

KUNZIMA, IT'S NOT FOR THE FAINTHEARTED: NARRATIVES OF THE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL IN NEGOTIATING STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore and theorise the experiences of seven SRC student leaders in one research intensive university in South Africa. We were interested in understanding / exploring / theorising the narratives of the student representative council on how they conceptualise, negotiate and navigate student leadership in a South African university. We adopted a qualitative case study and employed both semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion to generate our data. The findings from this research project revealed that the 1) SRC fundamentally believes that they are the *only* valid and legitimate voice for students in higher education. 2) They also revealed the emergent tensions / conflicts / frustrations between the SRC and the university, with the student leaders feeling that the university is deliberate in its effort at ensuring that students do not feel at home in the academy. And perhaps more troubling, the findings also revealed 3) that at times the SRC has become a heteronormative and patriarchal institution, where women student leaders are treated as the “black nannies” of student leadership. We end the article with some concluding thoughts on the complex and intersectional ways that the SRC socially constructs its role and function in the academy, as well as the need for a system wide overhauling in rethinking / reimagining / reconstructing student leadership beyond the colonising, patriarchal gaze.

Keywords: Student representative council, student leadership, higher education, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The 2015–2016 student protests were essential in serving as an epistemic and ontological reminder of the long delayed and frustrated decolonisation imperatives in the sector (Heleta

2016; Kumalo 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a). Triggered by the intersectional and complex challenges of mass unemployment in the country, an untransformed and racialised economy; corruption; the ever-rising cost and unaffordability / elitism of higher education; the alienating / marginalizing / exclusionary nature of higher education; an outdated curricula, oppressive teaching and learning strategies, and the need to rethink and reconsider the kind of university we need to fashion in the post-apartheid era (Bosch 2017; Hlatshwayo 2021; Nyamnjoh 2017). The student representative councils (hereafter the SRC) were at the forefront at bringing these issues to the fore, and leading students in the different higher education institutions. In this article, we explore and theorise how the SRC conceptualises and navigates student leadership in a South African higher education institution.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP: RECOGNITION, COMPLEXITIES, POSSIBILITIES

It was the breakout of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests in the 2015–2016 moment that catapulted the role of the SRC in South African higher education into national prominence (see Luescher, Webbstock, and Bhengu 2020; Nyamnjoh 2017; Sinwell 2019).¹ Leading from the front, the SRC in different higher education institutions played a significant role in raising national and international attention on the growing financial unaffordability of higher education, and the need to urgently transform / Africanise / decolonise the public university in South Africa. Various student leaders such as Mcebo Dlamini, Nompandolo Mkhathshwa, Naledi Chirwa, Shaera Kalla, Sthembiso Ndlovu, Thenjiwe and others dominated the public consciousness of the country and provided leadership in offering commentary and guidance on fee related issues, decolonizing the curricula as well as the role of the students in this transforming university. Taking a step back, we should note the role of the SRC is enshrined and contained in the country's Higher Education Act of 1997, specifically under Chapter 4 on governance of public higher education institutions. According to the legislative framework, the “establishment and composition, manner of election, term of office, functions and privileges of the students' representative council of a public higher education institution must be determined by the institutional statute” (Higher Education Act of 1997, 35). Although the Act is silent on the specific roles and responsibilities of the SRC at a national level, this appears deliberate as it leaves the specific functions to the different higher education institutions in the country to socially construct their own specific conceptions of what student leadership ought to look like for them internally and institutionally.

