



PROCEEDINGS REPORT

ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative: Gender Equity And Persons With Disabilities

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The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) was inaugurated in May 1996. It was formed in response to the need for an academy of science consonant with the dawn of democracy in South Africa: activist in its mission of using science and scholarship for the benefit of society, with a mandate encompassing all scholarly disciplines that use an open-minded and evidence-based approach to build knowledge. ASSAf, thus, adopted in its name the term 'science' in the singular as reflecting a common way of enquiring rather than an aggregation of different disciplines. Its Members are elected based on a combination of two principal criteria, academic excellence and significant contributions to society. The Parliament of South Africa passed the Academy of Science of South Africa Act (No 67 of 2001), which came into force on 15 May 2002. This made ASSAf the only academy of science in South Africa officially recognised by government and representing the country in the international community of science academies and elsewhere.

This report reflects the proceedings report of The Launch of the ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative for Gender Equity and Persons with Disabilities) as part of Science Forum South Africa 2023 Panel Discussion. The views expressed are those of the individual participants and not necessarily those of the Academy, nor are they a consensus view of the Academy based on an in-depth evidence-based study.





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Welcome Remarks: Prof Olubukola Oluranti Babalola (ASSAf Member, Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World, The World Academy of Sciences [African Region] (Facilitator)

Prof Olubukola Babalola welcomed participants to the launch and thanked the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) for organising the event. She mentioned that as the Vice President of the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD) (African Region), she has a passion for women in science, and was privileged to lead these discussions. The event brought together champions of inclusivity and equity and it was a testament to the transformative power at the intersection of innovation and diversity. It offered an opportunity to reflect on the multifaceted challenges faced by women and persons with disabilities in the form of visible and invisible barriers that hindered the full and equal participation of these groups in various facets of society.

She further alluded that the discussions at the current launch would focus on actionable solutions, through innovation, with the potential to dismantle traditional obstacles and also to find ways for new inclusive pathways. Innovation was not only about technological advances, but also entailed approaches and attitudes within systems and the conviction to create a space where talent from all sources could be recognised. Innovation could catalyse positive change by harnessing the power of creativity, collaboration and technology, building bridges to replace barriers.

Prof Babalola encouraged delegates to participate in the session actively, and to contribute valuable perspectives and experiences towards building a more inclusive society with a shared commitment of removing barriers to equity.

Overview of the ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative: Dr Tebogo Mabotha (ASSAf)

Dr Mabotha provided a policy landscape and an overview of how the ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative came about. South Africa's Bill of Rights promotes the protection of the rights of all people living in the country. Furthermore, South Africa is a signatory to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and two of those goals are especially relevant to the Inclusivity Initiative, namely Goal 5, which promotes gender equality, and Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities.

Many South Africans live with disabilities, both visible and invisible, which often results in discrimination against them. The 2016 White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹ seeks to safeguard the rights of all persons living with disabilities. Disability Awareness Month, celebrated in November each year, seeks to increase awareness of everyday aspects of life that are not accessible and available to disabled persons and also to offer opportunities of improving their quality of life.

As a membership-based organisation, ASSAf has almost 700 members, most of whom are male academics (70%). Statistics on persons with disabilities participating in the academic sector are often lacking, and ASSAf is no exception in this regard. In spite of legislative prerogatives, initiatives to promote the participation of women and people living with disabilities are slow to produce significant change, and the contributions of women to socioeconomic development and leadership are not yet sufficiently recognised.

As a result, ASSAf developed a transformation strategy which incorporated the 2019 White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) as one of many instruments to guide the organisation in prioritising inclusivity and transformation in STI. ASSAf deliberately embarked

¹ https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201603/39792gon230.pdf

on two (2) new initiatives to complement the current activities in supporting the advancement of ASSAf's Transformation Strategy; the ASSAf Institutional Roadshows and the ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative, respectively. The ASSAf Roadshows provide a platform for ASSAf to engage with institutions of higher learning, prioritising, the historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). ASSAf visited two (2) institutions in Limpopo to create awareness about the Academy to potentially enlarge the pool of membership from these institutions. The ASSAf Inclusivity Initiative for Gender Equity and Persons with Disabilities on the other hand specifically focuses on raising awareness of the barriers impeding equal opportunities and access to Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) by women, young girls and, persons with disabilities within the National System of Innovation.

The purpose of the launch was to raise awareness on the Initiative and to seek partnerships from beyond the academic sector. Dr Mabotha called for inputs and contributions from participants towards the ASSAf initiative and also to work collaboratively with other stakeholders in taking the initiative to a wider audience within the NSI system.

Lead Address: Dr Anlia Pretorius (University of the Witwatersrand, Wits)

The address focused on the intersectionality between disability and gender in academia and science. Disability and the lack of inclusivity were often not considered in the daily context of training and research institutions, where students with special needs were not accommodated. Dr Pretorius congratulated ASSAf for embarking on this journey.

