



Claude-Hélène Mayer  
Elisabeth Vanderheiden  
Orna Braun-Lewensohn · Gila Chen  
Kiyoko Sueda · Brightness Mangolothi  
Saba Safdar · Soyeon Kim *Editors*

# Women's Empowerment for a Sustainable Future

Transcultural and Positive  
Psychology Perspectives



Springer

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Editors

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Perspectives

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*A Woman in harmony with her spirit  
is like a river flowing.  
She goes where she will  
without pretense and arrives at her  
destination  
prepared to be herself  
and only herself.  
—Maya Angelou*

# Contents

<b>Women’s Empowerment for a Sustainable Future World: Transcultural and Positive Psychology Perspectives . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Claude-Hélène Mayer and Elisabeth Vanderheiden	
<b>Part I Personal and Structural Resources for Women’s Empowerment</b>	
<b>Creating Women’s Empowerment Through the Constructive Mastery of Life Crises . . . . .</b>	<b>13</b>
Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Hélène Mayer	
<b>Transforming Intercultural Critical Incidents of Women Into Transcultural and Transcendental Growth Experiences . . . . .</b>	<b>31</b>
Claude-Hélène Mayer, Ashley Jacobs, Mahlatse Malesa, Jessica Meiring, and Bianca Victor	
<b>Women’s Empowerment through Intercultural Communication and Identity Development in South Africa . . . . .</b>	<b>49</b>
Shamini Chetty, Anike Theron, Lindiwe Sibisi, Dikeledi Hlongwane, and Claude-Hélène Mayer	
<b>Sense of Coherence of Institution-Confined Teenage Girls at Risk . . . . .</b>	<b>65</b>
Gillie Pragai Olswang, Orna Braun-Lewensohn, and Tal Litvak-Hirsch	
<b>Young Female Current and Former Service Users and Female Staff Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of the Women’s Courtyards . . . . .</b>	<b>83</b>
Gila Amitay and Dalit Yassour-Borochowitz	
<b>Implementing a Strengths and Competencies Based Wellness Program for Mothers Living in a South African High-Risk Community . . . . .</b>	<b>95</b>
Izanette van Schalkwyk and Anthony V. Naidoo	

<b>Psychological Perspectives on Financial Empowerment of BIPOC/Non-WEIRD Women</b> . . . . .	113
Sadé Soares and Nancy M. Sidun	
<b>“Women Can’t Manage Farms”: Empowerment of Women in Agriculture</b> . . . . .	125
Judith L. Gibbons	
<b>Indian Women and Empowerment: A Kleinian Approach</b> . . . . .	139
Grace Maria Jochan and Trina Banerjee	
<b>Ubuntu: A Strategy for Empowering Rural Women and Transforming Lives Through Food Security Projects</b> . . . . .	153
Makwena Cate Molotja, Mosima Rachel Masekoameng, and Cynthia Hlekwise Smangele Ntuli	
<b>Part II Women’s Empowerment Through Education</b>	
<b>“Challenge Accepted and Mastered”: Empowerment of Women Through Formal Education</b> . . . . .	169
Elisabeth Vanderheiden	
<b>Empowering Female Offenders: A Model and Framework for Practice</b> . . . . .	197
Gila Chen	
<b>The Quest for Women’s Empowerment Through Collaboration and a Humanising Pedagogy: A Perspective from the Global South</b> . . . .	213
Heloise Sathorar, Deidre Geduld, Muki Moeng, Tobeka Mapasa, and Helena Oosthuizen	
<b>Trickle-Down Effect of Upbringing Conditions on Women Empowerment: A Study of Rural India</b> . . . . .	227
Sudatta Banerjee and Swati Alok	
<b>The Voice of Women in Higher Education: Current Perspectives of Students in Germany, Japan and Taiwan. A Contrastive Analysis of Western and Eastern Perceptions of Women Empowerment and Gender Roles Among Students</b> . . . . .	243
Siao-cing (Michelle) Guo, Eriko Katsumata, Birgit Kraus, and Renate Link	
<b>Stepping Stones to Empowerment for International STEM Students in Japan</b> . . . . .	271
Sandra Healy	