The role and importance of the SRC is also contained in the “Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education” (hereafter the Education White Paper 3). In the policy document, it is argued that the need to create a single, coherent and well-

coordinated system is necessary for the transformation of the system, with the SRC playing a central role in the transformation of the sector as part of the recognised student governance in higher education (Department of Education 1997). Although the legislative and policy framework recognises the SRC as the only legitimate form of student leadership in the academy (see also Speckman 2015), this for me is deeply misplaced as it makes two fundamental mistakes. Firstly, it assumes the SRC is the only form of student leadership in higher education, which is false as we have different student led organizations / societies / institutions that play a significant role in the wellbeing as well as the access and success of students in the academy. Secondly, *only* recognizing the SRC depoliticises the student body and suggests that it is only the SRC is the real and legitimate voice in the academy and therefore other non-SRC bodies cannot claim to speak for, represent or raise any concerns on behalf of students. Thus, although our focus in this article is on explicating / exploring / theorising how the SRC conceptualises, navigates and negotiates student leadership in the South African academy, our perspective of student leadership in the academy is broad and does recognise non-SRC bodies and organisations who all students who serve / support / work with students in various capacities.

In “the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions” (hereafter the Soudien Report), the role of the SRC as a complex institution, struggling to respond to and to confront gender, class and race dynamics in student leadership is painfully evident and well documented (CHE 2008). The report particularly comments on the complexities and intersectional challenges of institutional culture particularly in continuing to act as a stumbling block for women in student leadership;

“In the historically black institutions, the issue of identity and culture takes two forms – firstly with regard to the formation of male identity and relations of domination and subordination. These are expressed through the assertion of male authority and power and are justified on grounds of traditional culture. This is reflected in the comments of the (male) SRC President who indicated that it would be inappropriate in his culture for women to convene or chair a meeting or have anything to do with power It is therefore not surprising that, at least in terms of the SRC representatives whom the Committee met, there were no women who held significant positions, such as those of president, deputy-president and secretary. In addition, only a few of the women spoke. Instead, the tendency was to defer to the men” (emphasis added) (CHE 2008, 84–85).

Writing in a book chapter titled, “Contemporary student politics in South Africa: The rise of the black-led student movements of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015”, Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2016) argues that the majority of the SRCs at different public universities has been predominantly dominated by the ruling party’s African National Congress (ANC) aligned

Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), which is a student governance alliance consisting of the ANC Youth League, the Young communist League, and the Muslim Students' Association. For Naidoo (2016), this has meant that the +20 years' gains and reforms of the South African higher education were largely superficial in nature and inadequate in responding to the structural demands for a systematic overhaul of the higher education system. This is further supported by Heleta (2016), Mbembe (2016) and Kumalo (2020) who suggest that since at least the early 1990s, little has materially / structurally / organically changed in South African higher education regarding the still marginalised African and global South epistemic traditions and knowledge(s).

While it is true that the South African higher education system has undergone what Cloete and Moja (2005) have called the “demographic revolution” in the fundamental changes / shifts in the participation trends (that is, changes in the race and gender enrolment patterns) (see CHE 2018) – issues such institutional culture, governance, curricula, teaching and learning and knowledge remain deeply contested and challenged (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018b). In a book titled, “Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialisation and Decolonisation”, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b) argues that what important and impactful about the emergence of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests, was the critique they offered at the neoliberal conceptions of transformation, that is, thinking through and conceptualising of transformation as merely incorporating African / global South knowledge(s) into the curricula without materially changing the very being / architecture / foundations of curriculum knowledge and the university that holds it (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018b, 239). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and we agree with him, the only *real* option for those of us who are committed to rethinking and re-imagining the university in South Africa and the kind of student leadership we need, is a conception of decolonisation that would help us challenge / critique / explicate the very foundations of coloniality in the academy / curricula and begin to propose the alternative.

