was gross for both groups. Empirical research has revealed disturbing subtexts of racism, classism and sexism within the academy and the endemic structures that marginalised women and black men.<sup>1</sup> In the new democratic dispensation, the embedded social inequalities under apartheid prompted an extensive range of transformation orientated initiatives in order to address the situation, and higher education institutions were included in those badly in need of restructuring. In a study on women in academic leadership, Mazibuko (2006:111) acknowledged governmental policies and the commitment of universities in South Africa to adopt and enhance gender and equity promotion programmes. However, she asserted that governance and management within higher education had to contend with multiple sources of control, competing missions, decentralised structures and constrained resources. Centres of power included schools within institutions, faculties, colleges, executive management, senates and councils. The aims of this article are twofold and interact largely with two works. Firstly, the article seeks to examine the historical experiences of women academics in higher education and assess the progress made since the advent of democracy in South Africa (in 1994). In *Reflections of black women faculty in South African universities*, Reitumetse O. Mabokela examines not only the historiography of discrimination of women academics in higher education, but also makes recommendations for transformation. This work provides statistical and empirical data that highlights the fact that creating an enabling environment for women academics, particularly black women in South African institutions of higher education, is still an enormous challenge. The work also demonstrates the pervasive presence of unequal and discriminatory practices in higher education and the need for a truly inclusive and equitable working environment (Mabokela 2002:204). Secondly, honing in on a specific area within higher education, the article explores the experiences of women academics within faculties of theology in institutions of higher education in South Africa. In *Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989-2008)*, Isabel A Phiri presents a critical analysis of the challenges faced by African<sup>2</sup> women in theological education. These include the challenges of empowering women to study and teach theology, the challenge of engendering the theological curriculum, and the challenge of collaborating with African male scholars. Phiri notes that the biggest challenges are to motivate collaboration with male students and the staff of theological institutions, and the need to transform theological education so that it is truly inclusive.

## Historical overview of women in higher education

---

<sup>1</sup> See Cheryl Potgieter, *Black Academics on the Move* (Sunnyside: Compress, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The term “African women” will be used to describe all women who belong to diverse classes, races, cultures, nationalities and religions found on the African continent as defined by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. See Isabel Apawo Phiri. “Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34/2 (2008), 63-81.

Universities across the world are a product of their national and societal contexts. Under apartheid, racism in South Africa was institutionalised and higher education reflected that racially divided backdrop. In a report by the National Commission of Higher Education (1996), it was revealed that, in 1993, women occupied 32% of the total research and teaching positions. The report also held that the majority of women were employed at the level of junior lecturer or lecturer. The same report also stated that woman at some historically white universities in South Africa held all of the positions below the rank of junior lecturer, 89% of women held the position of junior lecturer and 45% held the position of lecturer. Less than 3% of women held the position of professor and 8% held the position of associate professor (Mabokela 2002:185-186). Blacks were conspicuously absent or under-represented and black women in particular were grossly under-represented. Scholars of the day attributed much of the quandary besetting higher education to patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> McIntosh (1995:76-78) asserted that predominantly white and male institutions and disciplines exposed the interlocking nature of race and gender oppression. She claimed that white male privilege was held up by an invisible hand of support, prestige and advocacy which gave male academics access to valuable information and opportunities, thus ensuring their success. Conversely, women academics who managed to obtain positions in the academy were without this invisible hand of support, which meant that these women simply did not have access to the resources they needed. Moreover, in such a context, white male privilege was the lens through which the experiences of women were re-interpreted and dismissed. In addition to this, black women, being at the bottom of the rung in the racial/gender hierarchy of apartheid were not only subjected to race, class and gender discrimination, but also experienced discrimination from within the ranks of women themselves, women who served to re-enforce paternalism and the marginalised position of black women.

According to Desiree Lewis (1992:17):

White feminist academics have a vested stake in the silence of black women. As producers of knowledge who have recently created a niche in the patriarchal world of knowledge production, they rely on the construct "black women" as passive, inarticulate and representable object. Recognition of the interpretations of black women would lead to white feminists' loss of dominance in an academic domain where their hold is already tenuous and threatened, particularly since a high premium has always been placed on authoritative interpretations of the colonised, the underclass, the dominated in South Africa. This partially accounts for the reluctance of some to recognise discourse as a site of power relations and to consider the extent to which their self-proclaimed interpretive mastery echoes the broader oppressive relations of racist, classist and patriarchal society.