**Part III Women Empowerment in the Workplace**

**Remote Working as a Source of Women’s Leadership and Empowerment** . . . . . 283  
 Claude-Hélène Mayer and Elisabeth Vanderheiden

**A Predictive Model of Women’s Work Engagement** . . . . . 299  
 Karolina Łaba, Anita Bosch, and Madelyn Geldenhuys

**Towards Mainstreaming Gender Equality in the Workplace: A Gender Perspective on Advancing Transformation in South Africa** . . . . . 315  
 Zethu Mkhize

**Enhancing Psychological Capital and Career Development of Female Employees in South Korea: Focusing on Gender Diversity and Inclusion Climate and Open Leadership** . . . . . 329  
 Soyeon Kim

**South African Women Academics Navigating to the Top: A Positive Psychology 2.0 Perspective** . . . . . 347  
 Brightness Mangolothi

**Empowerment of Women Leaders in the Fourth Industrial Revolution** . . . . . 363  
 Rudolf M. Oosthuizen

**Wisdom Lies in the Eye of the Perceiver: Tracking the Architecture of Perceptual Leadership Wisdom** . . . . . 381  
 Birgit Breninger and Thomas Kaltenbacher

**Female Representation in Technical Roles Within the Performing Arts Industry** . . . . . 401  
 Lungisani Nkomo, Musawenkosi D. Saurombe, and Eugene T. Maziriri

**The Experiences of Women in Academic Leadership Positions in Cross-cultural Contexts in South Africa** . . . . . 419  
 Kathryn Anne Nel and Saraswathie Govender

**Women Leadership in the Transcontinental Country: A Study in Turkey** . . . . . 439  
 Ummugulsum Gunes and Wei-Wen Chang

**Women Struggling and Thriving in Higher Education: Exploring the Experiences of Women Researchers Through Social Dream Drawing** . . . . . 457  
 Antoni Barnard, Michelle S. May, Peliwe Mnguni, and Annelize van Niekerk

<b>Empowerment of Unemployed Women in Low Income Communities: A Wellness Perspective—Women Self-reliance for Sustainable Tomorrow in South Africa . . . . .</b>	477
Meahabo Dinah Magano and Hector Mothudi	
<b>Perspectives on Leadership and Management Challenges Facing Women Leaders in Rural Secondary Schools . . . . .</b>	491
Joyce Phikisile Dhlamini and Njabulo Khoza	
<b>Part IV Body and Sexuality as Resources for Women’s Empowerment</b>	
<b>Women’s Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights as an Empowerment Strategy Towards Sustainable Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa . . . . .</b>	513
Mathabo Khau	
<b>The Sexual Experience of Middle-Aged Married Women: Perceptions, Challenges and Course of Action . . . . .</b>	525
Tal Braverman-Uriel and Tal Litvak-Hirsch	
<b>Lived Menstrual Experiences of Blind Menstruators: Empowering Blind Menstruators for Sustainable Development . . . . .</b>	539
Kavita Gupta and Balvant Somabhai Parimal	
<b>Between Forcefully Surrendering and Willingly Submitting: Implementing the 12-Step Programme in Treating Women Suffering from Sexual-Related Trauma and Substance Use Disorder . . . . .</b>	553
Sharon Eytan and Tuly Flint	
<b>Part V Women’s Empowerment in Minority Contexts</b>	
<b>Experiences of Being a Muslim Hijab-Wearing Woman in Estonia: Personal Stories from Immigrant and Local Women . . . . .</b>	569
Syeda Reema Zakir and Anastassia Zabrodskaia	
<b>Empowering Widows in Low-Resourced Communities: Rethinking Multidisciplinary Interventions for Widowed Women in Low-Resourced Communities . . . . .</b>	579
Misheck Dube	
<b>Toward Autonomy and Empowerment: An Examination of Identity Amongst Iranian Migrant Women in Canada . . . . .</b>	599
Maryam Hosseini and Saba Safdar	
<b>Part VI Women’s Empowerment from a Gender Perspective</b>	
<b>Vignettes of Equality, Wellbeing and Teaching . . . . .</b>	617
Irma Eloff, Evi Agostini, Ann-Kathrin Dittrich, and Kgadi Mathabathe	



