EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiences of female deans in South African universities: A phenomenological study

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Abstract: A democratic South Africa guarantees equality to all regardless of gender, religion, beliefs, and race. However, leadership status of women in general is still suffering as there is unequal representation in leadership positions between men and women in institutions of higher learning. This phenomenological study sought to understand the female faculty dean’s lived experiences and challenges they face in institutions of higher learning. An interview guide was used to collect data from the six female faculty deans in three universities in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa. Thereafter, a thematic analysis was applied. Analysis of interview data revealed that selection process, gender stereotypes, lack of support, networking and mentors are the challenges that women face in becoming leaders in South African university. Personal development, provision of support, networking platforms, mentoring programmes and research were recommended by the participants to be effective strategies for overcoming the challenges they face.

Subjects: Higher Education; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Sustainability Education, Training & Leadership

Keywords: Advancement; barriers in leadership; faculty deans; higher education leadership; women leaders

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Gender disparities are a norm in various African states due to a multitude of reasons that includes cultural belief and values. These values are inherently stubborn and at times are hard to eradicate. In the twenty-first century women are still fighting for emancipation and recognition in various places. This study focused on women in leadership position in universities. It was found that female deans are still struggling to have support as their male counterparts who occupy the same position. The support can be both material and immaterial; however, males in leadership position have a lot of resources. These findings show that we have a long way to go to bridge the divide between the two genders in the labour market.

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1. Introduction
The problem of underrepresentation of women in top management positions continues to exist in the South African higher education sector. This underrepresentation is an indication that women still encounter obstacles and challenges that result in them taking on fewer leadership positions than their male counterparts (Eustachio et al., 2020). Today, few women are found to be in leadership roles in the South African higher education sector. Such a picture shows that even a celebrated democracy like South Africa is still far from obtaining gender equality, especially in higher leadership positions (Naidu, 2018). In addition, regardless of the increase of women in positions such as deanship, it has not fundamentally resulted in changes in other higher management positions (D. Person et al., 2014). For example, Naidu (2018) points that out of South Africa’s 26 universities, only five were led by female vice chancellors. Investigating the status quo with regard to the challenges and constraints experienced by women leaders in South African higher education institutions can provide insights to understanding the lived experiences of these women. Further it can provide strategies that may help stakeholders to strengthen the role of women in South African higher education sector.

Leadership is both contextual and situational (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). The rise of academic meritocracy is a huge step back for the aspiring female leaders in institutions of higher learning. While studies conducted by Alsubaie and Jones (2017), Alghofaily (2019), Shava and Chasokela (2020), and Eustachio et al. (2020) established that women have distinct leadership traits and skills in leading especially in educational institutions, they face certain difficulties and challenges that impede their leadership effectiveness. Some scholars argue that further investigations is needed to ascertain what enhances or hinders women's access to leadership positions. While numerous studies have a western centric focus, the popularising of this discourse that relate to women in leadership fails to take into cognisant class-based differences such race and belief systems. Suggesting that women are treated as a homogenous group who subscribe to a set of values or factors. Such type of research has been classified, constructed and theorised from a western hegemonic perspective. Western leadership practices orchestrate women in developing countries by silencing and marginalising them. Therefore, more diverse perspectives from developing countries contribute to the growing discourse about women representation in higher leadership positions in universities.

This study aims to bridge the knowledge gap in the lack of female leadership in the higher education sector in the Southern Africa context. This study draws motivation from the paradigm shift that is currently taking place in numerous South African universities, were females are in apex leadership positions such as Vice Chancellors, Head of Departments and Deans. This drive by universities to have a balanced representation of females in management level is still in its infancy. The government has advocated for a fair selection process regardless of gender through women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill and Employment Equity Act, 1998 (act 55 of 1998). As a result, the current study provides an insight on how female deans lived experiences are shaped by their surroundings. This is a new avenue in the gender research, especially in the sub-Saharan region where patriarch is the order of the day in workplace. Nowadays, approaches are expanding to include more plural and inclusive forms of leadership (Wijaya Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2020). Consequently, the study objective is to identify the barriers that impede women in leadership positions in selected institutions of higher learning.

