

Women and Career Progression in the Academia: Taking Stock of the Doctorate Degrees of the University of Lagos Since 2009

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Abstract

Although women are gradually closing the gap in most occupations, women in the academia had consistently been fewer than men in higher ranking positions due to fewer women with doctorate degrees. Attainment of a doctorate degree is a prerequisite to promotions above Lecturer 1 in the University of Lagos (UNILAG). The requirement of 'publish or perish' had been expanded to include 'no Ph.D. no promotion' even when the papers required to get to the apex are complete. This paper reviews the number of doctorate degrees awarded by UNILAG in the past five years – from 2009 to 2013- to assess the extent of the gap existing between the male and female in the profession. It complements the data with in-depth interviews conducted with women who are still struggling to obtain their doctorate degrees to appraise the constraints which they face. This is because to be promoted above the post of a Lecturer 1, an academic must not only have obtained a doctorate (Ph.D.) degree, he/she is also expected to have a quantum of publications in the required combinations in what UNILAG has termed 'local' and 'foreign' journals. This paper found a disturbing asymmetry with respect to the margin between male and female Ph.D. graduates with the latter still in the minority. Considering the constraints faced by women both in the private and public sphere and flowing from the interviews with women academics that are pursuing their doctorate degree programmes, the paper made some suggestions. One of such is the provision of and/or creation of female TETFUND scholarships to give more opportunities for women in academia to close the ever increasing gap in the profession.

Introduction

Academic career is challenging to both male and female professionals but the gender gap suggests that the system in place is more in favour of men. The constraints which women academics face in progressing in their careers are no longer news. Several studies have shown that academic career development coincide with family building which force individuals to make choices and compromises and women often are at a disadvantage (Universities UK, 2008; Martinez, *et al.*, 2007; University of Leeds Report, 2002; Whitelegg, *et al.*, 2002; Sutton, n.d.).

A European Commission (EC) report alluded to in Sutton (n.d.), indicates that women accounted for 54% of students in European degree programmes leading to qualification for research studies and 59% of the graduates were also women. However, women's participation began to decline after the initial stage, with women accounting for only 15% of the highest posts in research institutions. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the 'leaky pipe', 'glass ceiling' or 'slippery slope' in academia, is more rampant in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) disciplines. Also, it has been shown that women are still less likely than their male colleagues to advance to the senior positions in the academia, despite their growing numbers in the SET undergraduate and postgraduate courses since the 1970s (Zalevski *et al.*, 2009). For instance, Sutton (n.d.) reports that only 30% of students entering these fields of study were women. At the initial stage, female research candidates show resilience as they represent 34% of Ph.D. graduates. However, by the time a woman

reaches the top tier of research, she finds herself clearly in the minority (9%). According to the report “Strong male dominance is also evident in other institutions in the power structure of the sciences: editorial boards, peer panels, and selection committees for professorships”. Zalevski *et al.*'s (2009) study also shows that only 23.8 per cent of all women in SET departments are professors and senior lecturers, compared to 42.1 per cent of all men. The situation, according to the study, has not improved significantly for some time, which challenges the notion that ‘a critical mass’ of women in the lower ranks of a profession should necessarily translate to greater gender equality in the more senior academic posts.

Despite this lop-sidedness, recent evidence has shown that women in the United States (US) have made an appreciable incursion into the rare doctorate degrees held previously by the men. Men retained the lead in doctoral degrees until 2008, largely through their dominance in engineering, mathematics and the physical sciences. According to a report from the Council of Graduate Schools, based in Washington cited in de Vise (2010), of the doctoral degrees awarded in the 2008-09 academic year, 28,962 were women and 28,469 were men representing 50.4% and 49.6% respectively which shows a slightly higher percentage in favour of women. The increase in women receiving doctoral degrees has been attributed to years of persistent gains across several areas of study. In the health sciences, for example, the number has risen at a rate of 14 percent per year over the past decade with women earning 70 percent of doctorates in that field. They also represent 67 percent of doctoral degrees in education, and 60 percent in social and behavioural sciences. Notwithstanding these reported successes, the situation is not the same in the developing world of Africa and Nigeria in particular.

