THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ACADEMICS: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Omolade Oluwatoyin Akinsanya
Department of Educational Management, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun

Abstract
This paper reports on the views women academics have about their career prospects, equal opportunities and the conflict they experience between their work and personal lives. However, very few women have progressed into senior academic roles. They continue to be handicapped by well-ingrained structural and cultural barriers and by promotion systems that still largely rely on the publication records of candidates for appointments and promotions. However, several issues are examined in this paper. The challenges women face in academics are not let out. What are the perspectives and the way forward are also discussed. This paper then concludes that more lecturers should be recruited in reducing high workload and stress being encountered by women in academics. Incentives should be given by the government as a way of motivating those in the system and encourage more females to take lecturing job at the tertiary level.

Keywords: Women, academics, challenges, perspectives

Introduction
The evolution of human civilization replete the overwhelming achievements of men who invented, discovered and introduced into the society, structures and materials which are of benefits to mankind today. However, it is very rare to find women who have performed similar feats either in the past or present, yet human intelligence is the same in both sexes.

In a review of studies by Stiver, Barnes and Harding (1994), they found out that across the world, there is a gender gap in the academia having two dimension status and power differentials among faculty and administrators, student subject and career choices. Women do not achieve the proportion of promoted posts that are expected by their numbers in the staff of tertiary institutions in which they are under-represented at the highest level across the world. World statistics indicates that women make up more than half of the population, do 64 percent of the working hours, receive 10 percent of the income and own only one percent of the property (FCE, Women Association, 1998). Many Nigerian women have acquired formal education such that in virtually every part of Nigeria today, almost every extended family unit can boast of a female graduate of one profession or the other such as a teacher, nurse, lawyer, medical doctor, accountant or engineer with diplomas, B.A., B.Ed. B.Sc, masters and Ph.D. degrees in these disciplines. Most of these qualified women are employed and are working in various establishments contributing their quota at both the state and national levels. Many others are self employed and also playing appreciable roles in the national development.

In the education sector, women account for a good percentage of the teaching force especially in the nursery, primary and secondary school levels. Many of these women have risen to the top positions in these institutions. Among the various universities in Nigeria, woman lecturers are found in many disciplines and departments of the various faculties. The universities themselves are expected not only to produce high level manpower, but also to make positive contributions to the overall development of the country. These women have therefore been found qualified, and employed to perform equal roles alongside their male counterparts in the fulfillment of some of the set objectives of the University. There is no gender discrimination in the distribution of lectures or considerations for promotion in the university. However, the catch comes at the rate which these women rise alongside their average male colleagues who could reach the top, that is, become professors, years before the women counterparts sometimes eventually get there.

Examining figures and policies in Nigeria, Pereira (2002) noted that although the University system tends to be spoken of in gender neutral terms, the effects of their workings are far from gender
neutral. The first female staff was employed in the year of Nigeria’s independence, 1960 in the Department of History at University of Ibadan. Abiola, (2003) noted that thirty-six years after the employment of the first female lecturer, the percentage of the female academic staff recruited in NigeriaUniversities in 1996/1997 was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>% of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Education (2006) noted that female participation among the academic staff of all tertiary institutions is still low. For instance in 2001/2002 session, the total number of Nigerian University teachers was 20,124 and out of this number, 3,174 constituting 15.7% were females while 17,040 (84.3%) are male. Moreover, in the Nigerian University system, there were a total of 2,442 Professors making up 12.1% of the total population of all the academic staff. The female full Professors were very low in percentage in the Professorial category of 6.9% (Okebukola, 2002). From the data above, it is glaring that men dominate the women lecturers in the University academics area.

Issues in women in academics
A woman is an adult female person. An academic is someone who teaches or does research at a College or University. Therefore, a woman academic is an adult female person who teaches or does research at a College or University. Women are very important in national development, and the role of women at home also cannot be over-emphasized. In recent years, women have put aside gender inequality, marginalization and inferiority complex. In spite of being academics, female lecturers are also expected to keep their homes. Women carry a dual burden that they must pursue both their academic interest while meeting traditional obligations, for which they get little or no help from their male partners and spouses. A woman academic is concerned with childbearing and rearing, cooking and domestic household chores and their supervision.

Odejide, (2001) found out that women academics are confronted by the sexual prejudice that abound among their male counterparts and the lack of a suitable framework within which they can articulate their concerns. In studies conducted by Nasir,(2001), Yolonfoun,(2003), they found out that women lecturers instructing university students as well as women intellectuals relating to male counterparts are generally perceived as being less knowledgeable, and also have to work twice as hard in order to legitimize their positions and authority. Women academics need to develop masculine heart in their approach to academic work in order to live up to expectation.