The rest of the article is organised as follows: section 2 focuses on literature review; section 3 provides the methods and materials used in the study; section 4 provides a discussion of results. Lastly, section 5 concludes the study.

2. Literature review
There are a number of barriers that impedes women’s progression to leadership positions in institutions of higher education. These barriers include selection processes, organisational culture, workplace relationships, globalisation, management styles, internal motivation, lifestyle conflicts and gender stereotyping (Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017).
2.1. Selection process

The selection process within an institution is a common barrier to career advancement. When selecting or considering candidates for management positions, regardless of one's qualifications, organisations tend to be biased towards masculine qualities that naturally favour men over women (DeFrank-Cole et al., 2016). This is the reason, despite government efforts to create an environment that is conducive of fair recruitment, women continue to be underrepresented in top management positions in South African universities. Few women are selected for top management position in the Higher Education sector (Kele & Pietersen, 2015). It is argued that the pool of women that are qualified for promotion to executive positions is quite small and therefore women chances of getting promoted are slim. Contrastingly, another study found that universities have a large pool of qualified women and they are simply not considered for top position (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). For instance, in South Africa, the majority (52%) of students enrolled in universities are females. While females make the largest proportion of students in universities, this does not translate to more females in leadership. Alsubaie and Jones (2017) study found that universities have a large pool of qualified women and they are simply not considered for top position. Another rationale is that since majority of existing top management positions in universities are held by men, those men in top positions tend to promote other men who are similar to themselves (Hannum et al., 2015).

2.2. Organisational culture

Organisational culture is another barrier that impedes women from occupying top management positions within South African universities. Moorosi (2019) asserts that challenges faced by women leaders are usually embedded in the culture of organisations. Many organisational cultures are shaped by men’s views of what an effective manager should be like. In addition, Eddy et al. (2017) notes that, because most universities are dominated by men in terms of power and influence, cultures prevailing in the institutions tend to exhibit attributes which favour men. As such, structural barriers within organisations that prevent women from entering top management positions in universities are entrenched in cultural practices. Social and work relations in most African countries are governed by traditional patriarchal structures (K. Person et al., 2016). Another barrier that hinders women from assuming top management positions in universities is workplace relations. These relationships can be with bosses, mentors, and female co-workers. According to Pereira (2014) most employees tend to bond through similar interests. Since historically men occupy much of top management positions in universities, there tend to be few executive women thus many women are unable to find a female mentor to prepare them for top management positions. Many people prefer to have mentors of the same gender because they tend to understand the gender-specific challenges faced. The needs of women from their mentors also tend to differ from the needs of men (Searby et al., 2015). On the other hand, male mentors tend to be resistant to mentoring a woman because they perceive women as more emotional, not as skilled at problem-solving, and because of the risk of workplace sexual harassment issues (Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

2.3. Managerial styles

Differences in management styles between men and women pose threats to women’s aspirations to get in top management positions within universities and other organisations. In a study to investigate the glass ceiling phenomenon in the promotion of women’s abilities in organizations, Omran et al. (2015) established that 96 per cent of female managers indicated that application of male management style is an effective factor in the promotion of women into top management positions. This demotivates women from taking up leadership positions. More often, women are forced to accept masculine culture and environment and deal with a phenomenon called masculine management style (Read & Kehm, 2016). As a result, women fail to execute the male biased masculine management style leading to them not get selected or appointed to top management positions. It is widely acknowledged that existing management styles in universities is dominated by male methods and characteristics, yet females have their own unique leadership characteristics, hence the scarcity of women in leadership positions (Gallant, 2014; Zhao & Jones, 2017). For
instance, in a male leadership dominated universities the leadership is usually authoritarian with little democracy. Where the Vice Chancellor has a huge influence on who is recruited and who gets fired. This on its own contributes to a lack of motivation among women who know that promotion chances are minimum. Lack of internal motivation has been noted as a barrier to women’s desire to occupy top positions. Women often lose internal motivation due to obstacles that they encounter in their efforts to occupy top positions. These obstacles include discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, family demands, and lack of opportunities (Emory, 2008; Glass & Cook, 2016; Tan & DeFrank-Cole, 2018).

