

Women in Higher Education Institutions and the Challenge of Academic Progression

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Abstract

Female academics in Africa have historically faced several challenges that have hampered their advancement to positions of leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The study's findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to women's inability to generate research outputs, which are required for advancement in HEIs. This problem was compounded by diverse degrees of infrastructural deficits and poor research funding. This study adopted a qualitative exploratory analysis approach whereby structured interviews were held with 20 female university academics in two African countries to examine the factors that inhibit women's advancement in the HEI space. The study highlights the need for HEIs to review the 'publish or perish' phenomenon, acknowledge the patriarchal nature of the HEI space, and recognise the additional work that female academics perform in their homes and families. It provides recommendations that may be used by HEI managers to bridge the widening gender gap in leadership positions in HEIs in the selected African countries. The findings cannot be generalised as the sample was taken from female academics from public universities in only two African countries. The study could, however, assist HEI managers and policymakers find solutions to some of the issues affecting women's progression in HEIs.

Keywords: higher education institution (HEI), women, academic, research output, challenges, gender, inequality, COVID-19, publish or perish, progression, leadership

Introduction

Studies on women in leadership positions in Africa have focused mainly on women in leadership positions in industries and government (Nelson and Mudau, 2019). Few studies have focused on women in leadership positions from the perspective of Higher Education Institutions (HEI), even though women play a major role in HEIs across the continent (DHET, 2019; NUC, 2019; Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede, 2021; Coetzee and Moosa, 2020). In most African HEIs, women still face many barriers and challenges that hinder their progression into leadership positions. This paper is a qualitative, exploratory analysis of the internal and external factors that impede female academic progression in HEIs in Africa. Samples for the study were drawn from the two leading economies in sub-Saharan Africa, namely Nigeria and South Africa. The paper looks at the influence of the 'publish or perish' phenomena on women's development in HEIs as well as the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on academic women's publication abilities, which are necessary for academic progression in HEIs.

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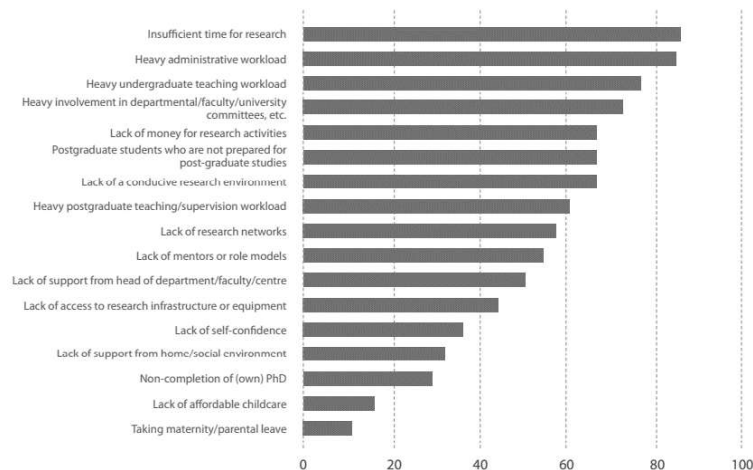
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Although the presence of women in HEIs globally continues to grow, women remain at the bottom of the academic hierarchy in most HEIs as very few women have risen to leadership positions (Bhatti and Ali, 2020; Coetzee and Moosa, 2020). In South Africa and Nigeria, as well as in other sub-Saharan African countries, emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the already extant gender gap and systemic inequality in the HEI leadership space (Walters et al. 2022). Evidence shows that fewer women were able to publish during the pandemic, thus, halting the progression of women in HEIs by at least the two years of the pandemic (Gabster *et al.*, 2020; Gao and Sai, 2020; Viglione, 2020; Walters *et al.*, 2022).

