



From the desk of the Women's Wing

Refusing the mask: My truth as a woman leading in academia

Natalie Schellack, professor and head of the Department of Pharmacology, University of Pretoria

There's a particular kind of photograph that circulates in academic circles: the smiling graduate, the proud supervisor, the sense that all is well behind the scenes. But the truth is, the real work of academia is rarely so tidy. The journey is messy, nonlinear, and sometimes painfully slow. It doesn't fit into a neat "before and after" story. Admitting that "I'm still in the thick of it" can feel radical, even risky. Yet, I've come to believe that authenticity – raw and unpolished – is quietly magnetic. People recognise honesty the way you recognise the smell of rain after a long drought of artificial air freshener.



As a professor and department head, I have often felt the pressure to wear a mask of composure and perfection. The expectation is to keep everything running smoothly, to never show fatigue or doubt, and to always have the answers. But the reality is, leadership is often lonely. There are days when I feel invisible, my contributions overlooked or deferred. I have found myself working twice as hard for half the recognition. My concerns, when voiced, are sometimes dismissed as "overly sensitive" or "emotional" – labels that sting, especially when they come from those who understand the weight of this work.

The truth is, even in positions of authority, it can be difficult to be yourself. There is a subtle but persistent pressure to conform, to minimise parts of yourself that don't fit the prevailing narrative. Sometimes, the greatest challenge is not the workload itself, but the emotional labour of maintaining the mask.

One of the most insidious aspects of academic toxicity is the so-called "queen bee syndrome". This phenomenon describes women in positions of authority who are more critical of their female subordinates, sometimes undermining or withholding opportunities from them. Research shows that this is not about individual failings, but about the way academic institutions reward masculine traits and force women to distance themselves from other women to survive. The result is a culture where women, even in leadership, feel isolated and unsupported, expected to emulate the very behaviors that excluded them in the first place.

This is not just my story – it is echoed in studies across the globe. Women in academia are more likely to experience harassment, discrimination and exclusion from exciting tasks and promotions. Those with caregiving responsibilities face additional penalties, and mentorship opportunities remain scarce.

"Rather than seeing the need to fix the system, women feel like they need to fix themselves ... We must value the diversity of what women bring to leadership, instead of just promoting more of the same" – Dr. Tessie Herbst.

When we allow ourselves – and each other – to be real, we create space for genuine connection and growth

I've felt the sting of being questioned, of having my worth measured against invisible yardsticks. Sometimes, it's a public belittling or a subtle dismissal. Sometimes, it's simply being left out of the conversation. These moments are rarely spoken about openly, but they are an open secret – an undercurrent that so many of us feel, yet we rarely name. And knowing I'm not alone doesn't make it hurt any less.

I find myself asking, does this count as bullying? The word feels heavy, but I can't deny the toll it takes on my

mental health. The anxiety, the self-doubt, the way these experiences linger long after the moment has passed. Research shows that bullying and toxic environments in academia are alarmingly common, with real consequences for wellbeing and productivity.

I've watched many of my colleagues and students struggle under the weight of power abuse and poor mentorship. Some leave academia altogether, their passion dimmed by a culture that too often rewards competition over compassion. Surveys and studies suggest that negative experiences with senior colleagues are widespread, but I suspect the true scale is even larger – a quiet tide of stories that never make it into official reports.

What makes this even more complex is the tension around status and recognition. In academic spaces, there's often an unspoken hierarchy about whose expertise matters most. Are we not all here to contribute to knowledge and learning? Yet, I've seen – and felt – how certain backgrounds or titles are privileged, while others are quietly sidelined. The very qualities and experiences that helped me rise to my position now sometimes feel like reasons for my voice to be discounted.

And then there's the extra layer: the subtle, sometimes overt, experience of exclusion based on race. In a diverse but divided environment, I've felt the ache of not belonging, of being on the outside looking in. It's a contradiction at the heart of academia, which claims to value diversity but often struggles to live up to its ideals.

So what can we do? I know I can't change the system overnight. The unpaid labour, the rigid hierarchies, the pressure to produce more and more – these are woven into the fabric of academic life. But I can choose how I show up. I can choose to treat others with respect, to listen, to speak up when I see something wrong and to support those who feel unseen. Change starts with the small things: the conversations we have, the kindness we show and the courage to be real.

I choose to carry it with openness and integrity. I want to show the process, not just the polished result. I want to give others permission to drop their masks, even if just for

a moment. Because when we allow ourselves – and each other – to be real, we create space for genuine connection and growth.

If you, too, sometimes feel that you are “still in the thick of it”, know that you are not alone. The mask may be rewarded, but it is authenticity that truly sustains us. My hope is that by sharing the unvarnished truth of this journey, I can help make space for others to do the same.

Source: LinkedIn, 19 May 2025. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/refusing-mask-my-truth-woman-leading-academia-natalie-schellack-zl0yf/?trackingId=xtHGQxrzdZGiZ7WPeaRrZQ%3D%3D>.

“A mask of compassion and perfection”

This phenomenon describes so many of us women within the healthcare industry. The profession, when balanced with one's own personal and family commitments, can easily become overwhelming.

We need to show ourselves grace and know we are imperfectly perfect human beings.

We need to take off the mask so we can not only breathe but show off our beautiful smiles.

Dr Sisanda Mabude, WW Committee



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Letters to the Editor page aims to give members the opportunity to comment on, query, complain or compliment on any matter, topic, incident, event or issue in their particular field or with regard to general healthcare, which you feel should be shared with your colleagues and fellow readers.

Please note that letters:

- should be no longer than 500 words
- can be published anonymously, but writer details must be submitted to the editor in confidence
- must be on subjects pertinent to healthcare delivery
- should be submitted before the 6th of the month in order to be published in the next issue of *SAMA Insider*.

Please email contributions to: Diane de Kock, dianed@samedical.org.