**Using Position of Power to Empower Women: Men in Action . . . . . 629**  
 Soyhan Egitim

**Media Contagion Suicides Among Married Women of India:  
 Rethinking Women’s Empowerment Practices in India . . . . . 643**  
 A. T.P Farisha, Athira Alex, and K. P. Sakkeel

**Psychological Empowerment and Intention to Quit: Is There a  
 Difference Between Female and Male Employees? . . . . . 659**  
 Hamza Smajić and Emil Knezović

**How Language Use Can Empower Women: The Discourse on  
 Gender-Equitable Language in Germany . . . . . 677**  
 Gundula Gwenn Hiller

**Part VII Women’s Empowerment: Examples of Outstanding Women**

**Remote Counselling from a Positive Psychology Perspective During  
 Covid-19 . . . . . 695**  
 Claude-Hélène Mayer

**Role of Social Capital in Career Development: Empowering a Japanese  
 Woman to Become an Executive at an International Company . . . . . 715**  
 Kiyoko Sueda

**Appreciating Women in Leadership . . . . . 731**  
 Sumeshni Govender, Sithabile Ntombela, and Siphellele S. Makhubu

**Activism, Advocacy, and Rebellion: Arab Women Through the Work  
 of Nawal El Saadawi . . . . . 753**  
 Shereen H. Shaw

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**Elisabeth Vanderheiden** is a pedagogue, theologian, intercultural mediator. She is the CEO of the Global Institute for Transcultural Research and the President of Catholic Adult Education in Germany. Her publishing activities focus not only on pedagogy, in particular on the further education of teachers and trainers in adult education, but also on the challenges and opportunities for digitalisation. She has edited books on intercultural and transcultural issues. Her most recent publications deal with shame as a resource, and with mistakes, errors, and failures and their hidden potentials in the context of culture and Positive Psychology. Current research projects deal with love in transcultural contexts, life crises, and humour in the

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**Kiyoko Sueda**, Ph.D., is a Professor at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan, and teaches interpersonal and intercultural communication. She served the Japan Communication Association as a board member from 2018–2022, and she served SIETAR Japan as Vice President from 1998–2001 and 2002–2004. Her research interests include face (social), identities, shame and pride in interpersonal and intercultural communication.

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# Women's Empowerment for a Sustainable Future World: Transcultural and Positive Psychology Perspectives



Claude-Hélène Mayer  and Elisabeth Vanderheiden 

**Abstract** This chapter builds the introductory part to the “**Women’s Empowerment for A Sustainable Future World. An Introduction to Transcultural and Positive Psychology Perspectives**”. It provides a brief theoretical overview on the state of the art in the research on women’s empowerment from diverse cultural and transcultural perspectives and provides insight into the chapters presented in this book.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Theories · Introduction · Positive psychology · Transculture

The empowerment of girls and women is considered a crucial factor for a sustainable future (United Nations, 2022). Structural change aimed at the “empowerment and participation of women and girls in shaping our world” (United Nations, 2022, 1) is considered substantial in terms of “ending poverty, inequality and violence and is urgently needed for a peaceful, just and sustainable world” (United Nations, 2022, 1). It is expected that women’s empowerment will have an impact on many levels and relate to many areas of life or fields of action, as it is considered to have a “leverage effect on economic growth and [economic and social] development”. It also influences, for example, “health, nutrition, and socioeconomic status of women and their children” (Asaolu et al., 2018). Huis et al. (2017) define this as an approach “through which women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Huis et al., 2017).

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Andriamahery and Qamruzzaman (2022) point out that women are treated less favourably than men, particularly because of the rules, norms, customs and character of society, leading to disadvantages at social, cultural, religious, economic and legal levels. This leads to multiple forms of discrimination against girls and women (Blödel, 2015, 18), e.g. institutional, individual, structural, symbolic, linguistic and every day.

The goal of empowerment concepts is described as “promoting people’s ability to shape their social lifeworld and their lives themselves and not to be shaped” (Stark, 2014, 536) and understood as “regaining personal agency” (Stark, 2014, 535). This involves recognising, (re)activating and promoting resources in order to enable people to take control of their own lives (Tschanz & Walzer, 2020). At the same time, the focus is on strengthening and expanding participation in socially relevant decisions (Stark, 2014, 538).