In South Africa, for instance, between 2001 and 2009, there was an increase in the enrolment of women into the Ph.D. programmes from three to four out of ten total enrolments. Yet, they are still in the minority at the postgraduate level study (Hweshe, 2012). As found by Edukugho (2011), males comprised 87.9 per cent (58) of the sixty-six academics elevated to the professorial cadre and females 12.1 per cent (8) in the University of Ilorin (UNILORIN). In addition, twenty nine (29) or 93.5 per cent of the 31 new Readers or Associate Professors are men as against two (2) or 6.5 per cent that are women; 29 or 82 per cent of the 35 new professors are men while the remaining 6 or 17.1 per cent are women. In similar vein, Udeani and Ejikeme (2011) found a great disparity in professorial positions among male and female academics in SET between 1999 and 2009 in UNILAG with no female occupying a chair in Engineering and Environmental Science in 1999. Although, in the interval, there was a steady increase in the percentage of women appointed to the professorial cadre, in all the SET disciplines listed; the percentage margins between men and women professors are still significant. The reason for these observed differences has been attributed to women’s peculiar but surmountable challenges.

Macinnis-Ng (2013) identified two of such challenges that women face in the academia. One, according to her, is universal to all women and it refers to success rates for funding and publications which are lower for females than males. Young girls are raised to be nurturing and compliant rather than competitive and assertive. These factors impact the careers of all women at some stage, often in very subtle ways and throughout their working lives. The second category of challenges is what she termed ‘circumstantial,’ because these depend on the situation a woman finds herself. These include career responsibilities, parental leave gaps and periods of part-time work. To this end, women are more likely to be left with the burden of caring for elderly or sick relatives and very young children; just as women in a relationship are more likely to be the ‘following’ partner when a couple or family moves overseas or interstate and these impact on their career opportunities. She submits that although these ‘circumstantial’ factors do not impact all women, but when they do, they can be catastrophic for a promising and even flourishing career. In terms of taking care of young

children, studies have also shown that women researchers with small children felt their career progression was slowed because they were exhausted, and thus unable to compete favourably with men (University of Leeds Report, 2002).

Other studies that explored attrition of female Ph.D. students in chemistry and biosciences from future careers in research (Lober Newsome, 2008a, b), had shown the likelihood that women do not want to stay in academic science in the long term compared to men. Reasons cited by most respondents behind that decision was the perceived incompatibility between an academic career and motherhood and/or maintaining a work-life balance. This also reverberated in the study by Whitelegg *et al.*, (2002) where young women physicists interviewed raised issues concerning the difficulties of combining working with raising a family. These female researchers reported that working in a lab goes with the inconvenience of having a baby or raising a family mainly because of long hours spent running experiments in the evenings and at weekends and this does not augur well for family life especially when the family is still at the teething stage. Evidence also suggests that having children may be an impediment to women's probabilities of tenured jobs and full professorships. Ginther and Kahn (2006) report that single women in academia do better at each stage than single men and that children make it less likely for women in science to advance up the academic job ladder while both marriage and children increase men's likelihood of advancing.

Women with a partner and children also face the barrier to their career mobility (Universities UK, 2008; Martinez *et al.*, 2007; Ackers, 2004). Ackers (2004) established that women were more likely to defer to their partners' career interests, when couples were faced with an international move whereas men in a similar situation were less likely to do this even when the women's job attracts higher pay. These cultural pressures result in a major attrition of women who put their time and effort to studying for a doctorate degree thus creating a huge loss to the academic profession. Often, the women settle for any available position that they can find, thereby effectively de-skilling themselves and removing highly skilled professionals from the research labour market (Ackers 2004; 2003).

Academics as a profession has its own problems. These problems are hardly ever realised by an observer who believes that there is ample time available for 'academicians'. New entrants are also lured with this belief only to get frustrated when they become tenured. Both female and male researchers generally view academic research not only as enjoyable but also intellectually rewarding (Garforth and Kerr, 2009; Lober Newsome, 2008 a, b). It is against this backdrop that this paper reviews the number of Ph.D. graduates in UNILAG since 2009 with a view of ascertaining the gender disparity as acquisition of a Ph.D. degree is a criterion for promotion above Lecturer 1 grade.

Theoretical Background

Power, in social and political theory, is often regarded as an essentially contested concept (Lukes, 1974; 2005; Connolly, 1993) and this claim is itself contested (Haugaard, 2010; Morriss 2002, and Wartenberg, 1990), with no doubt that the literature on power is marked by deep, widespread, and seemingly intractable disagreements over how the term power should be understood. One group conceptualises power as a resource and prominent among them is Okin, (1989) upon whose postulation this paper is anchored. In her work, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Okin argues that the contemporary family structured along gender lines unjustly distributes the benefits and burdens of familial life among husbands and wives.