It should be noted and appreciated that while it is true that African and global South epistemic traditions continue to be silenced and marginalised in the South African academy through curriculum constructions / design / assessments (see Hlatshwayo, Shawa, and Nxumalo 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; 2018b), demographically, we have witnessed widespread changes in the higher education sector, with historically white universities undergoing significant changes in enrolment and participation rates. For example, in 1996, African enrolment in the sector was 308 104, and in 2011, it had grown to about 646 829. For Indians and Coloureds, the enrolment was 37 118 (Indian) and 32 743 (Coloureds) in 1996, and grew to 59 312 and 54 698 respectively in 2011 (Cloete 2014). Please see Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of student enrolment in South African higher education (Cloete 2014, 1360–1361)

	1996			2011		
	Enrolments	20–24 population	Gross enrolment rate (%)	Enrolments	20–24 population	Gross enrolment rate (%)
African	308 104	3 153 083	10	646 829	4 065 527	16
Whites	198 904	349 102	57	177 365	316 262	56
Indian	37 118	103 123	36	59 312	110 667	54
Coloured	32 742	344 373	10	54 698	404 336	14
Total	576 868	3 982 353	14	938 204	4 896 792	19

In the latest publicly available statistics from the Council on Higher Education (CHE), there are significant demographic and enrolment changes that are visible in the country’s higher education sector (CHE 2023). Between 2016 and 2021, first time entering African students increased from 152 502 in 2016 to 168 499 in 2021. Coloured, Indian and White students all experienced minor enrolment declines for first-time entering students. Coloured first time entering students declined from 14 218 in 2016 to 10 990 in 2021. Indian first-time entering students started off 2016 on 9 140 and declined to 7 076 in 2021. White first-time entering students were 33 783 in 2016, and declined to 22 639 by 2021 (CHE 2023, 3). Reading the same numbers through a gender lens reveals that women students continue to be the majority in the public higher education system in South Africa. In 2016, we had 119 823 first time entering women students compared to 91 927 men. The gender gap continued to the 2021 academic year, with the sector having 128 351 first time entering women students, compared to only 83 988 men (CHE 2023, 3–4). Thus, the nature and form of student leadership in the South African higher education emerges from this contested, dynamic and ever changing context.

There is a close relationship between the emergent calls for decolonising the higher education system as well as the focus on student engagement. This was seen in how the students themselves were at the forefront during the #RhodesMustFall protests in calling for us to re-think / re-imagine / re-consider the colonising curricula in our classrooms, as well as the alienating institutional culture(s), particularly in historically white universities. In a paper titled, “Decolonising the curriculum: Students’ Perspectives” Lawrence Meda (2020) adopts a Rawlsian perspective to reveal that for the SRC, they strongly believed that decolonisation ought to include both the inclusion and incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), as well the need to dislodge the current dominance of the western epistemic traditions in curriculum. Camalita Naicker (2015) and Paddy O’Halloran (2015) read the emergence of the #RhodesMustFall as the birthing of a new mode of student engagement in higher education,

one premised on what they term the “subaltern politics” in higher education, were popular grassroots protests that are often seen through the daily struggles for service delivery in the different communities were now being brought to the ivory towers of academia. Thus, we began to see alliances between workers / students / community organisations, potentially redefining student engagement and mobilisation in new and innovative ways in higher education.

We now turn to outlining the methodological insights of this article, that is, how data was collected, analysed and theorised to make meaning, as well as the arguments of this article.

METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

In this article, we relied on a qualitative interpretivist case study (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Creswell and Creswell 2017; Yin 2017), in exploring and theorising how the SRC negotiates and navigates student leadership in a higher education sector. Two research questions underpinned this project, that is, how do student leaders conceptualise the role of the SRC? and secondly, how does the student leaders negotiate and navigate student leadership in the South African higher education system? Seven current and former SRC student leaders took part in semi-structured interviews, which averaged about 60–70 minutes per interview. We also held two additional focus group discussions to crystalize the data that we were generating, and to see to what extent, the shared narratives / stories / experiences that emerged during the one-on-one interviews were commonly shared in the group (Colucci 2007; Hennink 2013; Moretti et al. 2011). We purposively focused on one research-intensive university in the KwaZulu-Natal province, in South Africa that has a history of playing a significant role in the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests, often leading nationally in mobilizing and organizing students on various causes. Boasting about 52 000 students enrolled in the university, this institution is a by-product of the mergers that occurred in 2004 (Hall, Leucher, and Symes 2004; Jansen 2003; Schoole 2005), combining at least three different higher education institution with their different institutional culture(s), traditions and practices to create one traditional, research-intensive university. We did obtain the necessary institutional gatekeeper permissions as well as required ethical clearance to conduct this research project. Furthermore, the research participants did sign the consent letters that outlined their rights and responsibilities. This provided for us their consent in writing, and through audio / digital recordings, their willing permissions to take part in the research project.