2.4. Conflicts
Another barrier that has been identified as contributing to the scarcity of women in top management are lifestyle conflicts. This barrier is also referred to as work–family conflict and it is worsened by the clash between women’s family and work responsibilities (Lathobhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017). As the time constraints and demands of a job become more important upon promotion, many women are forced to choose between family and career and studies have shown that women tend to choose their families. According to Sahoo and Lenka (2016), lifestyle conflict or work–family conflict negatively affects women’s flexibility, yet flexibility is considered to be a key factor that has a bearing on effective management.

2.5. Gender stereotypes
Gender stereotypes are ranked as the biggest challenge that women face in their quest to be top management office bearers. Gender stereotypes in society have led to the formation of normative beliefs about the different roles expected to be performed by men and women (Katuna, 2014). The lineage of these dogmas may be attributed to the sexual division of labor in society (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Gender stereotype is described as an kind of thinking that views all women as a weaker gender in numerous facets (Glass & Cook, 2016; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016). Gender stereotypes in society have led to the formation of normative beliefs about the distinct roles expected to be performed by men and women (Katuna, 2014). The lineage of these normative dogmas may be attributed to the sexual division of labor in society. Gender discrimination at the workplace can normally be traced back to old patriarch values that shaped many societies. Modern and industrial life, just like in its prior times, have reshaped the social roles and these have impacted people differently (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

2.6. Mentors
Lack of mentors has also been identified as an impediment to the participation of women in top management leadership in higher education institutions. Smith Mckoy et al. (2018) state that men who dominate higher education top management are reluctant to mentor women. This demonstrates that there is a need for mentoring for women as this will help prepare them for top management leadership. Reeves (2015) found that the scarcity of women in top management positions within higher education institutions is a result of women’s attitudes, psychological attributes, organisational and socio-cultural issues. These negatively affect women’s ambitions; hence, there is need for adequate support from the experienced to increase self-determination, self-efficacy and aspirations so as to make them feel motivated to rise to top management positions (Smith Mckoy et al., 2018).

2.7. Progress in representation of women
Despite the enactment of various laws and statutes, women continue to be underrepresented in positions of power and influence. Considering this, researchers and authorities have been considering strategies that can be employed to overcome challenges faced by women (Sahoo & Lenka, 2016). Perhaps, this suggests that legislation and statutes alone are not enough to solve the current imbalances between the number of men and women in positions of power and influence. Capacity building, as a leadership building programme, remains at the forefront of preparing and supporting women in the initial stages of their academic careers as well as preparing them to advance to top management positions (Redmond et al., 2016). Literature is awash with examples
of countries in which capacity-building programmes, designed to spearhead the development of female academics, were implemented and yielded positive results. For instance, the University Grants Commission in India undertakes development initiatives aimed at equipping women with higher education leadership skills. In the United States of America, the Office of Women in Higher Education’s Inclusive Excellence Group and Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) provide leadership development opportunities for women faculty and administrators (Katuna, 2014). Additionally, in Norway, The Norwegian Programme for Capacity Building in Higher Education and Research for Development reflects on leadership attributes and on strategies to enhance and use them effectively. In the context of South Africa, there is the New Generation of Academics Programme, which enables universities to recruit new academics into permanent posts from the outset and support them towards high-level performance (Naidu, 2018).

Among other strategies to overcome challenges faced by women who aspire to be leaders, research is earmarked to play a significant role in the eradication of all the factors that lead to scarcity of women in top management positions (Campos, 2016). A focused research agenda is important because it allows for the collection of data on gender statistics in higher education leadership roles in South Africa. It would also help define a parameter to monitor and interpret growth patterns in terms of women in leadership roles.

According to Tan and DeFrank-Cole (2018) research facilitates the unearthing of “invisible” obstructions that hinder women from getting into top management positions. Through research, factors that facilitate or hamper women’s participation in top management roles in higher education can be explored systematically to construct a framework that is informed by empirical and theoretical underpinnings (Morley, 2014).