One of her list of benefits includes power, which she calls "critical social goods." As she puts it, "when we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and both physical and economic security, we find socially constructed inequalities between them, right down the list" (Okin, 1989, 136). For Okin, power is a

resource that is unequally and unjustly distributed between men and women and so, the goals of feminism are to incorporate the redistribution of this resource in more equitable ways. This theory explains the discourse in two ways: first it provides that opportunities for self-development are one of the ‘critical social goods’ in the rein of men which they expend at their pleasure. Second, since this resource is in the domain of men, women’s access to it depends on men’s approval and the men determine the women’s career prospects.

Methods

Data for the study was extracted from the Ph.D. graduation lists of UNILAG from 2009 to 2013.

The study sought to know the number of Ph.D. graduates by gender for the five-year period under consideration as shown in the table below. The data did not go into further details of preparing the tables by disciplines. This is because the interest of the study is to have an overview of the performance of the female gender in the doctorate degrees awarded for the five-

Table Showing Ph.D. Graduates for the Five-Year Period under consideration by Gender*

Convocation Year	No. of Graduates		
	M (%)	F (%)	T (%)
2009 ¹	46 (60.5)	30 (39.5)	76 (100)
2010 ²	38 (58.5)	27 (41.5)	65 (100)
2011 ³	45 (60.8)	29 (39.2)	74 (100)
2012 ⁴	31 (66.0)	17 (34.0)	48 (100)
2013 ⁵	70 (66.7)	35 (33.3)	105 (100)
Total	230 (62.5)	138 (37.5)	368 (100)

Sources: ¹The University of Lagos, Nigeria Convocation 2009 Order of Proceedings pp. 150-154

²The University of Lagos, Nigeria, Convocation 2010 Order of Proceedings pp. 137-143

³The University of Lagos, Nigeria, Convocation 2011 Order of Proceedings pp. 192-200

⁴The University of Lagos, Nigeria, Golden Jubilee Convocation 2012, Order of Proceedings pp. 125-128

⁵The University of Lagos, Nigeria, 2013 Convocation, Order of Proceedings pp. 101-108

*The table is compiled and prepared by the author

Five-year period and, by extension, examine their probable career progression. The classification by gender was prepared by the author. In addition, a female doctoral staff candidate each was interviewed from Faculties of Arts, Business Administration, Education, Engineering, Environmental Science, Law, Science and Social Sciences to ascertain the constraints they face in the programme. This served as a complement to the data.

Results

As the table above shows, although, there is an appreciable number of a female Ph.D. graduate in the five-year period under consideration, there is still a significant disparity between male and female Ph.D. graduates. In 2009, there were 46 male and 30 female graduates. This reduced for both sexes to 38 and 27 in 2010 respectively. By 2011 and 2013, the numbers rose to 45 and 29 and 70 and 35 respectively. Nevertheless, 2012 witnessed another downward trend of 31 and 17 for male and female Ph.D. graduates being the lowest for both sexes in the five-year period. All the same, in spite of the increase in the number of female graduates in 2013 convocation (35), this only translates to 33 percent of female Ph.D. graduates as opposed to 34 percent in 2012.

Overall, only 37 percent of females obtained a Ph.D. degree in the five-year period under study which is almost half of the 63 percent for the males indicating a great disparity between both sexes. It also shows that despite the increase in the enrolment of women for higher degrees, this has not translated into obtaining or completion of doctoral degrees

implying that the attrition rates for women at the doctoral level still remains high. Although, the interest of this paper is not to disaggregate the degrees obtained by courses, most female Ph.D. graduates for the five-year period are predominantly located in Education, Humanities and Social Sciences faculties while they are hardly visible in Science, Engineering, Business Administration and Environmental Sciences. The in-depth interviews throw more light on what women academics on the doctorate programme face in achieving their set objectives. This is incorporated in the discussion section.

Discussion

The data have shown a variation in the number of women Ph.D. graduates in the five-year period considered in this paper. It goes to confirm the ever increasing disparity between male and female in the acquisition of a doctorate degree in UNILAG. This supports studies such as Sutton's (n.d.) which shows a very insignificant rate of completion at the doctoral level for women. Yet studies have also shown that the gap is closing in some other countries like the US (de Vise, 2010) and South Africa (Hweshe, 2012). This study is also reinforcing Edukugho's (2011) report on UNILORIN's promotions to the professorial cadre as well as Udeani and Ejikeme's (2011) study of UNILAG and the ever present gap between male and female academics in the professorial cadre since the attainment to the professorial position in the latter institution is tied to obtaining a Ph.D. degree.