Women's progression or growth in HEIs in Africa are stymied by specific factors. Zulu (2021) identifies factors such as the deep patriarchal system which marginalises women in society, racism and or tribalism, sexism, a lack of mentors for emerging black female academics in HEIs, and women having to work in an unsupportive and hostile work environments which do not recognise the gender disparity. Okeke-Uzodike and Gamede (2021) write about the unrelenting workload meted out to academics due to the adoption of a blended learning mode in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; whilst Coetzee and Moosa (2020) highlight the challenges of workplace acceptance of women as leaders, finding the right work-life balance, and the dearth of advancement opportunities for women as major obstacles confronting women's progression in the HEI space. In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) notes that, of the 26 public universities in the country, there were only four women vice-chancellors (DHET, 2019). A similar situation exists in Nigeria, where the National Universities Commission (NUC) in its 2017¹ report noted that there were only five female vice-chancellors in the 43 federal universities in the country (NUC, 2022). Promotions and performance management in academia have been found to be a stressful exercise for academics (Kairuz, Krehula, and Truter, 2019). Most female academics' responsibilities transcend academic workloads and extend to include family commitments; thus, female academics find themselves in situations where they must find a balance between career demands and family responsibilities on the tripod of physical, emotional, and mental dispositions. In many cases, female academics have to choose from the essential responsibilities of raising their children, caring for their families, and pursuing a promotion in their HEIs (Awung and Dorasamy, 2015; Bhatti and Ali, 2020; Watson, Singh, and Nair, 2022a).

¹ Figures are based on the NUC 2019 statistical analysis, which is the most recent found on its website.

The gender disparity in HEIs in Africa is an area where literature is scant. Many HEIs in Africa are yet to recognise the added responsibilities that female academics face (Awung and Dorasamy, 2015). In South Africa, Statistics SA (2010) reported that females were more likely to engage in non-Systematic National Account (non-SNA) activities compared to their male counterparts. Non-SNA production, as defined by Statistics SA, alludes to activities such as household maintenance, care of persons in the household (children, the elderly, the sick), housework, personal and household shopping, etc. In contrast, males spend most of their time on SNA activities, which include activities such as engaging in waged employment or seeking opportunities. The survey found that, in total, females spent almost twice as much time than their male counterparts on non-productive activities (246 mean minutes per day for females compared to 113 for males) (Statistics South Africa, 2010). The impact of having to engage in non-SNA activities for women academics, as noted by Awung and Dorasamy (2015), is that it reduces the time available for research, publications, conference attendance, and presentations, all of which are prerequisites for the professional advancement of academics. Awung (2015) further noted that women academics will continue to lag behind their male counterparts until those factors preventing women's progression in HEIs are addressed. The DHET, in its ministerial report on the challenges and barriers to female progression in HEIs, commented on the patriarchal nature of South African society, and stated that this had found its way into HEIs. According to the report, the major challenges and barriers experienced by female academics at South African HEIs are as shown in Figure 1 below (DHET, 2019).



Source: (DHET, 2019)

According to DHET, these challenges have not only prevented or retarded the growth of female academics, but have also led to them leaving South African HEIs to find employment in better identity-affirming environments (DHET, 2019). In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC), which is the governing body of all Nigerian universities, listed a total of 219 HEIs as of 2022. The universities listed by the Commission comprised 49 federal universities, 59 state universities, and 111 private universities (NUC, 2022). An overview of the list of women in leadership positions in the 49 federal universities revealed that, as of 2019, Nigeria had six female pro-chancellors, five female vice-chancellors, 10 female registrars, six female bursars, and 14 female librarians. Shockingly, 17 institutions amongst the federal universities had zero female representation in the above-mentioned positions (NUC, 2022). In terms of academic staff members, from senior lectureship to full professors, the NUC report revealed that female academics were grossly under-represented in the higher echelons of Nigerian universities. For example, at the University of Lagos (one of Nigeria's oldest and most prestigious universities), only 46 out of the 283 full professors were female.