Many a scholarly work was written on the subject of the disharmony of women in higher education based on race, class, and gender differences. According to Moletsane (2002), women academics often saw themselves as survivors of racism, classism, sexism and insensitivity. The proof of this, according to Moletsane, was the re-surfacing of the issue time and again at women's conferences. Moja Teboho and Nico Cloete asserted that the system of tertiary education in South Africa was seen as one that perpetuated inequality, was hugely wasteful, and failed to serve the human-resource needs of the country. In short, higher education in South Africa fairly accurately reflected the society within which it was located (Teboho & Cloete 1995:50).

### **Experiences of women academics in the new dispensation**

Transforming higher education and the inherited apartheid social and economic structure was high on the agenda of the new democratic government of South Africa. A number of interventions were introduced to bring about the advancement of women and to increase the number of women in higher education. Research grants were made available; more positions for women academics opened up, mentoring projects were established and a host of other interventions were initiated. A study highlighting the place of women in higher education in South Africa and the United States revealed that the enduring setback for women, particularly black women employed at tertiary institutions, is that they are considered to be outsiders within their academic environments (Johnson & Thomas 2012). The study noted that, owing to their small numbers, women academics are often invisible and voiceless. Moreover, the experiences of black women are often overshadowed by the experiences of black men or subsumed under the realities of white women. The universalising of their experiences as black or female does little to affirm their uniqueness and their particular struggles. Black men's experiences are the taken for granted as being the black experience, and white women's experiences are the taken for granted as being female experience. As a result, black women academics must navigate their way through an environment that does not fully hear or see them. Similar sentiments are affirmed by Mabokela (2002) as she highlighted the overlap of race, class and gender, and asserted that women academics continue to face disparities across race

---

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Ballantine. "Impressions: Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa," 1 *Agenda* 9 (1991), 9-22.

and gender lines. The author affirmed the strength and tenacity of all women, both black and white, and stressed that the goal of her research was not to portray them as victims, but to affirm their contributions.

Mabokela conducted interviews with women academics employed at diverse academic institutions, including historically black universities, historically white universities and a technikon. The study was part of a broader enquiry involving 26 female academics. Participants reported heavier teaching loads than their other colleagues, with some junior faculty having a double teaching schedule every day. Mabokela noted that this makes studying towards higher degrees and the chance for promotion difficult. As a result, women cannot compete equitably for promotion. In addition to this, some participants said that, as junior ranking academics, they were not allowed to apply for study leave in order to pursue advanced degrees. As contract workers, their status did not allow them to accumulate the number of employment days required to qualify for study leave. Since furthering their studies and acquiring academic credentials are a non-negotiable necessity for permanent employment, they felt unfairly marginalised. Such impediments perpetuate the marginal position of women academics. Furthermore, these conditions fail to take into account the disparities in higher education created by past practices of discrimination (Mabokela 2002:191-197).

Many of the participants had limited exposure to and involvement in research activities. A key finding was that many senior scholars were reluctant to offer junior rank academics support. Another challenge was the dissemination of scholarly material in journals. It emerged that most mainstream journals were controlled by what one participant called an “old boy’s network” and, as such, are not receptive to the kind of work that women academics are engaged in – that is, research that is community-based and written from a non-western perspective or research that is written from the perspective of gender. One participant noted that she would not submit her research to a gender-focused journal because her senior colleagues viewed such a journal as being a “softer option”. All the participants expressed the view that they had to constantly prove themselves because they were under constant scrutiny to perform (Mabokela 2002:194). All participants experienced institutional environments that lacked respect for women. They maintained that there are persistent inequalities in the way in which standards were applied and that their work conditions impeded their ability to compete equitably. Furthermore, they made the point that an imbalanced group representation resulted in stereotyping and subtle forms of discrimination (Mabokela 2002:200). The study also revealed that there are serious misconceptions among racial and ethnic groups about each other. These attitudes are deeply rooted in apartheid ideology which imposed false perceptions of inferiority/superiority and isolated racial and ethnic groups from each other. The study concluded that institutions of higher education must systematically address deep-seated racial and gender attitudes; the same study claimed that meaningful change will not be realised until individual attitudes are addressed and black women, especially, are provided with opportunities that create an environment conducive to their growth and development (Mabokela 2002:202).