This underrepresentation of women academics in the professorial cadre (which also has a prerequisite of a Ph.D. degree and number of required papers categorised under 'local' or 'foreign') is not unconnected with the societal expectations of women which hinders their career prospects. Such societal expectations include fulfilment of their *natural* and domestic roles, which takes precedence over their career prospects. In that regard, they are forced to make choices and compromises for the sake of building their families (Universities UK, 2008; Martinez, *et al.*, 2007; University of Leeds Report, 2002; Whitelegg, *et al.*, 2002; Sutton, n.d.).

Some of the in-depth interviews conducted lay credence to these studies. According to one of the interviewees who pleaded anonymity:

I am faced with difficulties both in the office and at the home front. In the office, my supervisor poses a serious barrier to my getting this Ph.D. He hardly ever looks at my work and gets agitated when I approach him for consultation and advice. I don't know if he wants me to have this Ph.D. or he is bent on frustrating me out of the programme. At the home front, I don't need to tell you what is expected of you as a mother as well as a wife. You are to see that the home front is in perfect shape if you must have the needed tranquility for the progress of the programme. I think this summarizes my experience as far as this programme is concerned.

Also, lack of opportunities for further training, unsupportive work environment, lack of female role models have also been identified as factors that make women lag behind men in the academia (Udeani and Ejikeme, 2011); factors which Okin (1989) refers to as 'critical social goods'. In support of this view, another respondent feels that providing scholarships that will target women academics will do a lot of good. According to her:

It is a very commendable effort on the part of Federal Government to establish the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) which helps to alleviate the problems of accessing funds for conferences and publications of journals and books in the institutions of higher learning in the country. However, I think that creating a separate fund that targets only female academics will grant more opportunities for women considering that they are still teething in the field and still have a long way to go in closing the gap between them and the male gender. Have you taken time to see the number of graduates each year and how many women are part of it? This is more pronounced in the Sciences, Engineering and Technological courses where women are hardly present because of the belief that women are not naturally endowed in

these courses. That is not to say, however, that they are not good in these courses. The 2009/2010 first degree graduation (I am not so sure which one) for instance, produced more females than males with second class upper degrees in one of the Engineering courses. What does that tell you?

Another interviewee had not seen the women at the apex serving as role models. In her words:

Most female Professors are not real role models. They are vindictive and take it very personal when you make your views known. The male colleagues are more accommodating and support their kind in the pursuit of their career. I get more cooperation from the male than female colleagues.

Other interviews yielded the same responses but one of the respondents is quick to add this: *What is important is to have a level playing ground for all of us. What I mean is that granting opportunities for access to funds, training opportunities and allocation of courses and responsibilities in the institution should be done objectively and fairly. I am sure that despite domestic responsibilities, most women will cope in the presence of fair treatment. After all, 'modern' men these days provide a helping hand in the domestic sphere especially the progressive ones. But I wish to add that female academics also face harassment from their colleagues which, to me, is very bizarre. It becomes more ridiculous when this is used to assess your academic competence. So, when you don't have what it takes to advance in your career and you succumb to such pestering, the likelihood that you get what you want is high. Are we morally competent, then, to complain of falling standard of education?*

The in-depth interviews have revealed startling information which may not be known to the University authorities regarding what female academics, most especially those still in their early careers, face and how in the face of these difficulties, they try to balance things.

Considering the findings and bearing in mind that women are constrained by other factors beyond academics, the study recommends that:

- A gender inclusive policy is required for advancement of women in academia. This can be done through training and scholarship opportunities targeted at the group to cushion the effect of domestic responsibilities which bring untold but unremunerated hardships on them. One of such outlets is the creation of an exclusive female TETFUND scholarship as suggested by one of the interviewees, most especially those still in their early career, to encourage them to remain in the profession in spite of the difficult hurdles they have to cross. This will provide incentives for them to make greater efforts to succeed and ultimately produce more women at the professorial cadre.
- Second, women academics, in their reproductive age who are still bearing and rearing children should be granted concessions in terms of academic workload and other administrative responsibilities which also tie academics down and reduce their expected performance and achievement.
- Third, conducive work environment in the form of a policy document is needed to address the harassment problem. This could be reinforced with having cameras installed in offices and strategic places where these crimes are committed. By so doing, the victims as well as the predators will be protected and saved.
- Finally, in such a metropolitan and hostile environment like Lagos, availability of accommodation within the institution is suggested which will go a long way in alleviating the difficulties faced through traffic jams and robbery attacks in traffics especially for the vulnerable group like the women in the academia. This can be achieved by encouraging developers to build houses which can be taken over after an agreed period when they could have recouped their investments.

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