The university recorded 123 male associate professors and only 37 female associate professors. In the senior lecturer category, the university recorded 217 male senior lecturers and 93 female senior lecturers. Similarly, at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, another premier Nigerian university, 420 male professors were listed compared to 49 female professors. The university also recorded having 156 male associate professors compared to 26 female associate professors and 286 male senior lecturers compared to 59 female senior lecturers (NUC, 2022). The situation was the same across all federal universities in Nigeria, indicating that women are grossly unrepresented in leadership positions in HEIs in the country. According to Chankseliani and McCowan (2021), if Africa is to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which it has signed up to do, HEIs must play a major role. It is, therefore, pertinent that women advance to the highest echelons of HEI leadership in Africa in order to contribute to knowledge production, innovation, and societal development, which Africa badly needs.

It is against this background that this study aims to explore reasons why women in the two sub-Saharan African countries face slow progression into leadership positions in their HEIs despite the increase in the number of women employed in HEIs.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the challenges faced by female academics in relation to their progression in HEIs in the two sub-Saharan Africa countries, namely South Africa and Nigeria.

2. To assess the effects of the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon on female progression in HEIs in the two selected countries.
3. To examine the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on female academic progression in HEIs.
4. To ascertain, from academic women’s perspectives, ways in which African HEIs could contribute towards female academic progression.

The next section of the paper examines extant literature on the causes and factors that impinge upon the rapid progression of female academics. The section commences with an assessment of the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon, which many HEIs have adopted as a measure for promotion and institutional progression. The unintended consequences of the blanket application of the phenomenon are highlighted, followed by a discussion on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on female academic progression in HEIs in view of the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon. The section ends with a discussion on the issue of ‘shifting of the goal-posts’, a situation where promotional policies, requirements, and demands are constantly changing, which all infringe upon female progression in HEIs.

Literature Review

The ‘publish or perish’ concept is a popular principle in most HEIs around the world (Carnelley, 2018). Higher Education Institutions receive subsidies from both government and private funders which are often based on the knowledge produced by said HEIs in terms of publishable research outputs (Mwamwenda, 1994). According to Moosa (2018), HEIs have become a ‘publish or perish’ world where academic career promotion and advancement are often based on the number and quality of publications and other research outputs that an academic is seen to produce (Carnelley, 2018). Equally, many HEIs are in global competition to build an institutional reputation from the production of high-quality research to advance their rankings, both nationally and internationally. All this translates into intense pressure and expectations on researchers (Aprile, Ellem, and Lole, 2021; Carnelley, 2018; Simiyu, Buraimoh, and Davidson, 2021). However, data indicates that, overall, women academics submit fewer papers for publication compared to their male counterparts. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this as fewer female academics submitted papers for publication during the pandemic (Viglione, 2020). Moreover, in a study by Walters *et al.* (2022), the authors reported that 80.3 percent of women believed that it was ‘more’ to ‘much more’ difficult for women than for men to conduct academic work during the lockdown period. The study found that domestic work, online teaching, online assessments, responding to emails, and attending online meetings took up

most of the time of female faculty members, leaving little or no time for academic writing and research (Walters *et al.*, 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2022a).

Although this paper does not intend to discuss the merits or demerits of the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon in HEIs, it will, however, highlight the pressure that this phenomenon has placed on female academics, particularly during the pandemic. de Rond and Miller (2005) describe the ‘publish or perish’ aphorism as the principle by which an academic’s tenure is primarily a function of an academic’s success in research publications. The authors contend that it determines the recruitment, promotion, and tenure of an academic, as these appear to be decided primarily based on the number of publications in a select group of peer-reviewed journals which have significant impact and relevance to the HEI’s rankings. The notion of ‘publish or perish’, according to Weisshaar (2017), is rooted in the neo-classical economic theories of human capital and meritocracy, which propose that promotions and other workplace rewards ought to be distributed according to job performance. However, when viewed through this lens, one would argue that female academics’ lower productivity in terms of research output is not based solely on competence, but rather on other factors such as household labour, family life, academic teaching workloads, opportunities, and the achievement of a work-life balance (Weisshaar, 2017; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006; Callaghan, 2016).