In the context of women’s empowerment, Kabeer (1999, 2003, 2008a, 2008b, 2014, 2021) draws particular attention to the power dimension and emphasises the great importance of choice. Choice touches on three interrelated dimensions: Resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). Consequently, Kabeer defines empowerment as “the expansion of women’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer, 1999). She also explicitly calls for the analysis of the respective framework conditions in this context. Thus, all factors that influence a decision, both subjective and social, are taken into account. To this end, it provides a framework of analysis with various criteria, by means of which a precise description of moments of oppression and thus the identification of levers for empowerment becomes possible (Täubert, 2004, 27). Alsop et al. (2006) add access to resources and assets as relevant indicators for measuring agency.

Rao (2017) emphasises that the causes of women’s devaluation and discrimination are established primarily through the mechanism of culture, and recommends that, in terms of empowerment, women’s psychological empowerment should be considered as much as their social, political and economic empowerment. She therefore advocates for the overcoming of cultural devaluations. Psychological empowerment, in her understanding, includes “autonomy, decision making capacities, and Positive self-evolution as well as having capacity to regulate her own life as a person and not as a constructed feminine identity of subservience” (Rao, 2017, 1).

Empowerment is an important concept in the context of Positive Psychology and gender (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014). Positive psychology started out focusing on human strengths, capacity and mental health and well-being (Lopez et al., 2018) but during recent discourses, concepts such as meaning in life and the dialectic nature of it has been explored in Positive Psychology approaches (Wong, 2011, 2016) and in the past years, researchers have developed positive psychology interventions to enhance well-being (The Canadian Mental Health Association, 2015) and have started to focus on gender and women-related aspects (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014). However, the focus on Positive Psychology, women, their empowerment and culture is still underresearched.

Culture here is defined broadly as “the coordination of meaning and action within a bounded group” (Bennett, 2017). Interculture refers to the space in which members of the culturally bounded groups meet to create new meaning and action in the in-between of their cultural groups, while transculture emphasizes the systemic concept of intersectionalities. The intersectionalities of empowerment, culture and women are taken into consideration and explored in this book from positive psychology perspectives. These positive psychology perspectives include the idea of enhancing well-being, mental health, empowerment and also transforming negative aspects, emotions and experiences. They are characterized by the change in Positive Psychology emphasizing positive concepts in research and practice (PP1.0) to integrating the negative sides and transforming them into positive ones (PP2.0) (Mayer & May, 2019) to exploring Positive Psychology concepts systemically (Lomas et al., 2021).

This edited volume focuses on women empowerment from positive psychology perspectives and for a sustainable future. It takes different cultural and transcultural approaches, as well as positive psychology perspectives into consideration and explores the topic of women empowerment from a diversity perspective, across social strata, cultural divides as well as economic and political divisions.

Since previous research has criticized that most of the research on women and positive psychology perspectives is based on Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic samples (WEIRD) (Van Zyl et al., 2022), this book focuses in particular on transnational, transcultural perspectives, aiming at taking non-WEIRD samples into more in-depth consideration.

The editors therefore primarily focus on women from diverse socio-cultural, political, socio-economic backgrounds and their ways of empowering others and being empowered. Connected to the topic of empowerment are positive psychology constructs, such as: coping, resilience, transformation, growth, leadership, creativity, identity development, sustainable action, as well as positive socio-economical, political and eco-sustainable thought and action. Women leadership is one important aspect that is taken into account in particular to empower women across the world. One further fundamental assumption in the book is, that women empowerment is needed to create a sustainable future on micro-, meso- and macro levels, which contains the demands of safety, peace, ecological considerations, compassionate leadership and a better future world.

This book is divided into seven parts:

- Part I Personal and Structural Resources For Women's Empowerment
- Part II Women's Empowerment Through Education
- Part III Women's Empowerment In The Workplace
- Part IV Body and Sexuality As Resources for Women's Empowerment
- Part V Women's Empowerment In Minority Contexts
- Part VI Women's empowerment From a Gender Perspective
- Part VII Women's Empowerment: Examples Of Outstanding Women.