We now turn to the discussions and findings.

ON THE ROLE(S), FUNCTIONS, AND COMPLEXITIES OF LEADING STUDENTS

The majority of the SRC members who took part in the research project conceptualised the role

and functions of the SRC as largely being the valid and legitimate voice that represents the interests and well-being of students in the university. For the research participants, the SRC as an organisation is meant to “champion”, be an “activist” and give students an “equal fighting capability” in the university boardroom. For Mandla and Busi below, they comment on the role of the SRC as a bridge between the students and the university management;

“I understand the SRC as one the important stakeholders in the university because they play a critical role, not only as student activist or championing student issues. They also have powers to question some of the executive decisions taken by the management of the university you know? Because at all times, you have to have the interest of the students, so each and every decision taken, if it is not favourable to students then we have to question that as the SRC.” (Mandla).

“[The SRC] is a body that is there to liaise with the management on behalf of the students, giving them an equal fighting capability, because ama students would not have a voice on their own. In the boardroom, they need representation. So, that is what we are there for. The purpose we need to serve is to make sure that the students’ interest is met.” (Busi).

For Mandla and Busi above, the primary role and functions of the SRC as an institutional organisation is to stand for and represent the interests of the students. For both student leaders, they recognise the unequal power dynamics between students and the university, and therefore they see their role as being one focusing on mitigating the unequal distribution of power between the university and students. This is similarly echoed on by another participant, Sfiso, who suggests that the role of the SRC is to be a bridge between the university and students, and “this bridge is then finding itself having to correspond issues from one side to another”, often through tensions, struggles, squabbles and disagreements. In the book, “Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age”, Zygmunt Bauman argues that we are increasingly seeing what he calls a divorce between the power and politics. This means that leadership / governing / ruling in this neoliberal and democratic era, is often characterised by those who are often not occupying the formal structures of political power and office (see also Nel 2016). For student leaders, they appear to reject Bauman’s conception of how power operates in modernity, and they strongly believe that student leadership is only valued / recognised / legitimate only if it is formal leadership and is represented through the SRC structures. Passionately defending this conception, a former SRC community engagement representative and later President, Menzi, comments that without the SRC and students in higher education, then we do not have a university:

“When we speak of the SRC we are speaking of body that represents students. But a body that represents students at what sense? I will first start by explaining this body and how huge it is. I am speaking of a body that is constituted by students, students being the major stakeholder in the

institution in a sense that before there is even a lecturer, you must have a student. Before you have an existence of those buildings you see, you must have students. To hire people that will be working in the fees office, the person who will be paying the fees is the student. Now how does this body represent students? It represents students where there is unjust and action from the institution, it further represents student when the system seems to isolate them. It exists because it understands that there are inequalities that might exist in the institution given the levels of classes that exist in the communities.” (Menzi).

Willy Nel (2016), in a public lecture titled, “Student Leadership: Challenges and Possibilities”, cautions us against this conception of student leadership, and suggest that it was the above “blindspots” that led to the rise, influence and dominance of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests that occurred without any formal organisational capability or assistance from the SRC’s formal structures. For Nel, and we agree with him, formal, recognised leadership structures such as the SRC ought to be fluid, innovative and flexible without being tied down by formalised bureaucracy. Furthermore, and Keet and Nel (2016) write that student leadership in the South African higher education system tends to reflect this Foucauldian governmentality, where formalised organisational structures are often valued, preferred and reinforced over fluid, non-hierarchical and non-organised ones. What we would call “structures of legitimacy”, student leaders tend to prefer them because they offer security, protection and legitimacy compared to those student leaders who work outside of them.