Disruptive Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Female Academic Progression in HEIs

The COVID-19 pandemic which forced the adoption of blended learning methods in most African HEIs (Oparinde and Govender, 2020), negatively impacted female academic research publication (Singh *et al.*, 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2022b). According to Ali and Ullah (2021), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not the same for male and female academics. The authors contend that the pandemic disproportionately impacted women’s academic publishing, which includes writing scientific papers and proposals for academic grants. As a result, many female academics missed out on promotions as well as the ability to engage in the academic activities required for their career advancement in HEIs (Walters, *et al.* 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2022a). Gao and Sai (2020) equally emphasise the challenges faced by female academics in developing economies during the lockdown, where most women were saddled with domestic chores, care of children, the elderly, and sick family members. In contrast to this, their academic male counterparts received additional support from spouses and experienced less interruptions whilst working from home (Topping, 2020). Ali and Ullah (2021) also noted that male faculty members were more likely to have partners who cared for the children and did domestic household work, thus,

freeing time for them to engage in research and other academic pursuits (Filho *et al.*, 2021; Gabster *et al.*, 2020; Topping, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic removed or disrupted support structures that many academic women relied upon to carry out research, such as school and day-care centers (Thaba-Nkadimene, Makwara, and Mzindle, 2021). The lockdown and rotational schooling for primary and secondary schools meant that women had to become (in addition to their paid employment) teachers at home, as well as doing domestic work and looking after younger children and elderly family members (Alon *et al.*, 2020). As observed by Chitsamatanga and Malinga (2021), the added demands of online teaching, learning, and assessment came with their own negative impacts for women, particularly those who were employed in historically disadvantaged HEIs in South Africa or in poorly funded HEIs in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent (Filho *et al.*, 2021). The time used to master the new mode of teaching and assessment encroached into the time that could have been used in activities such as student supervision, research, academic writing, publication, and the preparation of conference papers – all the activities required in terms of promotions and recognition of scholarly work. The isolation and lack of interaction amongst academics dampened the zeal of many female academics who were, before the pandemic, enthused by their colleagues in the areas of collaborative studies and engagement (Filho *et al.*, 2021; Singh *et al.*, 2022).

Policy Changes – ‘Shifting the Goalposts’

In South Africa and Nigeria, as well as other sub-Saharan African countries, academics are constantly under intense pressure to conduct research and publish to not only secure their careers, but also to attain career progression in their HEIs (Simiyu *et al.*, 2021). However, many academics have complained that rapid and sometimes unannounced policy changes in terms of institutional requirements for promotions are a major barrier to their progression in their HEIs. For example, for one to be promoted to a senior lectureship position, some universities require that the academic must have graduated one master’s student, published a few journal articles, and attended and presented papers at one or more conferences, which could consist of at least one national and one international conference. Furthermore, it is often required that this be attained within a certain period, such as a three- to four-year cycle. In the same vein, to attain the level of an associate professor, one is required to have graduated one doctoral student, published several journal articles/books, and of course, participated in both national and international conferences, amongst other requirements.

A report by the NUC in Nigeria is worthy of note – for a Nigerian academic seeking to become a full professor, the commission reports that

becoming a full professor in a Nigerian federal university was comparable to a camel seeking to pass through the eye of a needle (NUC, 2017). The Commission noted that before being considered for promotion or appointment to the rank of full professor, the academic/scholar would have put in a minimum of twelve years of university teaching and research. More importantly, the academic/scholar is expected to have an assessment of scholarship, which involves the evaluation of the candidate's published works by seasoned (senior) full professors in the field of the scholar. The Commission also noted that, usually, a minimum of about 60 internationally published works, of which about 80 percent must be journal articles, are required to be published in high-impact international journals to qualify the scholar to receive a positive assessment (NUC, 2017). Sadly, these requirements and demands fail to consider the added workload that many female academics undertake in the home (Awung and Dorasamy, 2015; Bhatti and Ali, 2020; DHET, 2019), thus, making it almost impossible for many female academics to achieve this within their academic careers. This study contends that scenarios such as these account for the poor representation of women in the higher echelons or leadership positions in HEIs in both Nigeria and South Africa.