3. Materials and methods
The study used a descriptive phenomenological approach because only lived experiences of the female deans were of importance. A qualitative research approach was followed in exploring the challenges experienced by women in their efforts to become leaders within the South African higher education sector. A phenomenological research design in which six female faculty deans shared their experiences in relation to challenges they faced in becoming leaders enabled the researcher to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Data were collected using structured interviews and analyzed using the thematic data analysis technique. A purposive sampling method was used to select the participants who met the selection criteria devised for the study. Participants were women employed as a dean for more than 5 years in a university from the Eastern Cape.

3.1. Research site
The research was carried out at three universities in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. All three universities from which data was collected are characterised by dominance of men in as far as leadership and management positions are concerned. The interviewing process was carried out in a place where each participant felt comfortable answering the interview questions.

For this phenomenological case study, we used a participant face-to-face interview method. Phenomenology is an approach to explore people’s everyday life experience. It is used when the study is about the life experiences of a concept or phenomenon experienced by one or more individuals. A phenomenological researcher investigates subjective phenomena (Creswell, 2009). The decision and choice to use the phenomenological research design was based on its ability to allow more freedom during to participants during the interview to explore crux of their experiences (Groenewald, 2004). Since the research’s focus is to unearth the experiences of women in management in relation to glass ceiling in South African universities, phenomenological research design which allows for personal and participant expression of lived experiences was chosen.

The phenomenological research design is divided into two main branches which are identified as interpretive and descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology was developed by
Husserl (1931), a German philosopher, as a response against positivist views. Husserl defined individuals as connected meaningfully with everything else in the world (Vagle, 2014). Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology intended to identify the meaning of an individual’s lived experiences or to extract meaning from their everyday life. Husserl rejected the assumption that objects existed independently from the subject.

On the other hand, the interpretive phenomenology was developed by Heidegger in (1889), a follower of Husserl’s work, who broke away from the descriptive phenomenology (Pollio et al., 1997). Unlike Husserl, who argued that biases and preconceptions must be bracketed to isolate the lived experience of a phenomenon, Heidegger’s phenomenology was context bound (Barrow, 2017). To that end, the interpretive phenomenology rejects bracketing because arguing that the object cannot be separated from the subject’s interpretation of it (Groenewald, 2004). Instead, interpretive phenomenology emphasizes co-creation of interpretations between the researcher and participant because all humans share context, culture, and language (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This study follows the descriptive research methodology. Descriptive phenomenology involves the researcher reducing the lived-experience information into the phenomenological essences through bracketing, reflection, and data analysis (Vagle, 2014).

Case studies can help to examine an object, person, program, phenomenon or an organization or phenomenon (Miner-Romanoff, 2012). In the same vein, phenomenological case study defines the experience of a specific group of people in order to obtain the detailed reality of certain phenomena (Miner-Romanoff, 2012). It helps the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of intrinsic human experience from the participant’s perspective. Thus, the participant’s knowledge provides descriptive data, which helps in offering a firmer understanding of the participant’s life experience (Brannen, 2017). Experience of 5 years in working as faculty deans and being female qualified one to be a participant for this study. The research followed the interpretivist research paradigm (Creswell, 2014).

3.2. Participants
For this study, a combination of convenience and purposive sampling technique was adopted (Brannen, 2017). The participants were all deans currently working at universities located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The researchers chose deans because that is the highest position where females can rise in management. Beyond that it is quite hard to find females occupying positions higher than a dean. The participants had to be females and have five or more years working as faculty dean. Covid-19 rules such as social distance, wearing masks and sanitisation were observed during the interview process. The following pseudo names were used: Sihle, Sikho, Peace, Faith, Sivuno and Joy.

3.3. Data collection
Data was collected from May 2020 to July 2020. The whole interview process with each participant was formulated not to last more than an hour. The process included explaining the purpose of the study to the participant, notifying the participant of her right to continue or stop participating should she feel she is no longer comfortable. Questions probing for challenges faced by females in becoming leaders and suggestions for overcoming those challenges were posed to the participants. Furthermore, the interview focused on the lived experiences of the deans, that is, how do they lead or get led in an environment dominated by male bosses. The interviews focused also on other experiences beyond academics, like how they are treated beyond their office and so on. Responses provided by the participants were recorded using an electronic and then transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

