



A Critical Literature Review On Common Challenges Encountered By Women Leaders In Academia: Insights From Higher Education Institutions In South Africa

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Abstract: The obvious underrepresentation of women in leadership posts in South African Higher Education Institutions sparked this study. The objective of the study was to uncover the embedded challenges that women encounter when occupying leadership roles in such institutions. A critical review of the literature was conducted to provide contextual insight. A web-based survey with strategic themes, coupled with interviews, brought about findings faced by women academics in their leadership roles.

A substantial number of respondents in this qualitative study were from previously disadvantaged groups of society and were actively engaged in leadership careers in Higher Education Institutions during the time of the survey. The study revealed a lack of mentorship opportunities, the undervaluing of skills and capabilities, and a lack of work-life balance as critical challenges encountered by women in leadership roles at Higher Education Institutions. It was recommended that the Higher Education sector should close the gender parity gap and prepare women consciously for such roles.

Keywords: Gender equity, leadership roles, mentorship, skills, Higher Education Institutions

1 Introduction

The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) is the oldest index capable of tracking progress on gender-based disparities. According to this index, the representation of women in professional leadership roles constitutes a major gap globally [1]. South African history reveals that, prior to 1994, the representation of women in professional leadership roles was almost non-existent [2]. Under the previous regime, it was an acceptable norm for women not to work or to hold senior positions at work (Shermain 2008). In the new democratic dispensation, the government developed a legislative framework aimed at

ensuring fair promotion and practice in the workplace. These include the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa [Act No.108 of 1996], and affirmative action in the Employment Equity [Act No.55 of 1998]. The knock-on effects of racial and gender discrimination, which were prevalent during the apartheid era, are still evident in modern-day South Africa, especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Khumalo and Zhou [3] indicate that in comparison to the past, the percentage of women who have risen to positions of leadership in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has increased over time, however, there is still a huge gap between women and their male counterparts. Kuagbedzi et al. [4] agree with Khumalo and Zhou, contending that the number of men occupying senior positions in most universities worldwide remains exceptionally high.

An illustrative situation in South Africa is that, out of 26 universities, only five are led by women vice-chancellors [4]. This gross underrepresentation of women in South African academic institutions extends further into other academic fields, women make up around 18.5% of professors and 29.8% of associate professors. Despite having a solid publication record and superior qualifications, women academics are underrepresented [5]. This inconsistency can also be observed in terms of remuneration levels, where remuneration scales for women are less compared to those of their male counterparts [6].

This study hypothesises gender equity at the leadership level is a crucial element for the attainment of a sustainable quality higher education. The persistent underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of South African HEI has prompted the researchers' interest in the study and the quest to investigate the barriers facing women leaders in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. The objective of the study was not only to identify and investigate such challenges and barriers but also to recommend workable solutions. It is envisioned that the application of these solutions against the findings will aid in improving the much-needed fair representation of women in Higher Education, while simultaneously enhancing sustainable quality education in the country.

2 Literature Review

In addition to the existing legislative framework in dealing with past injustices, certain programmes in South Africa are also in place to empower women in leadership positions, particularly women in academic leadership. This article reviews challenges encountered by women in HEIs in South Africa; however, it is critical to demonstrate that, despite all of the obstacles, there are also opportunities available.

2.1 Leadership and women in higher education

Mokhele [7] identified HEIs as one of the institutions in need of gender transformation in the new democratic system disparity. The research by Walker [8] and Albertus [9] on academic leadership recognise government policy advances and the commitment of South African institutions to implementing and upgrading gender equity programs. Mazibuko [10] claims that the government, governing bodies, and administration in HEIs have had to deal with diverse sources of authority, decentralized structures, limited resources, and competing goals.

2.2 Leadership styles and effectiveness

Vyas-Doorgapersad and Bangani [11] define leadership as a process by which individuals or groups are influenced and persuaded to pursue particular visions and goals held by the leader. This means that leaders influence others in driving towards achieving an organisational or institutional vision. Career pathing ranks within HEI faculties, colleges, senate and council, and executive management, Power centres are examples. While there has been tremendous restructuring over time, traces of past prejudices remain [6, 10, 11]. In terms of academic career advancement, these designations continue to act against Black African women.