Changes in promotional requirements are often undertaken at senate levels in most HEIs, a level where women are under-represented. These changes are decided on without much consideration of how they will affect female academics. It is against this background that the current paper advances the argument proposed by Ali and Ullah (2021), that HEIs should take into consideration, when dealing with cases of promotions, the fact that some female faculty members do not operate on an equal playing field as their male counterparts. Hence, HEIs should devise more equitable and diverse merit systems and standards of measuring the contributions of academics/scholars within HEIs.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory design using a qualitative research method. An abductive approach was used to address the objectives of this study. The study relied on ethnography as a research strategy. Women working in public HEIs in Nigeria and South Africa were identified as the target population of this study. This population was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, Nigeria and South Africa are the two largest economies in sub-Saharan Africa, and, in terms of research publications, the two countries generate the most published work (Duermeijer, Amir, and Schoombee, 2018). The paper adopted a qualitative research approach whereby semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total of 20 female academics in public HEIs in Nigeria (10) and South Africa (10). The

respondents ranged from lecturers to full professors who had applied for or were/are in the process of applying for promotions in their HEIs.

As noted above, the respondents were carefully and strategically selected using the purposive sample technique. A total of 20 respondents were sampled. Ten (10) of the respondents work in South African public HEIs, the other 10 work in Nigerian public HEIs. Table 1 depicts the socio-demographic variables of the respondents and the positions they hold in their HEIs.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics and profiles of the participants

Socio-demographic variables	Country		Total
	Nigeria	South Africa	
Number of respondents	n(10)	n(10)	20
Position			
Lecturer (L)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	10 (50%)
Senior lecturer (SL)	2 (29%)	4 (40%)	6 (30%)
Associate Professor (AP)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)	3 (15%)
Full Professor (FP)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	1 (5%)

The socio-demographics of the respondents indicates that the majority of respondents from both countries were lecturers (L) who were preparing to apply for promotion to Senior Lecturers (SL). All respondents were aware of the requirements that they had to meet to be promoted. The South African academics indicated that their requirements included at least two publications in DHET accredited journals, a minimum of five years teaching experience, and a successful graduation of at least one post-graduate (PG) student, *inter alia*. The Nigerian academics reported that they were required to have a minimum of between four and seven years of lecturing experience, two or more publications in high-index international journals, as well as a successful supervision of at least one postgraduate student at a master's level, amongst other requirements. Thirty percent (30%) of respondents were SLs and, of this number, two were from Nigeria and four from South Africa. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents were APs, all from Nigeria and five percent were FPs from South Africa.

Following a thorough review of the existing literature on the subject, an interview guide for semi-structured interviews was created. The interview guide was divided into four parts. The first set of questions concerned the demographics of the respondents. The second set of questions sought to ascertain, from their perspectives, the factors impeding women's advancement in HEIs. The third set of questions sought to elicit information about the impact of COVID-19 on female academics' research

and publications. While the fourth set of questions sought to ascertain how they felt about the 'publish or perish' phenomenon and its impact on the advancement of female academics in HEIs.