3.4. Ethical considerations
To ensure that the research conformed to standard research ethics, participant anonymity was essential. This was achieved by using pseudo names instead of official identities of the participant. This ensures that responses are not linked to the participants. Furthermore, confidentiality, informed consent and voluntary participation were taken into consideration. This was achieved by providing participants with enough information to make an informed decision.
3.5. Data analysis and results
Data collected in this research was analysed using the thematic data analysis method to analyse the qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews. Creswell (2004) defines thematic analysis as a process of encoding qualitative information and the encoding requires an explicit code. The raw data was condensed into brief data formats that create understandable links between objectives of the research and the outcomes. Six steps were followed in analysing the data:

1. Familiarisation of data: this included transcription, reading and rereading material;
2. Generating of codes or systematic coding features to the research questions, and looking for connections; searching for themes and gathering codes relevant to text;
3. Reviewing of the themes to crosscheck suitability and creating a thematic map, naming and defining themes by generating clear definitions;
4. Lastly, producing a report by selecting relevant extracts of chosen themes and relating them to research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

These themes are discussed in the next section.

4. Findings
The research established that there are wide ranging challenges faced by women in becoming leaders within the South African higher education sector. These were identified from the lived experiences that were shared by six faculty deans from the Eastern Cape Province who took part in this research. Results collected from participants indicated that the following are the challenges faced by women to become leaders in South African universities.

4.1. Challenges

4.1.1. Selection Process
Two of the six women bemoaned the selection process for one to be appointed dean as being biased against women. This is seen in the response that was provided by Sihle who said:

I did face challenges. I feel that since majority of management positions in the higher education institutions are occupied by men, they often recruit men. It was not easy for me to get this position. I applied for deanship position for years to no avail until recently when I was appointed faculty dean.

Similarly, Peace lamented the selection processing citing the fact that it is dominated by men who appear to like everything going their way. In simple terms, she meant that man always find their way out in getting things at whatever cost.

The higher education sector leadership is dominated by males, and it seems like everything has to happen the men’s way to be acceptable. Selection processes and expected qualities of the leaders resemble a masculine figure which is not in me as a woman.

The results shown above concur with available literature which indicate that women often find themselves disadvantaged by selection processes that are mostly formulated by men. They ultimately fail to create a selection process that favours both genders (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

4.1.2. Work–Life Conflicts
Participants also identified work–life conflict as a challenge that they face as leaders. This challenge can be seen in the response provided by Sihle:

I must also add that balancing family roles and work responsibilities is a key challenge that can reduce one’s chances of being promoted to top management position.
Faith also indicated that she experienced challenges. She had this to say:

To be a leader one needs to be always available even beyond normal working hours. This is seen as a sign of greater commitment to one’s job. As a woman, a mother and a wife, this conflicts with work responsibilities.

Work–life conflict is a common challenge faced by women in leadership. This challenge is encountered when there are conflicts between work roles and responsibilities versus family roles and responsibilities, which are largely shouldered by women, especially in the African context (Tofloletti & Starr, 2016). This is corroborated by responses provided by three women who confessed experiencing difficulties balancing their roles as deans and their family duties.

Work–life conflict is a common challenge faced by women in leadership. This is a conflict between work roles and responsibilities versus family roles and responsibilities, which are shouldered by women, especially in the African context (Tofloletti & Starr, 2016). This is corroborated by responses provided by the two women who confessed experiencing difficulties in balancing their roles as deans and their family duties. While Joy had observed women struggling to strike a balance between family and work responsibilities, as a single person, she could be flexible with her time. Second, Joy was directly reporting to a female deputy vice chancellor and yet Faith and Sihle were both reporting to male deputy vice chancellor. Meaning that Joy may have established a healthy work relationship with her female boss without any gender and power issues, contrary to what was experienced by the other two women.

Sihle, aged 56 from Uhuru University had the following to say:

I must also add that balancing family roles and work responsibilities is a key challenge that can reduce one’s chances of being promoted to top management position. I have been having challenges balancing my motherly role with work responsibilities. Unplanned meetings jeopardise my family plans, as I have to be exemplary too, in instilling family values to my children.