### **Historical experiences of women academics in theological education**

Phiri (2008:6-8) identified four major challenges that hindered the growth and development of African women in theological education:

- The challenge of re-defining the identity of African<sup>4</sup> women theologians.
- The challenge of empowering more women to study theology and be on the permanent staff of theological institutions.
- The challenge of engendering the theological education curriculum.
- The challenge of collaborating with African male scholars.

A key concern of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians<sup>5</sup>, since its inception in 1989, is to bring together women in theological education in order to work as a community of women and to produce their own theology, theology that would seek the liberation of women from all forms of oppression and discrimination. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians therefore decided to refer to all African women (black, white, Indian or coloured) as African women (Phiri 2008:63-81). The Circle is committed to doing theology

---

<sup>4</sup> The term “African women” will be used to describe all women who belong to diverse classes, races, cultures, nationalities and religions found on the African continent as defined by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. See Isabel A Phiri. “Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34/2 (2008), 63-81.

<sup>5</sup> The Circle, as it is commonly referred to in Africa, is an interfaith association that aims at producing theological literature by encouraging and mentoring women to research, write and publish in the wide scope of religion and culture. Some key areas of concern are theological education for women; gender and theology; biblical and cultural hermeneutics; imperialism and globalisation; gender-based violence; theology of lamentation; and theology on the HIV and AIDS pandemic (Njorege 2005). See also Oduyoye, M A 1983. Reflections from a Third World women’s perspective: Women’s experience and liberation theologies, in Fabella, V & Torres, S (eds), *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to theology*, 246-255. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis. See also Christina Landman. “Mercy Ewuziwa Oduyoye: Mother of Our Stories”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33/1 (2007).

within the community of women in the academy and communities of faith. Research, writing and publishing are the core business of the Circle and is what distinguishes the Circle from other women's organisations and movements in Africa. The challenge is that only a few members have the capacity to write quality articles and books for publications. To address the situation, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians prioritises the training in skills for writing and publication. The Circle has also formed partnerships with various institutions of learning and stakeholders in community development in order to enhance their effectiveness and add value to the lives of women, develop them academically, and work towards liberation from all forms of oppression and discrimination (Phiri 2008:6-9). Increasing the number of women studying and teaching theology as a way of working towards eradication of exclusion and discrimination in theological institutions is also high on their agenda, simply because there are still so few women in theological education in Africa. One reason for this is that initial missionaries to the continent linked the study of theology with ordained ministry which was a vocation reserved solely for men. A huge problem women studying theology face is that there are few employment opportunities outside of the church. Compounding this problem is the fact that women working at university theological departments/schools are often employed on a limited-term contract basis. This presents a huge challenge because they do not qualify for academic leave, which would enable them to concentrate on furthering their education and increasing their research output. As a result, they are not able to progress academically. Furthermore, African women theologians employed at theological institutions find that advocating for the employment of women lecturers of theological disciplines in permanent positions is a frustrating exercise; this is particularly true if the head of such institutions does not share the vision of women empowerment in theological institutions (Phiri 2008:9-12). Moreover, there is an urgent need to promote the teaching of gender issues in the theological curriculum. This would entail making gender a concept in theological analysis and would go a long way towards exposing injustices in the church, in cultures, and in institutions. The problem lies in the fact that, at most institutions, the theological curricular, staff and student numbers are all male-dominated. Phiri (2008:12-13) emphasises the fact that this situation is in urgent need of redress and that engendering the theological curriculum can be done at three levels:

- The inclusion of gender issues in all disciplines and courses.
- Offering gender courses as electives at introductory, intermediate and advanced levels.
- Offering a whole programme in gender and theology/religion, with a designated chair at postgraduate level. A post in gender and religion/theology would specify that the incumbent will be responsible for the coordination of the engendering of the theological curriculum and giving leadership to the gender and religion programme.

Engendering the theological curriculum would require the collaboration of male scholars in the academy. An engendered curriculum would mean the addition of the often absent voices of black women and enhance the quality and scope of scholarship. Since the biggest challenge facing the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is the need to motivate more students and staff of theological institutions to engage in dialogue with literature produced by African women theologians, the contribution of a select group of African male scholars would be a huge step forward in advancing the position of women in theological education. However, far more needs to be done to ensure that more women enter the theological arena and women already in theological education receive the necessary support to further their scholarships (Phiri 2008:14-14).