Gender, disability and inclusivity were human rights issues, and the South African Constitution enshrined the rights of citizens at all levels. The Human Rights Commission had declared that all people should be valued as members of a barrier-free society and treated with dignity and respect. This included respect for differences, equal opportunities, access, and full participation and fundamental rights in all aspects of life, including the right to education.

The barriers to achieve this were numerous and all-prevailing. These included physical, academic and emotional impediments, ignorance, lack of funding and limited resources, unwillingness to accommodate persons with needs, lack of accountability, stigmatisation, labelling, discrimination and inaccessible facilities. In many cases, the barriers were not intentional but arose from lack of knowledge and awareness. In the teaching and learning environment, the secondary school system and special-needs schools were often not geared towards inclusivity, resulting in students that were unprepared for university.

Research had demonstrated a causal link between disability and poverty. This was more pronounced when gender was also a factor, and the intersection of disability, race and gender compounded negative outcomes for black women with disabilities. This led to economic disparities, social exclusion and untapped potential for the country.

The solutions required that persons with disabilities should be mainstreamed as an integrated part of society, however difficult that might be. Institutions must create spaces where commitment to transformation, inclusivity and diversity was visible and formed part of the institutional fabric. Stakeholders needed to take responsibility for creating a welcoming and accessible environment. An enabling platform to humanise people's experiences could only be achieved by recognising the inherent dignity and rights of all people, while creating a climate where differences were celebrated.

Barrier-free education required universal access and universal design for learning. This entailed modifying environments and allowing for reasonable accommodations to

facilitate disabled students' needs, thus enhancing their chances to study successfully.

South Africa had effective and well-considered disability policies, but implementation was lacking. For example, in the academic sector, reasonable accommodation was required to create equal opportunities and assist in minimising the barriers preventing students with disabilities from learning and demonstrating what they had learned. This could be achieved through innovation and assistive technologies.

Dr Pretorius concluded by mentioning that to enable inclusivity and equity for all, the main priority was increasing sensitivity and mainstreaming through education and awareness, not only at universities, but in all spheres of society. In the academic sector, universal access and universal design for learning were crucial to provide equitable opportunities.

Panel Responses

Ms Dineo Mmako (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, DWYPD)

Ms Mmako praised ASSAf for taking the lead in this important matter. Essentially, the initiative was about transformation and addressing the triple challenge of South African society, namely inequality affecting women, youth and persons with disabilities; unemployment of women and youth; and poverty, which disproportionately impacted these groups. From the perspective of the South African government, the biggest barriers were the patriarchal society and the embedded legacy of apartheid. Transformation to free South Africa from these barriers was not yet institutionalised, and systems to enforce change were lacking.

At government level, there were policies in place for transformation and inclusivity that formed part of the Mid-term Strategic Framework (MTSF). The Gender Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework, developed by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities in 2019, *highlighted the importance of prioritising budgeting, monitoring and evaluation in the planning process* in order to succeed with implementation plans around transformation. The framework had been developed to close the gaps of social and economic exclusion and called for system-wide transformation in implementation programmes. Furthermore, the principles of transformation and inclusivity needed to be internalised in institutions to become a conscious factor in all cycles of their implementation programmes. *On a practical level, this meant that in institutional plans, the needs and priorities of women and persons with disabilities should be reflected.* The critical success factor in implementing these plans was the availability of funds. Budgets determined the progress that could be made, and it was important that the budget was aligned to the plans.

Ms Mmako said that for South Africa to prosper economically and socially, it was important for the women of South Africa (who constituted about 51% of the population) to prosper.

Mr Mark Bannister (Department of Water and Sanitation, DWS)

Mr Bannister's life was a demonstration that everything was possible for a person such as himself, living with a disability. As an engineer working in water and sanitation, he ensured that every project in which he was involved had an aspect of disability included in the design, such as providing wheelchair access.

He emphasised on the social model of disability, namely, defining a person with a disability not in terms of their medical condition, but by the spaces and environment in which they found themselves, and the barriers existing in these. These barriers could be technical, such as a lack of ramps and railings, or social, such as discrimination and ignorance. Removing

these barriers had the effect of removing the disability. In his experience, the social barriers were much less of a problem in African countries than in Europe and America because people had a better understanding of community values in Africa.

Mr Bannister mentioned that in the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), projects were approached from the outset with the intent of removing technical and social barriers, by acknowledging the human point of view. There were many solutions and standards to accommodate disabilities, but too often these were used as tick-boxes for compliance, and were meaningless on a practical level. Often the interventions were reactive, ineffective and insufficiently planned. Not including issues of disability in relation to gender in workplaces and public areas excluded access to about 6% of the population, and employers thus miss out on the value that could be contributed by this sector of the population.

The challenge was posed to everybody present to change their mindsets in their workspaces and their environments, and to take steps towards making a difference to ensure an inclusive society.