Data for this study came from 20 female academics at Nigerian federal universities and South African public universities, even though both countries have private and other recognised HEIs. The limitations were that public universities, being older and more established, had more female academics who had spent a significant number of years in employment and had applied for one or more promotions during their careers, thus, making them more knowledgeable in the key research areas of this paper.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents via phone, MS Teams, and Zoom. Because of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in both countries, this method of interviewing was used. Furthermore, purposive sampling was used because it allowed the researchers to select the sample in a more strategic manner to ensure that there was a diverse range of respondents who differed in terms of the certain characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

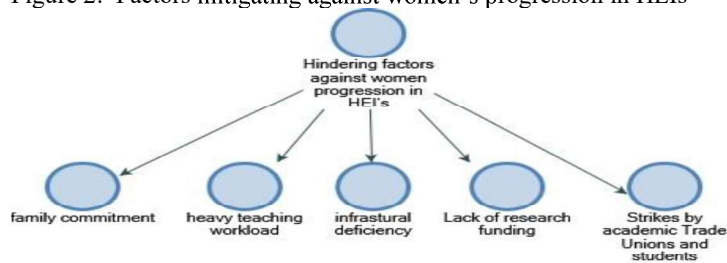
Data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach. The researchers examined the data to extract core themes. Moreover, NVivo 12 software was used to code each transcript. The transcribed data was broken down into component units and categorised and labelled. Using the NVivo 12 software. Crosstab queries were run to determine the links, relationships, and recurrences of the sequence of the coded text within and across cases. As noted above, the data was grouped and categorised into themes, which were derived from the transcribed data based on their recurrence and sequence. Three main themes emerged from this process, each having several sub-themes, which are further discussed in this section. The discussion on the findings commences with a discussion of the demographics of the respondents. Thereafter, a discussion on the themes and emerging sub-themes follows.

Data from the transcripts were coded into NVivo 12, plus qualitative data analysis application that allows for the organisation, analysis and visualisation of unstructured or semi-structured data. This paper discusses findings from the three main themes that emerged from the coded data. The themes were coded as: Theme One (T1) - factors which impede women's progression in HEIs; Theme Two (T2) - the effect of COVID-19 on the research and publications of female academics; and Theme Three (T3) - perceptions of female academics on the 'publish or perish' phenomenon and its impact on female academics' progression in HEIs.

Theme One (T1): Factors impeding women’s progression in HEIs

Figure 2 depicts the factors identified from the data that hindered women’s progression in HEIs in the two countries. Data coding identified family commitment; heavy teaching workloads; infrastructure deficiencies, such as electricity, paucity of data, computer hardware, high expenses in accessing the internet; funding; and strikes/protest action as the highest perceived hindering factors to female academics’ abilities to increase their research outputs, which in turn hinders or delays their progression in their HEIs.

Figure 2: Factors mitigating against women’s progression in HEIs



Source: Authors own construct (2022)

Family Commitment

The patriarchal working environment, in which female academics are not recognised for the additional work of caring for the family (in both Nigeria (NGN) and South Africa (RSA)), was identified as one of the factors that impeded women's advancement in HEIs, particularly among those in the lecturer and senior lecturer categories.

According to one respondent:

“Our responsibilities and expectations, especially from a personal or family perspective when it comes to domestic chores, taking care of family and children, can be very time consuming and definitely impacts on the time that could have been used to focus on research and publications.” RSA10.

Another respondent also commented:

“As an African woman our backgrounds expect us to do certain things like raising a family and helping with family responsibilities. These often make female academics to not engage in research activities until later in their careers.” RSA6.

Heavy Teaching Workload

Participants who were lecturers complained that their Heads of Departments assigned them heavy teaching workloads that did not allow them enough time to research and produce publications. Table 2 shows the number of publications derived from respondents from 2020, for which heavy teaching workloads were cited as a hindering factor.

Table 2: Heavy teaching workload as a hindering factor to publication

Publications during COVID-19 Lockdown	Number of Publications from 2020				Total (20)
	Lecturer (10)	Senior Lecturer (6)	Associate Professor (3)	Full Professor (1)	
Heavy workload and impact on publications	8	12	10	17	47

Source: Authors' construct (2022)

The heavy teaching workload hampered those in the lecturer position the most, according to the above table. According to the data, the 10 sampled lecturers could only produce eight published works from 2020 to 2022, whereas the one FP could produce 17 published works and the three APs produced 10 research publications. This is clear evidence that heavy teaching loads on female academics, particularly at the lower levels of academia, impede women's advancement in HEIs.