### **Mapping a better future**

Historically, women academics faced various challenges in pursuing careers in higher education. Under apartheid, they were systematically excluded from participating in mainstream South African academic culture and were denied the opportunity to create viable niches for themselves within the academy. For those tenacious enough to pursue careers in the academy, multiple forms of oppression and discrimination hampered their progress. Phiri's account of the challenges women academics face in the theological arena only serves to underscore the precarious position of women in South African institutions of learning. Their experiences constitute a dynamic narrative that challenges conventional understandings of the "breeding grounds" of race, class and gender discrimination in South African societies and institutions of higher education. We must recognise the pervasive, hidden, covert forms of race, class and gender discrimination, not just in the academy, but everywhere. We must acknowledge that women in higher education, theological education included, especially black women, continue to experience an uncharacteristic continuity with some historic experiences of discrimination. Issues of race, class and gender still impact on the way in which African women are perceived and received. Entrenched discrimination continues to hamper their capacity to progress, only in a more nuanced form. I suggest two areas of concern which, if addressed, would go a long way towards creating environments within the workplace that would support, rather than hinder and prejudice, those most marginalised under apartheid.

### *Covert forms of discrimination*

Even though, since the advent of democracy, there has been serious restructuring in order to promote the development of women and the advancement of black women in particular at an institutional level, there still remains a remnant of old prejudices. In day to day interactions, these prejudices continue to undermine rather than support black women in particular. Such attitudes live in encoded speech about what is and what is not acceptable and ensures that discrimination persists for those who were most marginalised under the apartheid system. A form of benevolent paternalism dictates, in veiled undertones, that women ought to remember their subservient position. As a result, they must still navigate the often hostile terrain of higher education because, irrespective of how hard they work, and how much they are able to prove their competence, they are regarded as token appointments, appointments based on race, class and gender.

In his recent work, *A Bantu in my bathroom* (2012), Eusebius Mckaiser expounded on the notion that prejudicial attitudes continue to pervade South African societies because South Africans fail to see the intimate links between the private and public arenas of life. As a result, there exists a deep inconsistency as far as racial acceptance is concerned. In a nutshell, Mckaiser explained that the reach and endurance of racism finds its birth in the private sphere – in the homes and hearts of South Africans. As a result, racism and, I would venture to add, classism and gender discrimination, are ingrained in the collective social psyche of South Africans. Even though we are able to wear masks of non-racialism in the public sphere, the breeding ground of such attitudes – the private sphere remains unaffected because we dare not infringe on the right of an individual to be whoever she/he wishes to be in so intimate a space. It is here that people emphatically defend their right to exercise preference. Yet it is also here where notions of hierarchical orders, gender, class and racial perceptions are developed. This means that the embedded social inequalities perpetrated under apartheid continue to grow and influence how we interact in the public space. Compliance and participation in the “rainbow nation” in some instances is merely a cosmetic measure, a measure that masks deep-seated prejudices. What we need to truly be a “rainbow nation” is a willingness to work on prejudices in the private space. This “causal connection” between the private and public space, according to Mckaiser, must be acknowledged and addressed if we are to successfully eliminate prejudice in our new democracy (Mckaiser 2012:26-27).

I contend that there is a need within the academy to build social cohesion. We cannot uphold the denialism that inequalities do not exist. These inequalities are often dismissed as baseless accusations of over-reaction. Moreover, inequalities and discrimination often remain unnoticed, especially when those who do not experience them fail to understand how deeply offensive/wounding they are. We must also admit that those who find themselves on the fringes of employment at academic institutions are more likely to encounter discrimination. Social cohesion within the academy means that all individuals are made to feel secure in their jobs and an acknowledgement and recognition of their unique contribution. Within the work environment, individuals must be able to experience social inclusion; such inclusion acknowledges their need for collaboration with other scholars and communities and their need for access to services. It also recognises the fact that individuals within the academy are not lone agents, but have profound connections and responsibilities to their local communities and families. Discrimination against any individual not only undermines that individual's personal growth and development, but also hinders the individual's academic progress, thus hampering the smooth running of the institution in which they are employed.