2.3 Common challenges experienced by women in academic leadership

In reflecting on women in leadership experiences, Al Naqbi [14] and Keohane [15] state that, in some countries, while women are now more visible in leadership roles than ever before, they continue to face significant obstacles. Such obstacles include work-life balance. This is a struggle to balance work and family responsibilities. In some

instances, Women have the challenge of being largely responsible for childcare and homemaking, as well as a lack of family-friendly policies and gender stereotypes.

Al Naqbi further reveals that, in countries like the USA, women still face gender bias, discrimination, maltreatment or not being taken seriously. Tshipani [16] identifies challenges faced by women in leadership positions at Higher Education Institutions, not only in South Africa but also around the world. For instance, in Chinese culture, women are supposed to play a supportive role for their family and this often makes them invisible. In Saudi Arabia, women in leadership are faced with various social, religious and organisational challenges, lack of technical empowerment and the effect of the guardianship policy. This policy forces women to ask for permission from a male, usually their husband or father, to travel or to work. This has an impact on those women in leadership positions at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). However, the reform of the Personal Status Law in 2022 on International Women's Day was a call to Saudi Arabian authorities to end discrimination against women and to dismantle the guardianship system fully [17]. In the Republic of Maldives, a study by Waheeda and Nishan [18] on women leaders in higher education presents findings on challenges such as heavy workloads, lack of opportunities for career development, their voices not being heard, and a lack of support.

In African countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, women in academic leadership have been facing challenges which, most of the time, stem from several cultural issues [16]. In Ethiopia, recent policy initiatives including international initiatives on gender equality in HEIs are believed to have improved the situation. However, a recent study undertaken on gender and leadership at the University of Addis Ababa found that women are still facing barriers that affect their participation in leadership positions and that these include social and institutional barriers [19]. South Africa is no exception; yet, the establishment and implementation of certain policies were responses to the situation. In a study by Zitha and Lumadi [20], it was discovered that in South African schools, women leaders experience issues related to cultural challenges, structural challenges, and social challenges. Robertson et al. [21], in their research about women and leadership, agree with Zitha and Lumadi and mention hierarchical organisational

structure as one of the challenges or contributing factors to the difficulties that women leaders in workplaces. They are of the view that a hierarchical organisational culture can create an environment in which gender variances make women feel out of place and may even lead to women stepping down or leaving the position. With a specific focus on the education sector, [22] and [23] found that the policies and processes deployed in the sector often emerge as obstacles for women seeking to assume leadership and management positions. Another factor is the unavailability of structured human resources policies and strategies addressing women workers [20]. However, [11] views the disregard of women leaders in the education sector as a by-product of organisational attitude rather than as the existence of differences in the characters of males and females. [24] is of the same view and asserts that the challenges faced by women leaders are usually embedded in the culture of organisations.

2.4 Opportunities for women in academic leadership

According to [15], the opening of Higher Education Institutions for women has led to more women being visible in positions of leadership than previously. This has been part of the democratic government's transformational goal in South Africa. [25] feels that in order for women to take on senior leadership roles more effectively, women must not only cope with and compete in patriarchal systems but also be equipped. Regardless of the problems that researchers around the world continue to face, improvements have been made that have resulted in specific opportunities for women in academic leadership. In a study undertaken at the University of Limerick, it is shared that the starting point was the use of the gap analysis, action plans, and integrated policy and practice changes, the Athena Swan Charter serves as a framework to support and transform gender equality across the organization. Following the usage of the Charter, practical steps such as staff-tailored development activities, such as skills to influence, convince, and empower, were implemented., mentor and coach women in academic and professional support roles. Moreover, research grants and dedicated staff support networks were developed to enhance women's career opportunities, including progression and promotion successes [26].

Similar situations are found in South Africa to those mentioned above. Examples include the launching of the Female Academic Leadership Fellowship (FALF) by the Wits University Vice-Chancellor, as part of the university's role in the transformational agenda in higher education [27]. The programme creates opportunities to enable Women to be exposed to leadership training programs as they advance in their academic careers. The ultimate goal is to gain representation in the professoriate and higher levels of academic administration. In some cases, universities are even offering programmes to empower women, for example, the University of Johannesburg Women's Leadership Development Programme. Some of the expected outcomes of this programme are: (i) to broaden the awareness and understanding of management and leadership in an emerging market within the education sector; (ii) to enhance the personal leadership skills of senior women leaders; and (iii) to create a coaching and mentorship practice amongst senior women leaders [28].