Ms Bongjwe Mkhithika (Department of Science and Innovation, DSI)

Ms Mkhithika thanked ASSAf for its commitment in launching the initiative and stated that DSI is looking forward to the progress and the outcomes. She mentioned that the DSI understood the importance of STI in addressing gender equality and equity, and had policies in place to address issues affecting women and people with disabilities. The 2019 White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation advocated the use of technology and innovation to enable inclusivity and promote sustainable development. It aspired to increase the number of black persons, women and people with disabilities in management positions, research programmes and technology-based professions. The White Paper established policy directives for transformation initiatives to ensure inclusivity in the sector and to change the ownership of the economy through STI.

She further emphasised that STI tools were important in addressing the empowerment of women and developing solutions for removing barriers to people living with disabilities. The DSI is increasing its advocacy and engagement with stakeholders and entities falling under the landscape of the department to ensure adherence to the framework developed by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities.

Mr Gerhard Coetzee (INVEN-D)

INVEN-D is a company that addresses mobility challenges by tailoring equipment and devices to meet individual needs, it is based in Cape Town. Mr Coetzee said that persons with disabilities should be seen as differently abled, and that, equipment and devices could make a positive difference in their lives. Products designed for specific disabilities could be adjusted and adapted to work for other types of users and disabilities. In many cases, patients released from hospitals struggled to use facilities in their own homes. However, simple adjustments and design changes of home facilities could enable to resume their normal lives.

His experience in this field has taught him that in designing products, it was important to engage with potential end users to establish their requirements and learn what kinds of solutions would work for them. Persons living with disabilities often knew what would work best; thus, tapping into their personal experiences, designs could be more practicable.

A company such as INVEN-D can act as a link between policies and commitments to assist those living with disabilities, and the theoretical aspects of design and technical mechanisms. ***By engaging in dialogue with disabled persons as end users, and carers as supporting persons, the best solutions could be realised.***

Q&A and Discussions: Ms Susan Veldsman (ASSAf) (Moderator)

(Comment)

Gender and sexual identity should not be overlooked, and should not receive attention merely as a 'tick-box' requirement. Deep conversation with gender scholars was required to sensitise, acknowledge and incorporate these issues. There was no distinction in the presentations between 'gender' and 'sexual orientation'. It was problematic if policies and frameworks did not use the appropriate terminology. The use of correct language made a big difference in the effectiveness of interventions; in this regard, closer collaboration with gender scholars was necessary.

(Response) Dr Pretorius, Wits

Considering inclusivity from the perspective of the social justice model would assist in placing the issues within a bigger context and linking separate discourses, and would help to address different aspects of gender more comprehensively.

(Question)

There is a need to see equality of outcomes in the representation of men and women in different fields. In reality, however, men and women naturally tend to gravitate towards different careers and fields of interest. The question was whether it was more important to balance the numbers, or to enable persons to follow their interests irrespective of gender.

(Response) Ms Mkhithika, DSI

The barrier of patriarchy had more impact than was often realised. Society had defined and internalised the respective roles of men and women, which had become deeply entrenched and were complex issues to resolve. Representation, recognition and access were key issues in the value chain of human resources. The aim should not merely be to balance gender numbers, but to transform society so as to afford equal opportunities for all.

(Comment)

It was important in research institutions and universities to create awareness of and respect for differently-abled persons. The challenge to all personnel at such institutions was to enhance mindfulness in simple, realistic and practical ways.

(Response) Mr Bannister, DWS

This was an important and valid comment. The DWS occasionally organised awareness games where staff had to roleplay different disabilities. This was an effective way of building personal awareness of what a disability entailed. The DWS also had a Disability Forum that arranged awareness events.

(Comment from the SABS)

The South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) requested an opportunity at future events of the Inclusivity Initiative to share their experience of activities on which they had embarked.

(Question)

South Africa had good policies, regulations and standards, but implementation was problematic. How could the implementation of frameworks ensure betterment of communities?

(Response) Ms Mkhithika, DSI

Policy implementation was a general challenge that institutions were grappling with. It could be questioned whether policies were indeed good if they were difficult to implement. Appetite and passion for policy implementation were required for success. There were examples of institutions that were succeeding in policy implementation, despite resource constraints, due to willingness and dedication to action.

(Comment)

Behavioural attitudes within society were concerning; for example, when able-bodied persons park in spaces designated for disabled persons. Societal changes of attitude have to begin at the individual level.

Closing Remarks: Dr Tozama Qwebani (ASSAf)

Dr Qwebani thanked the panellists and participants for contributing to the event and for sharing their lived experiences, not dwelling only on the barriers but offering solutions while celebrating differences.

She mentioned that ASSAf was established through an Act of Parliament to address the need for an Academy of Science that would reflect the democratic values of equality, dignity and freedom. The Inclusivity Initiative demonstrated ASSAf's dedication to these values. Participants were invited to partner with ASSAf and to contribute to this initiative going forward.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF ACRONYMS

ASSAf	Academy of Science of South Africa
DSI	Department of Science and Innovation
DWS	Department of Water and Sanitation
DWYPD	Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
OWSD	Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
TWAS	The World Academy of Sciences