4.1.3. Discrimination
Women from whom data was collected in this study confirmed that they have experienced discrimination and gender stereotyping. This is seen in the response provided by Sihle, who said that she had experienced negative perceptions about her leadership capabilities. She further mentioned that women are perceived as being weaker and ineffective leaders who have to work twice as hard to prove themselves. This is revealed in the response she gave as presented below:

And lastly, there are just these perceptions of women viewed as being weak and ineffective leaders who need to put more effort than men to be accepted as leaders. Sometimes in meetings your point is not given the same consideration as those from male counterparts.

Sivuno bemoaned experiencing gender stereotypes. She singled out instances where women get discouraged from taking up leadership positions due to gender. She also added that reporting to a male boss can be problematic, as he expects things to be done according to expectation rooted in masculinity. This she meant that an authoritarian sort of engagement happens, where she is expected to give feedback with less engagement. This is revealed in the response below where she said:

The major challenge that I faced, and which is still a challenge for most women in all sectors is gender stereotypes. When you share your desire to become a leader or when you become a leader, male colleagues give you all sorts of negative feedback that are not justified by any logical facts. Reporting to a male boss is also a challenge, as his expectations are grounded in masculinity.

Peace also confirmed that she experienced some challenges too. She, however, mentioned that the challenges are not visible for all to see, but only the results of the challenges are visible. In her own words, she said:
The big challenges I faced are not challenges that you can specifically isolate. They are not some written rules or anything but the environment itself. The higher education sector leadership is dominated by males, and it seems like everything has to happen the men’s way to be acceptable.

Five of the six women who took part in this study indicated that they have been discriminated against in one way or another. The discrimination and stereotypes include women’s contribution in meetings not getting the same consideration as their male counterparts, discouragement from male colleagues and being side-lined in making important decisions. This finding supports the assertion that gender discrimination is a challenge that women from all professional backgrounds continue to grapple with (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

4.1.4. Lack of support
The female deans also pointed out that they have experienced lack of support in different ways. This is revealed in the responses provided by the women as presented below.

Sivuno mentions that she did not have enough support from workmates and mentors to help her realise her dreams and goals:

Challenges that I experienced as a black woman in becoming a leader include racial discrimination, gender stereo types, lack of networks and relationship in the workplace to support my ascendency to the post of a dean in the higher education institution.

Peace pointed out that “lack of financial resources as well as lack of connections” were two significant challenges she experienced as a dean.

The women said that they lacked support in the form financial resources, mentors to encourage and guide them as well as networks where they can get support for their careers. Women have often cited lack of adequate support as an impediment to achieving leadership goals (Goryunova et al., 2017). This shows that despite various efforts by the international community and local government to support women, they still face lack of support at the workplace.

4.2. Strategies to overcome challenges faced by women
Women were also asked to share views on what should be done to overcome these challenges faced by women leaders in the higher education sector. A number of themes emerged from responses that were shared by the participants as presented below.

4.2.1. Mentoring
Three of the six women who took part in this study indicated that getting mentors or mentorship programs can help to overcome challenges that women in leadership experience. Sihle noted that finding a mentor to encourage and support her would help her overcome challenges she herself had experienced:

For me, finding mentors that encourage and support me has been helpful to overcome challenges that I face. A mentor would be someone who has experienced all the obstacles that I am fighting today, and a great deal of knowledge on how to handle certain issues that relates to leadership.

Mentoring is a method that has been identified to be useful in overcoming some of the leadership challenges that women face in the higher education sector (Grant, 2012). This intervention is important because it allows upcoming leaders to receive impartation of knowledge and skills from those that are already experienced.

4.2.2. Networking
Sihle said she has used networks to overcome challenges she has encountered. Networking has proven beneficial for women to gain knowledge, influence and social capital that enhances their
chances as leaders (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016). She said she networks with other female leaders holding various positions in academic institutions or other sectors. She stated:

I also network with other leaders who are leading in academic institutions and even in the other sectors, we share ideas and experiences and how we can better our plight as leaders in the academic fraternity.

4.2.3. Support
Two of the women who took part in this study revealed that having support also assists in overcoming challenges. Joy disclosed that family support helped her to overcome conflicts between work and family life. This is shown in her response:

Having a supportive family has enabled me to cope with challenges that relate to family-work conflicts.