Moreover, research reveals that there are systems in place in support of women in general and specifically of those in leadership. For instance, HERS-SA stands for Higher Education Resource Services South Africa. This is an organization dedicated to boosting women's advancement in higher education. It is a non-profit organization (NPO) founded in South Africa in 2003 to provide mentorship, networking, and training to women pursuing career advancement. Another curriculum is Higher Education and Leadership and Management (HELM). This is a collaboration between the University South Africa (USAf) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). It provides strategic insight to top management into the specific challenges that exist in South Africa's ever-changing higher education sector. Furthermore, HELM has launched a six-month program for women called Women in Leadership (WiL). This curriculum recognizes the importance of gender equity.

In conclusion, the study finds that women in leadership positions around the globe face similar challenges. Such challenges are commonly related to cultural or religious, social, structural or organisational issues. In some cases, these challenges are influenced by factors such as gender stereotypes. As part of the transformational agenda globally, some developments have been achieved in institutions of higher learning through various programmes introduced both at national and institutional levels. Researchers

believe that programmes such as HERS-SA, and HELM (with its sub-project WiL) have resulted in specific opportunities for Women in academic leadership are underrepresented, particularly in South Africa. Continuous research into new programs or tactics to ensure that women are in positions of academic leadership can function successfully with fewer or no challenges should be carried out to ensure a transformed Higher Education sector in South Africa with a full representation of women in leadership positions.

3. Research Methodology

A critical review of literature as well as purposive sampling were employed as research instruments for this study. Through the critical literature review, an analysis and evaluation were conducted by the authors of sources relating to the study. According to [29], a literature review should stimulate the assumptions of an argument to evaluate content critically [30]. The critical literature review offers more of a reflection and critique of the concept in question, by making connections between sources as well as by comparing and contrasting sources. This methodology provided an overview of the body of work undertaken by other researchers on the same topic.

In using a purposive sampling technique, the researcher has a specific purpose or objective in mind when selecting the sample. [31] is of the view that purposive sampling should involve purposefully selecting participants because the researcher believes that they might contribute something to the analysis. [32] Describes a purposive sample as a non-probability sample chosen based on demographic characteristics and the study's purpose. Purposive sampling differs from convenience sampling in this regard and is also known as selective, judgmental, or subjective sampling.

The sample selection was based on the characteristics or attributes that the researcher is interested in studying. The sample selection was premised on the subjective ideas of participants that were critical in analysing the barriers to and enablers of fair representation of women in academic leadership posts at South African HEIs.

In line with the objective of this study, the researchers prepared a web-based questionnaire with research specific themes and disseminated it to women respondents who are holding leadership roles at various academic institutions in South Africa. Respondents were concurrently interviewed in line with the theme content.

4. Findings

Studies from 2019–2023 [15, 33] attest to the fact that women occupying leadership positions in academic circles globally are still faced with gender parity challenges. Such challenges range from cultural, organisational, and other factors like work-life balance, and lack of support, among others. A qualitative analysis of the findings from a short survey questionnaire using a sample of 12 female academics in various leadership positions from different institutions of higher learning in South Africa is presented below, according to different themes.

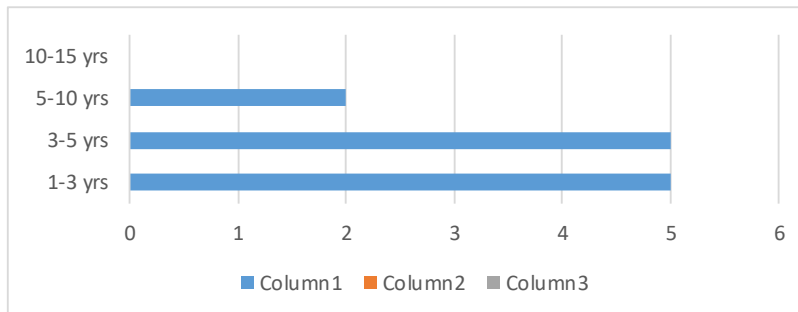


Figure 1. Duration of the position

A noteworthy finding in Fig. 1 is that most women in leadership positions have occupied those positions for a period of less than five years. This occupancy rate is less than a decade showing a glaring lack of historical reference. [34] made a similar observation when he pointed out that the tendency in South African universities is that centres of power diversify and express themselves through influential male groupings, pockets of resistance amongst academics, which favour racial or former institutions (old boys' club).