### *Becoming inclusive and affirming*

Theological faculties often fail to acknowledge the precarious nature of women's positions within theological education; perhaps more so than any other discipline, historically theology has been entirely male-dominated. In a recent work undertaken by several ministers representing ten different denominations in South Africa, and dealing with theological education, a glaring omission was the role of women in theological education and the challenges they face (Naidoo 2012). The repeated call by African women theologians for the mainstreaming of gender in theological education and the need to promote and redefine theological education so that it encourages women to embark on studies in theology was completely ignored in this work. Phiri (2008:13-14) noted that the collaboration of male scholars is an important issue as far as engendering the curriculum and promoting the growth and development of women in theological education are concerned.

My sense is that Phiri's appeal for a whole programme in gender and religion to be implemented in theological institutions is neither widely accepted nor practised. As a result, it does not even occur to those involved in preparing curricula that gender issues are a vital area of neglect and should be considered when compiling a holistic curriculum that would be inclusive and affirming. To remedy this, more women's voices should be heard on the subject and more collaboration with male theologians should be advocated. Conversations around engendering the theological curriculum must begin in earnest. In addition to the need for collaboration, there is also a need for greater consistency. Through partnership between male and female

scholars within the theological arena, strategies can be developed to promote a clear understanding of what it means to be inclusive and affirming and the measures that need to be taken in order to achieve this. By doing this, not only will we be addressing structural, cultural and institutional barriers, but we shall also be confronting any unconscious bias which has the ability to stunt the development of the field of theology within the academy. This, in turn, means that male and female academics within theological education will work together and become forerunners in creating a future for social cohesion in the academy.

## Conclusion

The pursuit of knowledge and transformation must intersect with promoting the rights and giving a voice to all groups within the diverse societies in which we theologians ply our trade. The need to promote equality and social cohesion within our very ranks is of vital importance. Creating equality must be an essential part of what defines us. This entails not only collaboration on all levels, but also the ability to understand and identify covert and systematic inequalities, especially when these impact on those most marginalised among us. In order for academic institutions, and faculties within the academy to achieve this, there must be recognition and engagement with the issue. There must be recognition that the race, class and gendered nature of the complexities we experience within South African institutions of learning are ongoing. The façade of the “rainbow nation” which we display feeds into the scope of subjugation and prejudice that is still prevalent today, and continues to tarnish and deride the progress we have made as a nation.

## Works consulted

- Johnson, L. & Thomas, K. 2012. A similar, marginal place in the academy: contextualising the leadership strategies of black women in the United States and South Africa. Edited by Johnson L. In *Advances in developing human resources*. Available: <<http://adhr.sagepub.com>>. Accessed: 13 May 2013.
- Landman, C. 2007. Mercy Ewudziwa Oduyoye: mother of our stories. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33(1).
- Lewis, D. 1992. The politics of feminism in South Africa. Edited by Daymond. South African feminism: writing, theory and criticism. *Staffrider* 10(3), 15-21.
- Mabokela, R.O. 2002. Reflections of Black Women Faculty in South African Universities. *The Review of Higher Education* 25(2), 185-205.
- Mazibuko, F. 2006. *Women in academic leadership in South Africa: conventional executives or agents of empowerment?* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- McIntosh, P. 1995. White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies, in Anderson, ML. and Collins, PH. (eds.), *Race, class and gender: an anthology*. Wadsworth: Belmont.
- McKaiser, E. 2012. *A Bantu in my bathroom: debating race, sexuality and other uncomfortable South African topics*. Johannesburg: Bookstorm (Pty) and Pan Macmillian.
- Moletsane, R. 2002. Is sisterhood possible? Racial (dis)harmony and feminism in higher education. *Feminist Africa: Intellectual Politics*, 1.
- Naidoo, M. (ed) 2012. *Between the real and the ideal: ministerial formation in South African Churches*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 16-22.
- Nyambura, N. 2005. A new way of facilitating leadership: lessons from African women theologians. *Missiology* 33(1), 29-46.
- Oduyoye, M.A. 1983. Reflections from a third world women’s perspective: women’s experience and liberation theologies, in Fabella, V & Torres, S. (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to theology*. New York: Orbis, 246-255.
- Phiri, I.A. 2008. Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989-2008). *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34(2), 63-81.
- Teboho, M. & Cloete, N. 1996. Academic freedom, in Daniel J, Lador, Daniel J. & De Vlaming, N (eds.), *Education and Human Rights*. London: Zeb Books.