One of the most important themes that emerged from the data in how the student leaders conceptualised and navigated the role of the SRC focused on the apparent tensions / conflicts / frustrations between the SRC and the university. This was seen in how the student leaders thought of and spoke about the university, lecturers and management in antagonistic terms, with a growing sense amongst the SRC that the university and its staff really did not care about students’ wellbeing, and that students were deliberately made to feel unwelcomed in the university. Describing these challenges, Phindile and Busi both comment on the difficulties of engaging with a university that does not seem to care:

“Vele ama institutions are not homes to us. We do not feel at home, angeke ngiqambe amanga [I will not lie]. We are not at home lana, we are always reminded that ... we had a case of a lecturer oyibhunu [Afrikaner] who was teaching i-Geography, so every lecture he made sure that students see how inferior they were. He always made examples that black people are not even supposed to be educated, they are not supposed to be here. All they are limited to is working emakhishini nasengadini [working in the kitchens and in the gardens]. He failed them. And you might say what if they were failing on their own? But how do you expect someone to pass a module if you are constantly reminded that you do not have space here? And till now he has not been fired.” (Phindile).

“Right now, with the management that we have [sighs] ohh, its tough. It is so tough, ungaze uthi [is like saying] ama student interests are just not in their best interests at all. It takes forever, I mean forever ukuth abantu bakwazi ukuthola i-data ukuth bakwazi ukuqhubeka bafunde and

nokuphuma kwama allowances [its taking forever for students to get data, for them to continue studying, for students to get their allowance], they are dragging their feet to register students ema-res and that affects your allowances. So, a lot of students were also struggling with that issue and abanye abantu lemali bayisebenzisa nase makhaya [students were using their allowance to help their homes], that means that they really need it. So, there was a lot of issues that need you to deal with face to face with the management but asikwazanga ukuthi sibe nakho lokho [we have a lot of issues to fix with management but we just haven't done so]. So, then izinkinga bekuthatha isikhathi to be resolved [it took longer for students' problems to be solved]. That really put a strain on the student leadership in its entirety, to solve student matters under such circumstances. Even now it is still an issue." (Busi).

For Phindile and Busi, who both served in the SRC leadership during the Covid pandemic, describe the challenges of engaging with a university leadership that do not seem to care. For them, they feel that they are deliberately isolated, marginalised and not being assisted in their quest to help and support students. The student leaders' comments above reflect the emergent literature on the painful anguish, challenges, frustrations and difficulties that students had to navigate and negotiate during the Covid 19, with some students using the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allowance that was meant to support them educationally, they now used that money to feed and support their families (Maphalala, Khumalo, and Khumalo 2021; Motala and Menon 2020; Porter et al. 2021). Scholars such as Hlatshwayo, Khumalo, and Nzimande (2021), Maphalala et al. (2021) and Du Preez and Le Grange (2020) theorise the complexities of teaching and learning during the pandemic, with many of our students living in remote parts of the country and being left behind academically in their studies. For Phindile, part of the problem with representing students during the Covid pandemic and attempting to deliver on her elected mandate, is that the university took advantage of the emergency remote teaching with students being off campus, thus the possibilities of disrupting academic programmes and initiating protest actions were greatly reduced. For her, this benefited academics and compromised the academic / social / psychological wellbeing of students:

"Students have issues and what I have noticed is that staff from XXX is very very arrogant. So, because they are also working from home nabo, nathi we are working from home so the only way to communicate is via email as we cannot have their personal numbers and we cannot share their personal numbers with the students. So you found out that they don't respond to emails, its actually worse when students send email, istaff is very arrogant, you know issues are solved much quicker if we are all in campus because they know very well we would strike, we would disturb all academic activities, but when we are at home, its impossible because you cannot tell people not to login on Zoom [soft laugh]." (Phindile).