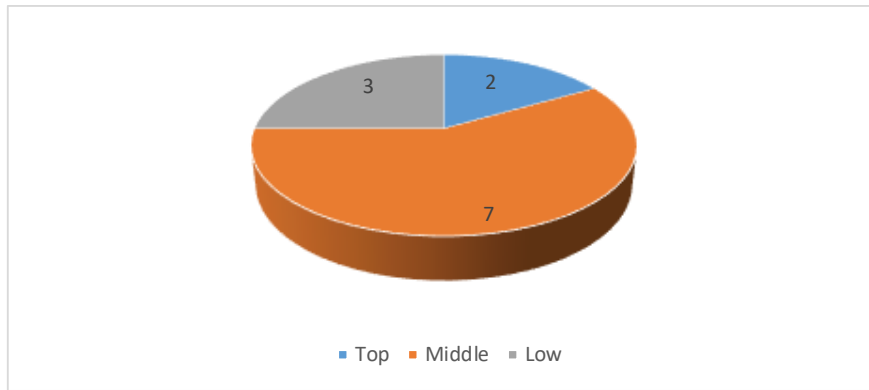


Figure 2. Management levels

The number of women in the top management level is still very low, while a substantial number of women occupy positions in middle management. Various researchers have raised concern about the imbalance in the number of male and female permanent academic staff, with certain schools of thought seeing limiting women's advancement as a cultural barrier [35, 36].

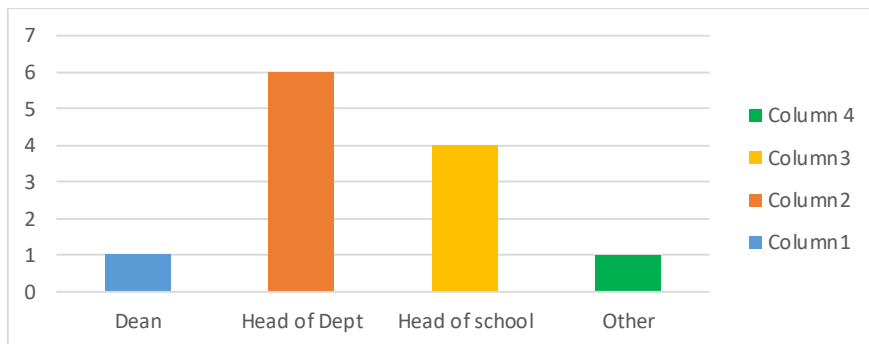


Figure 3. Leadership roles

Fig. 3 reveals that more women are likely to be heads of department as opposed to being heads of school, which is a senior management position. This correlates with a widely held view that women tend to occupy middle-management positions, more than senior/top management positions. [37] concur with this view and it has been pointed out that women in higher education are stuck in middle management, and that their visibility is significantly larger in the lower ranks of academia.

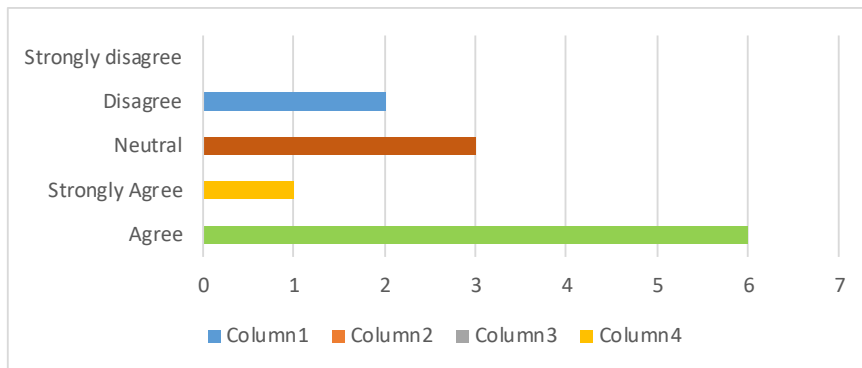


Figure 4. Conducive working environment

According to Fig.4, most respondents concurred that a conducive work environment that is enabling and is free of toxicity is essential for women to thrive and to maximise their potential in any leadership position they occupy.