The performance measures of women in academics can either be qualitative or quantitative. The quantitative performance involves the number of times the women are present in attending lectures, meetings, seminars, workshops, conferences, attending to students’ projects etc. Qualitatively, in terms of students’ feedback, successes recorded per time, accessibility, dedication at work, and reward for excellence to mention a few. At the same time, there are a lot of job constraints on the part of women academic based on a number of reasons such as home factors, life expectancy, which include pregnancy, child rearing to changes in body chemistry. Other job constraints include breast feeding, attending to family problems, perception and lack of mentor.

Furthermore, women academics according to Odebunmi’s (1982) report feel guilty when they try to assert themselves which is not part of the Nigerian traditional culture. Specifically, the Nigerian woman academic has the peculiar problem of having to cope with the role of the token woman i.e. a woman to be seen but not heard, lack of role models to learn from, feelings of isolation, strains of coping with male prejudice and overt or covert discriminations from senior colleagues.

Despite the fact that female lecturers constitute just about 20.3% of lecturers in Nigerian universities, it is worthy of note that a few women have come out as pace-setters. Nigeria has produced at least four female Vice-Chancellors who are Professors. The professors, who most of the times are the heads of the departments, constitute the Senate of each university. In effect, female under-representation
reflects the level of female participation in the policy formulation process of the universities.

Factors responsible for this low participation of women in top rank lectureship positions are connected with the struggle to keep the home and function maximally on their jobs at the same time. Babajide (1995) reported that female lecturers are subjected to greater work-related pressures than their male counterparts. Teaching in the University in itself is a very high-pressure job. Part of these pressures include the ‘publish-or-perish’ syndrome, teaching and research work load, paper writing for conferences, seminars and workshops, marking of scripts, meeting deadlines, supervising students projects and other practical work. Related contributory factors include attending and making meaningful contributions at post-graduate thesis and dissertations meetings, emergency meetings at departmental and faculty levels as well as membership of various administrative committees. By all these assignments, a woman academic may become a nagging mother, difficult or uncooperating co-worker and someone who may be highly intolerant of everyone else around her.

Challenges of women in academics

Work stress does have a home-work interface connection. In the findings of Adeoye, (1992), Durosaro, (1995), they indicated that the dual role of women in academics as wives/mothers as well as lecturers was a source of stress. While the husbands go to clubs and other relaxation centres to unwind, the women academic go back home to attend to domestic chores and care of children. Another challenge of women lecturers is the sex-role stereotype in which power and independence are not traditionally assigned to the Nigerian women. Some women lecturers according to Odebunmi (1982) seemed to feel guilty when they try to assert themselves because female assertiveness is not part of the Nigerian traditional culture.

Furthermore, the woman academic face role conflict between the workplace and the home which can be: the female gender factor or the male factor. The female gender factor is based on religious beliefs and cultural dependency of women on their husbands (Alele-Williams, 1992). Every working woman, irrespective of her status, retains the primary responsibility for household labour and childcare. The female lecturers most often are still of child bearing age when they join the system. In this society where being married and bearing children are the expected norm for a normal woman irrespective of any other thing, every woman aspires to acquire both. Thus the domestic demands of the home, pregnancy and taking care of children and other family members must still be executed together with academic duties. It is therefore discovered that a young female lecturer who in the first ten years on the job, may have a minimum of 3 pregnancies to cope with and the nursing of the babies, cannot in anyway rise at the same rate as her male counterpart. This is because as a lecturer, she is expected to be actively engaged, in addition to the lectures, in research and supervising research projects and publishing the findings of such research in relevant academic journals. The number and quality of her published articles determine her eligibility for promotion irrespective of the teaching quality.

On the part of the male factor, the issue of marriage has subjected women to be totally responsible to men. This traditional authority has given the man the ability to dictate what he likes his wife to do and not in all cases what the woman would like to do. Such dictates can make or mar such women especially in their career development. For the married woman, no matter the level of education, the finding is that she can rise as high and as fast as it is convenient for the husband and the home. For example, participation in conferences and seminars which are necessary complements and supplements for a successful academic career maybe out of the question if the timing is very inconvenient for the women due to "primary responsibilities."

Jonathan and Stone (1989) also came out with findings that female lecturers living and working under great pressure, and the resultant stress, expressed complaints of constant fatigue and exhaustion. Stress and stress-related outcomes which do have serious consequences on an individual’s personal, mental, psychological and physical health thus make a female lecturer to become a nagging mother, difficult and highly intolerable to everyone else around her.
There is the need to answer the question of why women are not as many as men in academics? This is a serious challenge because women lecturers perceive themselves as a minority group in a male-dominated environment. Although an increasing number of women have entered academics, yet they are few in higher ranks. Women Deans and Professors are a minority group and women Vice-Chancellors are rare. A follow-up survey in 2000 by Association of Commonwealth Universities is not encouraging as women remain disproportionately represented within instructors, lecturers and unranked positions. They observed that women remain significantly underrepresented at research institutions which are in contrast to representation at primary and secondary schools. Due to the under-representation of women in the academic arena, women tend to have less bargaining power and limited opportunity to influence decisions or other initiatives to promote gender equality and women’s rights. Thus many prefer to work on their research projects and in isolation, therefore rendering their contributions less significant.