**Part I** focuses on **personal and structural resources for women's empowerment** and examines them in ten chapters.

First, **Elisabeth Vanderheiden** and **Claude-Hélène Mayer** discuss how women succeed in empowerment through the constructive management of life crises by presenting a qualitative study, analyzing the experience of life crisis events for women at micro-, meso-, and macro levels.

In the second chapter, **Claude-Hélène Mayer**, **Ashley Jacobs**, **Mahlatse Malesa**, **Jessica Meiring** and **Bianca Victor** look at how the transformation of intercultural critical incidents of culturally differing women in the South African context can contribute to transcultural and transcendental growth.

In the third chapter, **Shamini Chetty**, **Anike Theron**, **Lindiwe Sibisi**, **Dikeledi Hlogwane** and **Claude-Hélène Mayer** examine how women with different cultural backgrounds in South Africa use challenging intercultural communication situations to construct their own identities and generate empowerment.

In the fourth chapter, **Gillie Pragai Olswang**, **Orna Braun-Lewensohn** and **Tal Litvak Hirsch** present a current study that focuses on girls at risk in the Israeli context and explore the question of which personal resources of at-risk teenage girls possess, their perceptions of those resources, and how those perceptions can change within a short period of time and contribute to their empowerment.

Young women suffering from distress and social exclusion are also the focal point of the fifth chapter. **Gila Amitay** and **Dalit Yassour-Borochowitz** investigate how young and adolescent women, mainly from the Arab Muslim and Jewish Ethiopian communities, can better cope with disadvantaging conditions such as poverty and distress through the provision of safe and stable spaces, as well as the support of social resources and networks.

**Izanette van Schalkwyk** and **Anthony V. Naidoo**, in the sixth chapter of this book, shed light on how the implementation of a maternal wellness programme for mothers living in a South African high-risk community, using a community-based participatory approach, was able to contribute to strengthening the personal/psychological and maternal capacities of the participants.

In the seventh chapter **Sadé Soares** and **Nancy M. Sidun** discuss the intersection of gender and racial challenges in chapter seven and develop psychological perspectives on the financial empowerment of BIPOC/non-WEIRD women.

In Chap. 8, **Judith L. Gibbons** undertakes a critical analysis of efforts to empower women in agriculture and elaborates on the importance of agricultural education, women's cooperatives, and consideration of local contexts, culture, and women's time commitments to achieving the United Nations Strategic Development Goals.

In Chap. 9, **Grace Maria Jochan** and **Trina Banerjee** explore the question of the concept of empowerment among middle-aged women from collectivist cultures from a social constructivist position. The chapter focuses on ideas about the empowerment of ordinary women in the Indian context, particularly in relation to their occupational status.

**Makwena Cate Molotja**, **Mosima Rachel Masekoameng** and **Smangele Cynthia Ntuli** consider the South African concept of Ubuntu as an empowerment strategy in Chap. 10 and explore its suitability to describe the different roles of rural women and their leadership characteristics.

**Part II** explores **women's empowerment through education.**

In the first chapter of this content focus, **Elisabeth Vanderheiden** unfolds the results of a study in the German context, which was able to show that formal education can be regarded as a crucial prerequisite for sustainable empowerment of women, as it contributes significantly to social participation, personal, professional, economic and political self-realisation, self-determination, experiences of self-efficacy, well-being, meaning in life and happiness.

**Gila Chen** develops in the following chapter a practical framework for the implementation of an empowerment model for female offenders that explicitly incorporates positive psychology. Central cornerstones of the comprehensive empowerment practice model presented here are based on the development of gender-specific interventions that address the special needs of female offenders. Addressing these needs while the women are still in prison and after their release can promote sense of wellbeing and facilitate successful reintegration into society.

In Chap. 13, the authors **Heloise Sathorar, Deidre Geduld, Muki Moeng, Tobeka Mapasa** and **Helena Oosthuizen** reflect on how teams can contribute to the mutual empowerment of members and how these insights can be further developed within a humanising pedagogy.

**Sudatta Banerjee** and **Swati Alok** present in Chap. 14 a study that analyses the impact of rural women's educational conditions on their future self-determination in India and develops measures that are suitable for increasing rural women's awareness of social policies and their rights.

