

Coping for Academic Women Departmental Heads during COVID-19: A Capabilities Approach Perspective

Authors : Juliet Ramohai

Abstract : This paper explores how women departmental heads in higher education experience leadership in a time of the COVID-19 crises. The focus is mostly on their care and coping as they work in virtual spaces. Most scholars have looked at the effects and challenges that different employees face while working from home during a lockdown. However, very few take a dedicated focus on women in leadership and the coping mechanisms and resources that they use for effective leadership during this difficult time. The paper draws on two aspects of Sen's Capabilities approach, functionings, and agency, to cast a closer understanding of the institutional and individual coping mechanisms that might be at these women's disposal. The qualitative approach used for this paper and a feminist lens provides a critical and in-depth understanding of the real-life stories of the women and how they make sense of their virtual leadership. Data for this paper was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 women in the positions of head of departments and analysed thematically using capabilities approach concepts as an analytical tool. The findings in this paper indicate that functionings and freedoms are tightly linked to institutional ethnographies. These ethnographies might support or hamper coping for women leaders, especially during times of crisis.

Keywords : capability approach, women leaders, higher education, COVID-19

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