According to **NGN2**: "I have very many lectures and assessments to conduct every semester, therefore, I can hardly find the time to engage in research and publications or go for a conference". **RSA7** equally noted that, as a female STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) academic, all the laboratory work is given to her. However, on completion, the project leader, who would often be a male counterpart, would take the credit for the project.

Infrastructure Deficiencies

Although all respondents complained about their countries infrastructural deficiencies negatively affecting their ability to engage in research publications in some way, all Nigerian academics cited an erratic power supply as one of the major impediments to their ability to publish. Prior to the lockdown, respondents stated that they could rely on a stable electrical power supply on the university campuses. However, it was difficult for them to generate their own power at home. Access to the internet, difficulty obtaining data for research, and the cost of computer hardware and accessories were all mentioned as barriers to women's ability to produce research outputs.

Research Funding

This was a major source of concern among the Nigerian respondents, the majority of whom reported they lacked the funds to cover exorbitant publication fees and conference attendances. The South African respondents, on the other hand, did not share the same sentiments; they were aware that funds were available in faculties and institutional research offices, however, the stringent requirements for accessing the funds made it difficult. When pressed further, they stated that to be eligible for international conference funding, one must first present at a national conference and publish a paper in a DHET accredited journal.

Strikes and Protest Action by Students and Staff

Although all respondents complained about the disruptions and maintained that it hampered their research outputs, the emotional trauma associated with the protests and strikes, as well as the resulting changes in the academic calendar were the major factors impeding the South African respondents' ability to concentrate on research activities. The Nigerian respondents complained about the financial and emotional hardships caused by strike actions from Trade Unions and government agencies responsible for resolving disputes in HEIs.

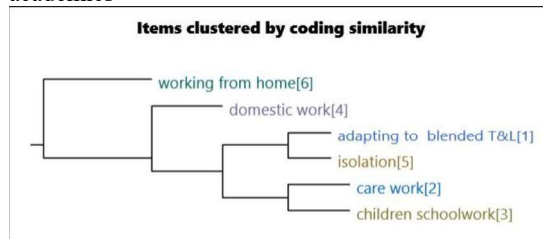
According to a respondent:

It is very difficult to publish or research when you have to constantly worry about how you will meet your monthly expenses, when the trade unions and government are in a power struggle over funding of the universities all the time (NGN5).

Theme Two (T2): The effect of Covid-19 on research and publications for female academics.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems described in Theme 1. The current theme (T2) focuses on the negative effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the research productivity of female academics.

Figure 2: Effects of COVID-19 on research and publications by female academics



Source: Authors construct (2022)

The items in this theme were clustered in accordance with their similarities. 'Working from home' was associated with performing domestic work, adapting to the new blended learning mode, the feeling of isolation, caring for family members, and engaging with children's schoolwork due to school closures. All respondents were affected in one way or the other by one or more of the sub-themes arising from the main theme.

Of the 10 respondents in South Africa, seven had young children/adolescents with them at the time of the lockdown in 2020. They all reported that the school closures and the abrupt withdrawal of their support structures, such as day-care facilities and home-care services, greatly affected their ability to engage in research work. They contended that having to learn new methods of online learning and teaching, online assessments, and the preparation of online teaching materials left them with little or no time to engage in research. Some respondents equally reported that they had to care for their parents and other family members during this time. Hence, they were emotionally, physically, and mentally stressed and unable to engage in research activities.

According to a respondent:

Preparing online lecture materials, online assessments, and taking care of my children and other domestic work at home left me with very little time to conduct research or write for publication. I also had to give my devices very often to my children to attend their online classrooms as we did not have enough computers at home for each child (RSA3).

The Nigerian respondents equally reported that the lockdown affected their research productivity in negative ways.

I was too preoccupied with learning the new technology of using the online systems of teaching, learning and assessment for my undergraduate students and hardly had time to engage in research and publications (NGN4).

