



## **Academic and professional identities as gendered experiences in higher education: challenges and possibilities**

**Bantu L. Morolong**

University of Botswana

Botswana

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### **Abstract**

While duly recognizing the role that higher education institutions have played in the promotion of gender equality in teaching, learning and management of education and development processes, this paper aims to assess the extent to which these inroads have been constrained by their bigger and more powerful societal context. Using documented evidence from research and scholarship on gender equality in higher education, this paper argues that in the developing world the persistent gender inequalities in higher education institutions are a mirror image of the larger context at which level very little has been achieved to close the gender inequality gap in policies, legal systems, leadership and decision making structures, in capacity building efforts and attitudinal change. The key premise in this paper is that changes that are taking place in Higher education should be predicated on the ideological and practical commitments from all the sectors of societies that give these institutions context. Highlighted are the strong indications that most of the nations in this context still lag behind in appreciation of and subscription to some of the regional and international instruments and protocols that form a basis for concern and action about gender inequality as a form of social and economic injustice. Simply put, the larger context is neither convinced nor committed to this course. This makes central in this analysis, the ensuing expectation for higher education institutions to make significant influences

in this regard.

This paper puts people at the center of the debate about how gender equality can be achieved in education in general and in higher education institutions in particular. It outlines the spill over effects of the gendered professional identities in the larger context to the academic and professional identities in higher education. The interplay between the two contexts is assessed with specific reference to the power dynamics and the skewed mutual influences that render higher education institutions ineffective in their attempts to alter this landscape. An argument is developed for an urgent need for these institutions to introspect and develop from research, approaches and strategies that clearly identify linkages between the gender inequality dynamics in the smaller unit, that is, the higher education institution and those in the broader context which is society. This seems all the more urgent in these contexts where higher education institutions are still public institutions that enjoy limited autonomy in their generation of ideas, practices and institutional forms and in the content of what they deliver. They therefore still produce graduates who lack capacity to effectively drive the gender equality agenda on a micro and macro scale when they enter a context that marginalizes these issues. They find themselves bargaining from a position of disadvantage as they carry over from higher education institutions to the world of work, where they become policy and decision makers, the constraining baggage of gendered identities. They then consciously or not become part of the circle of promoters of this status quo.

This paper posits that higher education institutions lend themselves vulnerable to societal pressures by not building enough internal intellectual and attitudinal capacity, to effectively counteract the societal forces against gender equality in education. A central critique of these institutions by this paper is that they have territorialized this discourse and undermined both the pressures that they get from their national contexts and their potential to act on this challenge. A strongly held view is that within their spheres of influence, and in spite of all the limiting factors from the larger context, higher education institutions have the potential to be the brain power for the gender equality agenda. It is argued that they have the most trained and exposed human resource on the discourse. They have the capacity to engage within their confines and further build capacities for other disciplines, to use the curriculum and

their institutional structures to prepare their students and staff on this area in terms of thinking, attitudes and practices as future leaders. If this was not the case, why is it that in many cases, the national gender in development policies that subsequently inform what institutions can do are drawn with expertise from these institutions. It is suggested in the main that the major leeway of these institutions would come from capitalising on their relative autonomy and intensifying their capacity to address these issues by first dealing with their internal weaknesses to address this very huge development challenge on which there is still expectation for them to play a leading role.

Gender equity is promoted in higher education institutions through reforms in policies, the curriculum student and staff recruitment procedures and practices and through innovations to achieve a gender sensitive teaching and learning environment. But this transformation is happening against a backdrop of impediments that leave these institutions with continued gender differentiation in institutional management and leadership, in the curriculum content, in enrolments and in science and technology subjects and in technology mediated teaching and learning processes. Noted extensively is the expectation that higher education institutions as centres of knowledge creation should be play a leading role in these efforts. The crucial question however, is why this particular area seems such a challenge for higher education institutions when they have been able to make significant contributions to theory and practice in science, technology and medicine, economics, business, political and administrative studies, environmental factors and other areas of development in their societies. In their leadership role in education, with the scenario as here presented higher education institutions therefore fail to be positive role models in efforts to achieve equity in Education and as effective participants in the fight against social injustice.

While there are specific interventions in the context of higher education institutions to achieve gender equity and alter the landscape of gendered identities in these contexts this paper argues that those have been achieved against great broader contextual odds. In conclusion the paper suggests strategies that Higher education institutions could use around the areas of staff and student capacity building on the principles of gender equality as a human rights concern. The paper argues that higher



education institutions should use strategic approaches that develop linkages between what they are trying to do at institutional level and what the national context has achieved to deal with this challenge. Suggestions are also made for rigorous efforts to skill, involve and commit all those with a stake in educational reform to recognise the very broad and complex area of gender equity as one of the key vehicles for sustainable development and to be given priority as part of educational transformation.