Lack of networks can be seen as another challenge of women in academics. Unlike the male academic staff that seems to be able to use unofficial networks to learn from colleagues, women in equal need of such support are more likely to miss out on information sharing and informal mutual help from within their institutions since they are in the minority in most departments. The absence of a supportive network among women academics whether official or unofficial fragments their efforts and contributions towards the women’s cause.

The nature of the job is another challenge women in academics face. At certain levels, the job may require constant travels outside the town of residence for corporate meetings, supervisory duties, study-leave training. Sometimes relocation could enhance and accelerate promotion to higher status, but the inability of some women especially married women to fulfill these requirements has robbed some well qualified women of top positions. Relocation to accept a higher position on the job may be possible only if the man is the initiator or directly involved. Secondly the physiological state of the woman at the time in question could also make the acceptance of such a post even when offered impracticable. Thus it is very probable that the actualization of every married woman’s dream on the job is a function of the cooperation given her by her spouse, family member and her state as a woman.

There are lots of constraints being faced by women in the academic profession. The academic profession requires large investments of time and energy. You either perform or you are out. Academic institutions have masculinist institutional cultures and women academics are increasingly under pressure to perform in this masculine environment. This is compounded by the fact that in addition to a heavy work-load which they have to juggle with family responsibilities, they may have limited extra time to join efforts with other women groups. It is not surprising therefore that sometimes women academics are shunned by their fellow women and seen as uncaring or unconcerned about issues in their environment.

**The way forward**

The percentage of women in academics is still very low in Nigeria which could be traceable to gender inequality in students’ enrolment at the secondary school and tertiary levels of education. This could be due to high dropout rates among the females because of early marriage or the popular belief that no matter how highly trained a woman is, her education ends in the kitchen. The society should device means of encouraging parents to allow their girl-child to go to school based on her capabilities and not to be abruptly stopped before getting to her desired peak. Also the girl-child’s self-worth should be emphasized that she is not in any way inferior to her male counterpart and so could get to the top if she is desirous.

Face the facts and accept them. Women must be realistic and come to terms with the fact that natural and biological roles in life such as marriage and child bearing and the upbringing of the children moderate their jobs and careers, placing them second in the scheme of things. Accepting this fact mentally makes it easier to cope with the probability that the man she graduated with, or even before, could likely become a manager, director or professor long before her.
In order to solve the problems of the unending home variables, the federal and state governments in Nigeria can provide for a variety of paid and unpaid leaves which will enable women to attend to family responsibilities. It should be noted that every family serves as the foundation of every society in which women are the home makers. If their work is given greater priority at the expense of the family, they are running a risk of losing the home. Hence, adequate support should be provided for women in academics in order to function well in the system. Universities must provide pregnancy leave for women under institutional benefit programmes. Routine check must be given its own place for normal pregnancy and birth.

Most often, research done by women is evaluated more critically than men. There should be less of this. Women achievements should be celebrated to encourage other women function well and perform their roles both at work and at home. In as much as high productivity is expected from workers generally, it appears that meeting deadlines, marking excessive number of scripts are found to be stressful for the female lecturers coupled with homework pressures. The National Universities Commission (NUC) could reduce the high workload through improved funding which will also allow for the recruitment of more lecturers.

Again, professional women, including women academics, juggle multiple responsibilities and challenges that influence their health and wellbeing. To address this issue, women academics need to take care of themselves, exercise and eat right. They also need to recognize that the effect of stress is on their health. To reduce stress by women academics, they need to look for opportunities to relax, distinguish tasks that absolutely must be done from those that are simply nice to do, determine what must be done now, what can wait, and what requires consistent small bursts of activity. Women academics should also seek help at home, whether it’s a monthly visit from a maid or additional child care. They should also allocate their time alongside their priorities: spend time first with their children and then find time for the housework. They should also decide to let some parts of their home receive less attention by getting their children involved in maintaining the home. Of course, they should rely on their spouses if any and ask them to lend a hand every day. The academic system is such that specialization is the ultimate objective and this naturally calls for many lecturing hands for more effective output. The contribution of women academics to the academic system directly and the nation at large cannot be underestimated.

Obviously the inherent gender limitations call for appreciation by the women, employers and society such that every encouragement should be given to women at every stage to cope with the realities of being women and still bring out and contribute the best of what nature has endowed them with. It becomes therefore very appropriate and important to address and discuss policies and plans that enhance women acquisition of education and skills before marriage which they can sustain and eventually improve upon at the later stages of their metamorphosis to actualize their ambitions and dreams.

**Conclusion**

There is need for more research on women in academics. It should be noted that every family serves as the foundation of every society. In the society, women are the home makers. If their work is given greater priority at the expense of the family, they are running a risk of losing the home. Hence, adequate support should be provided for women in academics in order to function well in the system.

**References**


executives, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation; Department of Guidance and Counselling University of Ilorin.