Writing in a paper titled, "South African student leadership unrest and unsettled constructions: A Cibart analysis", Neo Pule (2017) argues that conflicts and tensions are a key feature of

student leadership, with conflicts ranging between the SRC members themselves, between the SRC and university management, and between the SRC and students. As reflected by Phindile above, Pule argues on what he calls the “still born metaphor” to describe and theorise the anxieties and frustrations that student leaders often experience when they realise that they cannot achieve what they had set out to achieve for students. This tension and frustration could be reflective of Boughey and McKenna (2021)’s argument on what they term the “decontextualized approaches” to higher education, that is, instead of the institutions of higher learning responding to structural / social / comprehensive challenges that student leaders are struggling and grappling with in carrying out their elected mandate, they tend to adopt neoliberal, individualistic, linear and prescriptive that serve as “piece meal” solutions to otherwise more systemic and complex problems.

Although peripheral as an emergent theme in the data collection process, what also came out during the interviews was the idea of the intersectional connections of power, patronage and abuse within student leadership. Various student leaders were able to use / abuse / manipulate their proximity to the different university offices for their own gain. For Busi, a research participant, she comments on the apparent normalisation of the “abuse of power” within student leadership and how it has become normalised / acceptable / palatable to jump university rules and regulations to gain whatever one desired;

“Across the spectrum of XXX, SRC members do abuse their power here and there. Especially when it comes to accessing university resources, they do use their proximity to get ahead. An example would be, because it was agreed to not be e-res during lockdown. Even SRC members were not allowed in the residences, but because I am an SRC. They used the SRC status to jump regulations set by the university to gain access within the institution. ... But it is like power, it does something to the head, you end up having a disregard for other individuals because wena you are in a position of authority. Because you want to make other officials feel that you are in power. We are all guilty of it to be honest.” (Busi).

In the above comment, Busi comments on various ways in which students’ leaders misuse / abuse / manipulate their elected offices to access benefit and patronage. Through their complex knowledge and understanding of institutional policies, practices, offices and personnel that work there, it becomes easier for the student leaders to use their roles to gain access to these privileges and to benefit from them. This is similarly echoed on by another research participant Sfiso, who argues that he personally knows of student leaders who have been living beyond their means, it is just that he himself has been “unfortunate” not to have lived such a life:

“It does happen at some point finding SRC members living beyond their means or luxurious life. One may never know where that comes from. Unfortunately, I am one who has not happened to

experience that, to live a life that is beyond my means or a luxurious life. I have only been given authorized benefits by the university to honour us. I mean we sacrifice lot during our term so the university should at least honour us in that manner. I mean I stayed in a flat and had access to transport whenever I needed it, I am talking about those kinds of benefits. Not anything beyond that. And I must say that it happens.” (Sfiso).

The comments by Sfiso and Busi are reflective of the South African political literature that has often focused on the looting, stealing and plundering of state resources by the current political leadership, and its inability to tackle deep rooted systemic corruption, patronage, and networks of kleptocratic stealing (Bello 2021; Kroukamp 2006; Moosa 2019). We could read the normalisation of corruption and theft in the SRC and in student leadership as forming part of that broader political crisis in South Africa and in the global South (see Bitterhout and Simo-Kengne 2020; Kesar et al. 2022; Vadra 2017), where theft and looting are seen as a normal way of life, and that ethical conduct, accountability and responsibility are being seen as secondary. This often operates under the discourse of “its now our turn to eat”, that they feel entitled and deserving (Jansen 2013), as symbolised by Sfiso’s attempt at justifying corruption in student leadership because he feels that “we sacrifice lot during our term”, thereby deserving and worthy of the plundering, and stealing during their term of office.

