**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE SUPPORTS CALLS FOR MORE WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND OTHER ACADEMIC FIELDS**

Rigid gender norms, imbalances of power and patriarchy are still excluding women from institutions of higher learning. This was a view expressed by the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Innovation during its engagement with the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF) and the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE).

The NACI is an advisory body to government on science, technology and innovation and it gave a presentation on women’s participation in science, while the ASSAF, which represents South Africa in the international community of science academies, gave a presentation on women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM).

The NACI said there is an increase in the number of women enrolling in these fields, most notably in the health, life, physical and social sciences. However, much more can still be done to improve women’s inclusion and participation in academia. The committee supported this sentiment, emphasising the importance of these subjects in primary schools.

Meanwhile, ASSAF commended the NACI’s work, saying that women represent a meagre 33,3 per cent of researchers globally, while fewer than four per cent of Nobel prizes for science have been awarded to women. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in most scientific disciplines, publish fewer articles and receive fewer citations.

ASSAF then mentioned some of the interventions that have been put in place to address these disparities, such as the Women in Leadership series supported by the Water Research Commission and the South African Bureau of Standards. In addition, the United Nation’s Organisation for Women in Science for the Developing World aims to increase women’s participation in scientific and technological research and in leadership roles.

In its briefing report to the committee, the CGE noted that it conducted follow-up transformation hearings in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in 2021/22 to determine compliance with the CGE’s 2020/21 report recommendations. These hearings set out to address the vulnerabilities and risks experienced by women in TVET colleges, as well as the obstacles they face in the workplace, which existing legislation is failing to address. The four TVET colleges that took part were Waterberg, Nkangala, Northern Cape Urban and Southwest Gauteng.

The CGE said most TVET colleges do not have sexual harassment policies in place, nor accurate statistics regarding the number of pending harassment cases reported. The committee was concerned to hear this, saying some TVET colleges blame the Department of Higher Education and Training for their failures to implement such policies. In light of the high prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa, the committee also called on the CGE to do more to protect women.

The CGE also noted that many TVET colleges do not provide enough employment opportunities for the disabled. Furthermore, the Northern Cape TVET College was uncooperative with the transformation hearings. The committee asked the Higher Education department to provide it with a progress report on implementing the CGE’s recommendations on TVET colleges.

The committee was also concerned to note the poor representation of women in the decision-making structures at TVET colleges and said more work needs to be done to robustly address the gender inequalities in the sector.

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