Theme Three (T3): The 'publish or perish' phenomenon and its impact on female academics.

T3 aimed to investigate female academics' perceptions of the 'publish or perish' phenomenon. Most respondents to this theme indicated that they did not mind the publish aspect of the phenomena as they believed that it was part of being an academic. However, they were quite unhappy and unappreciative of the perish aspect of the phenomenon, particularly during the era of the global pandemic.

According to a South African respondent:

I think academics should be recognized and rewarded for their work in all spheres of academia, not only research and publications. I personally love to teach, I love getting students to develop projects and ideas which could be commercialised and patented, why can I not be recognized for that which I love, and which is also part of academia, and which is very hard work and takes a lot of ingenuity to achieve (RSA5)?

The Nigerian counterparts on this theme equally lamented the reasons why research publications, and in particular the quantity thereof, constituted the primary consideration of university promotions committees. According to NGN 8: “Nobody considers the quality of the research publication, but rather the quantity only”.

Conclusion/Recommendation

The paper investigated the barriers to academic advancement faced by many female academics in Nigeria and South Africa, as well as how these barriers had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. Furthermore, the study investigated how the ‘publish or perish’ concept affected the promotion of many female academics during and after the lockdown period. The failure of HEIs to recognise the challenges that female academics faced was brought to light and highlighted. Findings indicated that female academics were largely academically unproductive because they could not engage in research activities due to domestic/familial obligations during the lockdown.

Further, on the issue of the ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon, most female academics were appreciative of the fact that all academics should produce publishable research outputs. However, they argued that the perish component of the phenomenon was inhumane and needed to be discarded. Respondents from Nigeria contended that the requirements of academics to attend national (also called onshore) and international (also called offshore) conferences, as well as contribute to onshore and offshore publications for career progression were stressful as the scholars were unable to write for or access research grants during the pandemic. Additionally, the travel bans imposed by host nations also prevented international travel for conferences. They equally noted that, although many international and national conferences were online during the lockdown period, the access to a stable network connection was lost.

The study recommends that HEIs in Africa should reconsider how their policies impact women’s careers and progression and should adopt measures to assist, encourage, and support female academic progression. Government agencies, ministries, and departments in charge of HEIs in

Africa should work in collaboration with women academics and HEI management to ensure that women are accorded full representation in the higher echelons of leadership in HEIs and are able to articulate issues that affect women without the fear of being ostracised or disparaged for their views.

Below are recommendations derived from extant literature and the findings of this study in relation to how HEIs could assist female academics' progression.

- Universities need to become more flexible and understanding towards women when dealing with promotional application cases in the post COVID-19 era.
- Women in academia should be recognised for the additional non-SNA work they have had to undertake, particularly during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and in their careers as academics (Walters *et al.*, 2022).
- Institutional cultures where most leadership roles are dominated by men need to change, and university senates and councils should reserve a certain percentage of participation or representation for women.
- HEIs should interrogate and expunge all sexist and patriarchal traditions, beliefs, and practices that exclude and alienate women, and introduce measures aimed at developing cultures that are inclusive, sensitive, and proactive.
- Female academics should be recognised for other academic roles, and they should be encouraged and supported to publish. However, their career progression should not be halted or terminated (perish) due to an inability to publish.
- Higher Education Institutions need to ensure that promotion criteria and performance appraisal systems are clearly spelt out and implemented in a fair, consistent, and transparent manner, taking into consideration differentiated performance and recognising the added responsibilities that women academics are confronted with (DHET, 2019).
- Changes in policy: the 'shifting of goalposts' should be implemented in an objective and transparent manner, taking into consideration the possible impact of these changes on female academics' progression.
- The issue of being burdened with heavy teaching and assessment workloads should be investigated, and modalities for revising them should be considered. Women should be encouraged to engage in research and publications and be given a commensurate teaching workload that would allow such to happen.

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