Sivuno also said that support from other women has helped her deal with challenges she experiences:

Having support from other women has also helped me settle down well, and to ride the threat of challenges that I experience as a woman. However, this is not enough. A lot still needs to be done to overcome the challenges we face as women.

4.2.4. Personal development
Two women indicated that they have used personal development as means to overcoming challenges they experience. This is revealed in the response provided by Peace:

Furthering studies and attaining new skills has enabled me to minimise the impact of challenges that I experience as a leader. More skills and knowledge have, enabled me to understand the world around me and how to deal with issues that might arise. In addition, education has given me a chance to prove that what men can do, women can also do, thus, minimising discrimination against our gender.

Similarly, Sikho said that she has been helped by developing new capabilities:

Attending leadership workshops, seminars, and reading books about leadership has been helpful. In addition, I have been focused on getting appropriate skills and more relevant knowledge which has been very helpful. That created an opportunity for me to be judged not based on my gender but on what I am capable of.

5. Discussion of findings

5.1. Challenges
Drawing from the data presented, the selection process can hinder the progression of women to the management level in South African universities. The female deans who took part in this study outlined that, since top management in South African universities are largely manned by men, the selection criteria is crafted in a way that fits male candidates. The women also cited that selection processes and expected qualities of the leaders resemble a masculine figure, something that women do have. This concurs with available literature, which indicates that women often find themselves disadvantaged by selection processes that are mostly formulated by men, who fail to come up with a system-based strategy that favours both genders (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

The study also concludes that work-life conflicts hinder the progression of women into top management positions within South African universities. Due to demands of top management positions, women often end up choosing roles that enable them to balance work and family responsibilities. The women said that they consider the process of balancing family roles and
work responsibilities as a key challenge that can reduce one’s chances of being promoted. For example, the women said that they experienced challenges relating to work–life balance because they have been required to work beyond required hours as way of showing job commitment. However, this often conflicts with their roles as wives and mothers who subscribe to the cultural role of a woman at home. Furthermore, the finding that work–life conflict is a common challenge faced by women in leadership agrees with an existing study. The study revealed that the challenge of conflicts between work responsibilities versus family responsibilities largely shouldered by women, especially in the African context, is a hindrance to leadership ambitions (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016).

The research concludes that discrimination has been a further factor hindering the progression of women to top management positions in South African universities. Five of the six faculty deans who were interviewed experienced discrimination at one point in their efforts and endeavours to be in management positions. The discrimination included being seen as weak and ineffective just because of one’s gender. This resulted in women being required to prove their abilities twice as much as their male counterparts, lessening their chances of becoming leaders.

Women experience discouragement to an extent that they end up being reluctant to take leadership positions just because of their gender. The women shared that there were times they were discouraged by family, colleagues and friends from taking up the position of dean. The research also concludes that reporting to a male boss can be a fertile ground for discrimination. Based on what was stated by the deans, it is clear that they face discrimination in conducting their work due to various social construct issues such as gender roles or patriarch values or sexism. This is because female subordinates are expected by their male bosses to execute the role in a way that is rooted in masculinity.

Furthermore, women fail to progress to top positions because of racial discrimination. Racial discrimination as experienced by the women in this study had the effect of slowing down their advancement into the position of a dean. Due to the fact that leaders in South African universities are men, they tend to have power to influence what is seen as right or wrong, and this largely disadvantages women who harbour leadership aspirations. The conclusion is that women are discouraged from taking up leadership positions due to gender-based discrimination and to some extent racial discrimination. This corroborates with the findings of a research conducted by Gandhi and Sen (2020) where they concluded that gender discrimination is a challenge that women from all professional backgrounds continue to grapple with.

According to experiences of female faculty deans, lack of support from colleagues and mentors to prepare them for leadership roles posed challenges to their efforts to take leadership positions. A number of participants shared that a lack of networks and relationships in the workplace to support their ascendency to the post of a dean in the higher education institution was a setback. The deans felt that although their colleagues were not the appointing authority, their support is invaluable in as far as seeking promotion is concerned.