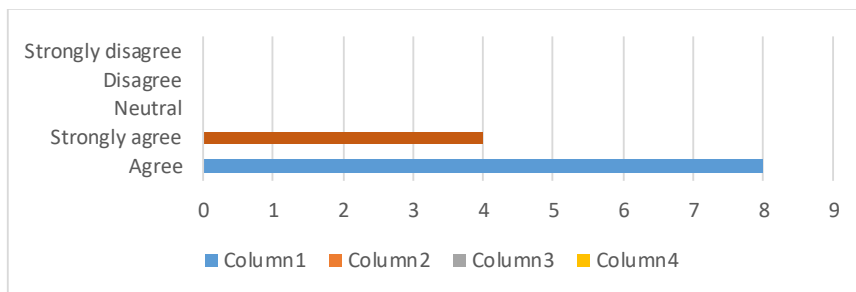


Figure 5. Improvement on gender equality

All of the respondents appreciate the strides and initiatives executed in support of gender equality. Conversely, respondents acknowledged the slow pace at which such initiatives are applied.

While the country has policies in place to ensure gender equity and redress, there are fewer monitoring mechanisms in place to supervise gender equity implementation in

institutions of higher learning [38]. Despite the fact that South Africa's Employment Equity Act [No.55 of 1998] establishes the compliance standards for employment at South African universities, [9] and [39] argue that anomalies in recruiting processes continue to harm gender representation. A transparent recruitment process, in line with the Employment Equity Act, would promote equal representation of women in South African universities.

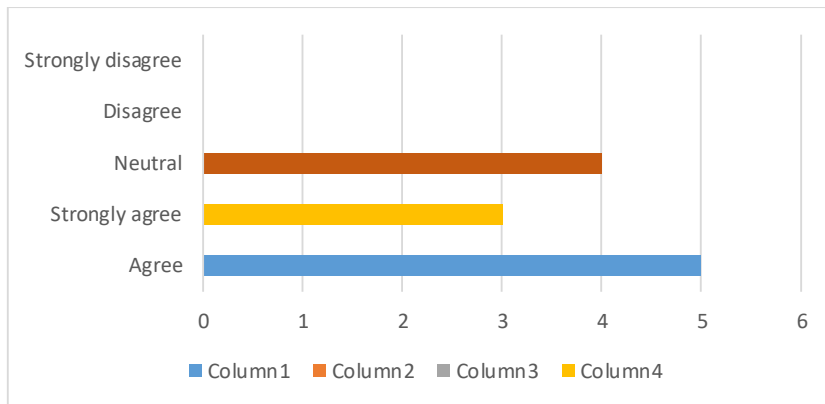


Figure 6. Leadership recognition

Most women possess leadership qualities that allow them to be recognised in their institutions of employment. Half of the respondents were neutral on the matter, citing being overlooked by employers despite their capacity to lead. This was often evident when they were due for promotion.

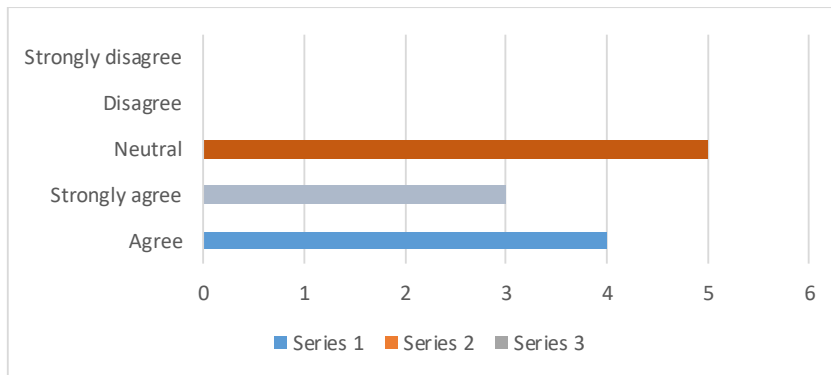


Figure 7. Flexible hours

Fig. 7 illustrates that most of the respondents have flexible working hours, which creates a conducive work environment, lessens the workload, and minimises work-related stress while promoting job satisfaction.