Simla Dipnarain (2021) cautions us that the access to power and patronage plays a significant role in the perpetration of intimate partner violence in university residences. Put differently, Dipnarain draws the fine line for us in connecting student leadership with the emergence, perpetration and protection of those who commit gender based violence on campus. Dipnarain, citing a female SRC leader, comments on the challenges of confronting intimate partner violence when prominent student leaders were perpetrators themselves, and often turned a blind eye to such accusation. In Dipnarain’s study, the woman student leader narrates that, “I tried to speak to the other male leaders, but because I was the only female in the SRC structure, I was experiencing oppression. For my voice in most cases would not be heard. Only when they needed me I would be heard, but for that particular situation I was not needed, so they did everything in their power to ensure that whatever I did, did not succeed and I failed to assist that student.” (Dipnarain 2021, 99–100). Dipnarain concludes that instead of confronting and tackling the complexities of gender-based violence in all its forms and using their authority to get justice for the victims, men student leaders often resort to heteronormativity and patriarchal leadership in protecting one another and frustrating any possibilities for justice, and accountability. These gender dynamics and power inequality between men and women student leaders also manifested themselves in how women SRC leaders are deliberately and politically treated differently compared to their men counterparts. Narrating her journey into the SRC, and

how to she came to joining a student political party and serve in the SRC, Phindile, tells this gendered and patriarchal story of how women are cautioned against joining politics, as women are often seen as “sex objects” for the sexual pleasure and enjoyment of male comrades, and that women leaders are often subjected to this form of abuse;

“I wanted to see for myself why we are being told to stay away from these guys, what is it that they are doing, I had an interest in leadership, like I said I am the kind of person that is free and talkative. So I joined amagroup ko facebook and kukhomentwa [commenting], then I guess, they saw me form the comments, ask a lot of questions] ama question nani nani because the platform we use to update ama student is Facebook, because we don't have privileges like other campuses to have our own website yet. So I got along with comrades, I got acquainted with them. I got to see how they lived, their views nje on and I saw a lot of things. They had this idea that women in general were always going to be in fear in their organization. That women were always going to be sexual objects, that they will sleep with them.” (Phindile).

Phindile's narrative reveals the complex manner in which gendered power, toxic forms of masculinity, and political structures intersect to produce new forms of marginality and structural oppression for women who are interested in student leadership at university. This socially constructed culture where women have to sleep with male comrades in order to enter and succeed in student politics creates / maintains / reproduces this toxic, abusive and unaccountable culture. Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) write that sexual harassment, the normalisation of sexual harassment, toxic masculinities, a culture of silence and lack of active leadership has gradually become a global phenomenon in higher education, and has enabled the prevalence and proliferation of sexual harassment in the sector, with women who are interested in leadership bearing the brunt of that. In the book, “Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience”, a large number of Black women academics support these arguments and argue that academics predominantly based in historically white universities often find themselves having to negotiate an alienating institutional culture, patriarchy, heteronormativity, harassment, abuse, cognitive and intellectual abuse in the university (Khunou et al. 2019). For Mahabeer, Nzimande, and Shoba (2018), this represents the social disconnection between the grand narratives and aspirations of the higher education institutions claiming to be inclusive / democratic / tolerant bastions for everyone versus the crippling reality on the ground where women students / academics find themselves grappling with the systems of white imperialist patriarchy.

It was Magoqwana, Maqabuka, and Tshoedi (2019) in a paper titled, ““Forced to care” at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by Black women academics in the South African university”, who introduce the term “black nannies” in the university. The term was used to refer to that unpaid / under-appreciated / exploitative / un-

recognised emotional labour that Black women academics are forced to take on in the university, often resembling the structural oppression / marginality / abuse that domestic workers experience when working for their “madams” and “baas” in the informal sector (see Cock 1989; De Villiers and Taylor 2019; Jansen 2019). We see the same patterns when exploring how women student leaders perceive and conceptualise their role in the university. They seem to take on this unpaid “care work”. Often through heteronormativity, patriarchal sexism and gendered power relations, women SRC leaders are often delegated to deal with “care work”. Commenting on this challenge, Busi narrates that because of her gender, men SRC leaders would automatically delegate her as the person responsible for gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and all forms of sexual harassment because she is a woman and is therefore deemed to be “nurturing” and fit to handle such matters, resulting in her becoming that “Black nanny” for the SRC:

“Being the only female in the structure in XXX exposed me a lot to cases of assaults and violence towards other students. Because the male members, even if the students report the case to them, they would just pass it down to me because as females we are the ones who are nurturing, and we are the ones that are understanding. So, I guess the way I approached some of the cases inspired confidence in others to bring forward.” (Busi).