Lack of financial support and connections within the system is another setback that results in women being reluctant to take up leadership positions in universities. Men are usually well resourced, and they have connections within the university leadership system, which make their chances of taking up leadership roles higher than those of women. This finding corroborates findings of a study by Goryunova et al. (2017) who concluded that lack of adequate support is an impediment to achieving leadership goals.

5.2. Interventions to overcome challenges faced by female leaders in South African universities
Drawing from the data presented, the research concludes that mentoring female leadership aspirants may be useful in overcoming challenges faced by women. This conclusion was reached based on
indication by other deans who shared that finding mentors that encourage and support them has been helpful to overcome challenges that they face. Advice and encouragement from women who were already in the system has helped some of the women to minimise the effects of challenges they experience. The findings that mentoring can help overcome challenges faced by aspiring female leaders are in line with findings of a study carried out by Grant (2012) who concluded that mentoring is a useful method that can be used to overcome some of the leadership challenges that women face in the higher education sector. This intervention is important because it allows upcoming leaders to receive impartation of knowledge and skills from those that are already experienced.

Additionally, the research concludes that networking is a useful strategy for overcoming challenges faced by women in leadership. The research established that networking helped the female deans to overcome challenges they encountered as deans in the higher education sector. Networking with other female leaders holding various positions in academic institutions or other sectors was helpful. Platforms where women in leadership meet to share ideas, experiences, and how the plight of leaders in the academic fraternity can be best improved, emerged to be helpful in overcoming the challenges. Networking has been found to be helpful for women to gain knowledge, influence and social capital that enhances their chances as leaders (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016).

The research also concludes that provision of all forms of relevant support such as resources for professional development is important in overcoming challenge experienced by female leadership aspirants in the university setting. Support from family and other professionals helped two of the deans to be where they are today. Some of the participants indicated that family support helped them to overcome conflicts between work and family roles, while some hinted that support from other women helped them to deal with challenges experienced in their day-to-day leadership journey. There was, however, an appreciation that a lot needs to be done to increase the level of support to include financial support. Women often experience invisibility, exclusion, and isolation because of lack of support within higher education, which translates into fewer women hold key positions (Jamil et al., 2019). Findings of this study are therefore in line with that of Meyer (2016) who recommended support as a way of improving chances of women in leadership.

Finally, the research concludes that personal development can be employed to minimise the effects of challenges encountered by women who want to take up leadership roles. Two of the deans who took part in this study suggested that personal development has helped them to overcome some of the challenges they faced. The women shared that furthering their studies and attaining new skills assisted them in minimising the impact of challenges that they had experienced. This included attending leadership workshops, seminars, and reading books about leadership. In addition, the use of personal development to minimise hurdles faced by women in leadership equipping oneself with new skills and knowledge is a confirmation of the conclusions of a similar study carried out by Chisholm-Burns, Spivey, Hagemann and Josephson (2017) to investigate a similar phenomenon.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, strategies that can be used to overcome challenges that prevent or discourage women from taking up leadership positions in South African universities include mentoring, personal development, networking and support. These findings concur with the assertion by Moody and Toni (2017) who cited mentoring, personal development and networking platforms as interventions that can be used to minimise the effects of the challenges experienced by women in leadership.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that female leadership aspirants should be provided with mentorship services and some be drafted into mentorship programmes. This will help more women to overcome challenges they experience because of lack of mentors.

To minimise challenges in tertiary education, Awang-Hashim et al. (2017) suggest that women who aspire to be in top management positions are encouraged to set up networks of women within similar roles and interests. This, it is argued, will “disrupt the patterns of social connectivity
at work that have for so long privileged men, and in so doing provide a new way to alter the balance of power between the sexes” (McCarthy & Wright, 2004, p. 11). For women in developing countries, it is recommended that they network with women from developed countries such as Sweden, which have seen remarkable increases in women who take up management positions in higher education institutions (Awang-Hashim et al., 2017). Such networks would create an opportunity for aspirants to understand the role of women in management of higher education, develop skills and competencies to make well-informed decisions, learn strategies for a better balance in their personal and professional lives and build a community to exchange support and address exclusion (Sahoo & Lenka, 2016).

The research focused on women who are already working as deans. Future research should consider collecting data from those still aspiring to be leaders and those that are already in leadership positions so that there can be informed comparisons.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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