The following themes indicate respondents' feedback on essential success criteria for sustaining women's effectiveness in academic leadership positions.

Theme 1: First-hand experiences during your leadership period

Respondents indicated that they experienced tremendous pressure, heavy workload, limited resources, inadequate support from the top manager as well as high and often unrealistic expectations from senior managers.

Theme 2: Access to support/mentorship

Respondents expressed a fundamental lack of mentorship and capacity-building programmes. Of the sample researched, only one respondent confirmed having received mentorship through Higher Education Resource Service South Africa (HERS-SA). Gender-empowerment programs and mentorship workshops for ambitious female academics in South African institutions could create beneficial platforms for women's inclusion [32, 33].

Theme 3: Suggested improvements for women leaders in the South African Higher Education sector

All responses related to the need for more training, coaching and mentoring programmes. A well-defined career path is needed for women aspiring to senior positions in the higher education sector.

Theme 4: Prejudice experienced based on gender

No instances of gender prejudice were revealed by any of the participants.

Theme 5: Balance between professional responsibilities and personal life in a leadership position in the Higher Education sector

Most of the respondents complained about being overwhelmed, owing to a lack of balance between demanding managerial tasks and domestic responsibilities. This imbalance often culminates in situations where respondents work under constant pressure to the point that they experience burnout resulting in poor work performance. According to [15], women holding managerial positions are more likely than men to take a knock in their careers so that they can take care of their families.

Theme 6: Support given to other women in a leadership position.

There are few woman-driven platforms/support groups that are helping to empower other women in leadership roles. Only 20% of the respondents confirmed having acquired assistance from other women in terms of coaching, mentorship, and broad support. This evidence points to a serious lack of support even among peers who are in the same leadership roles.

Theme 7: Challenges in your current leadership role

Burnout, a constant imbalance between family and work, and lack of leisure time.

Theme 8: Existing initiatives that are designed to support women leaders in your institution

Lack of intentional, consistent, and organised systems in the workplace for capacitating women in leadership positions. The meetings or workshops that take place are often done on an ad hoc basis.

Institutional structural weaknesses have made it difficult to sustain gender equality and provide platforms that encourage women's inclusiveness and engagement [34, 35]. As a result, women must exert greater effort to overcome the hurdles and address the issues that contribute to gender disparities in academic positions in South African universities.

Theme 9: Proposed changes that will help to empower women in their leadership roles in the Higher Education sector

Top management should invest in coaching, the construction of vital networks and executive leadership development programmes which are bottom-up in nature and tailor-made for women in Higher Education Institutions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has uncovered a distinct shortage of mentorship opportunities for women in leadership careers. This poses an impediment to their career progression in the Higher Education sector. The inability of the Higher Education sector to create sustainable mentoring support systems for women is, in fact, setting them up for failure in their leadership roles. Women are innately wired to juggle multiple tasks in society, at work and at home. This requires a serious balancing act; otherwise, it could indicate a major breaking point for women in leadership careers. This breaking point can involve, among other things, working under pressure for long hours and extensive travelling on official trips, where much time is spent away from the family. Another glaring observation was an institutionalised culture which is not supportive of women in leadership careers. This was evident in policies and practices. If women are to thrive and excel in such roles, the institution's culture, which is embedded in policies and practices, must reflect a supportive and balanced work ethos which affords equal opportunities for women's career progression. The study has also unveiled a subtle tendency to undervalue women's skills and capabilities to the point where they are overlooked when the time for promotion comes. It is worth noting that women bring essential skill sets to their workplace. If such skills are treated with the dignity they deserve, they will help to build cooperative, inclusive and high-performance teams which can promote excellence in the workplace.

In addition to the above, women are naturally innovative, creative and able to empathise. This virtue inevitably qualifies them as relationship builders who are catalysts of collaboration adding value to the empathetic leadership smartness of the institution. Through their innovational abilities women leaders can add value by bringing a different viewpoint to multifaceted official tasks and assignments. It is very possible to bridge the gender gaps which are plaguing the Higher Education sector, but it all begins with equipping women consciously for such roles.

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