Overall, the SRC appears to have a complex conception of the role(s) and functions of the student leadership in the South African academy. The narratives of the student leaders appear to show that the SRC believe that they are the only valid and legitimate voice that represents student interests in the academy. They also begin to show, how for them, their role appears to have an existential / organisation tension with the university, feeling misrecognised / unappreciated / antagonised by the academy. These conceptions of their role and functions in the academy are not innocent or neutral, and this is seen with the discursive operations of power and gendered power dynamics playing a significant role in how they carry out their responsibilities and the ability to deliver on their elected mandate. Furthermore, and perhaps more troubling, the heteronormative and patriarchal structures within student leadership has enabled and facilitated the leaders themselves to see various causes such as gender-based violence and other forms of harassment as largely a woman’s role. This has resulted in women student leaders accepting this patriarchal reality and framework and working within it to offer help and support on the various “nurturing” and “care” work that is imposed on them.

We now turn to the conclusion, to offer some parting thoughts and recommendations on what is to be done regarding the SRC, student leadership, and the future of the university in South Africa.

SOME PARTING SHOTS ...

The SRC plays a significant role in the governance system in the South African higher education system. They represent a key and essential stakeholder in governance and management that speaks for and represents the well-being and interests of students in the university. Largely driven by that logic, this article was an attempt at exploring / understanding / theorising how the SRC conceptualises student leadership, as well as how they navigate and negotiate their roles and responsibly in the academy. In this article, student engagement with university processes appeared to be a complex and intersectional process. This included the SRC seeing themselves as the necessary structural interface between the student and the university leadership; navigating challenges of leading and governing during an unprecedented pandemic, as well as the gendered-patriarchal nature of student leadership / governance, where women leaders commented on the burden being imposed on them to deliver on the “care work” that is expected on by patriarchy. Furthermore, the article also revealed the seeming normalization of corruption and looting within student leadership offices, with some student leaders legitimating the corruption as part of the broader benefits of serving students. This narrative, no doubt linked to the broader national discourse on seeing the state as a trough that needs to be plundered and looted at all costs. This needs to be tackled, critiqued, challenged and hopefully exposed as it has serious implications not only for students’ wellbeing in higher education but more broadly for South Africa as a developing country.

Based on the above conclusion and in light of our discussions, we make the following recommendation:

- A careful study is required to see to what extent, the SRC has changed / transformed / shifted in how they understand student leadership post the gains of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall.
- Better monitoring / policing systems are required at institutional level to ensure that there are adequate financial and fiduciary checks and balances in student governance that will hopefully reduce and mitigate against the looting and corruption in student leadership offices.
- A much more targeted study is urgently required that will foreground the complex and rich experiences of women SRC leaders regarding how they navigate, negotiate and handle what is increasingly becoming a patriarchal organisation in the SRC. This research will help formulate some targeted solutions that will help challenge / overcome / dismantle the gendered power structures that manifests itself through student leadership

in general and in the SRC in particular. Failure to do this, we argue, women SRC leaders will continue to be forced to operate within the established patriarchal cultural system, that forces them to become the “Black nannies” of student leadership.

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NOTE

1. We are not suggesting that the SRC had not played any significant national role in our history, Badat (2016) in his seminal paper, “From SASO to SANSCO, 1968–1990”, carefully traces for us the important role played by the SRC, Black student leaders, and student movements in challenging / confronting / dismantling the apartheid regime.

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