In Chap. 15, **Siao-cing Guo, Eriko Katsumata, Birgit Kraus** and **Renate Link** present results of a comparative study on women's perceptions of education, influence and social position in Germany, Taiwan and Japan and present a gender analysis of the responses.

**Sandra Healy's** chapter takes perspectives from three female students from Africa and Asia who came to study in Japan, people who are not WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic), and examines what factors can be identified as relevant to their empowerment.

**Part III** focuses on different facets of **women's empowerment in the workplace.**

First, **Claude-Hélène Mayer** and **Elisabeth Vanderheiden** discuss how remote work could be a source of empowerment for women leaders, using the example of a woman leader, her team and her organisation.

**Karolina Łaba, Anita Bosch** and **Madelyn Geldenhuys** develop a predictive model for the occupational engagement of employed women in Chap. 18 and present results of a longitudinal diary study for this purpose.

In Chap. 19, **Zethu Mkhize** examines the discrepancy between legal and political determinants and elaborates that the use of women's empowerment principles to achieve social justice, promote equality and change gender perspectives in the workplace.

**Soyeon Kim** presents a study on the direct and interactive effects of organisational factors such as the climate of gender diversity and inclusion or that of the leadership part of supervisors on increasing the psychological capital of

female employees, taking into account the perspectives of positive psychology and human capital.

A reference to positive psychology is also made by **Brightness Mangolothi** in Chap. 21. in which she presents a study on how women have coped with the promotion process to leadership positions in the South African context and which factors can be identified as relevant.

In his chapter, **Rudolf M Oosthuizen** investigates specific aspects to consider for empowering women leaders in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focusing on 4IR intelligence, which comprises four types of intelligence, namely strategic, emotional, inspired and somatic intelligence.

**Birgit Breninger** and **Thomas Kaltenbacher** introduce in Chap. 23 the approach of ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ as a significant strategy to succeed in uncertain, multicultural environments and present in this context the results of an experimental pilot.

In Chap. 24, **Lungisani Nkomo**, **Musawenkosi D. Saroumbe** and **Eugene T. Maziriri** ask what interventions have been found to be relevant in terms of empowering women in technical roles within a performing arts company, and what needs for change have been identified in terms of addressing the underrepresentation of women in technical roles.

In Chap. 25, **Kathryn Anne Nel** and **Saraswathie Govender** analyse the experiences of women in academic leadership positions in cross-cultural contexts in South Africa and develop recommendations for stakeholders based on their study findings.

In the following chapter, **Ummugulsum Gunes** and **Wei-Wen Chang** identify the challenges faced by women leaders in a transcontinental country like Turkey and the strategies they develop to change existing systems.

**Antoni Barnard**, **Michelle S. May**, **Peliwe Mnguni** and **Annelize van Niekerk** describe in Chap. 27 how women scholars from South Africa succeed in realising their (research) leadership through appropriate self-authorisation and authentic connections using identity work methods as a collective intrapersonal strategy.

In Chap. 28, **Meahabo Dinah Magano** and **Hector Mothudi** unfold a concept for the empowerment of unemployed women in low-income communities and present the Tshwaragano Community-Higher Education Partnership model for women for a sustainable future.

In Chap. 29, the last chapter of the third part of this book, authors **Joyce Phikisile Dhlamini** and **Njabulo Khoza** examine the factors faced by women head teachers due to the gender bias of rural communities and develop recommendations on how to produce more empowerment.

**Part IV** focuses on **body and sexuality as resources for women’s empowerment** and discusses different aspects in four chapters.

First, **Mathabo Khau** examines the context of sexual health and reproductive rights of young women in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the context of sexuality education in African schools and examines them in the context of sexuality education in African schools. She elaborates on how women’s sexual health and



reproductive rights can be shaped as an empowerment strategy for a sustainable future in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Tal Braverman-Uriel** and **Tal Litvak-Hirsch** place the sexuality of women aged 40–55 years at the centre of their contribution. In doing so, they develop an approach that defines sexuality as an important component of women's relational communication and psychological well-being, thus contributing to women's empowerment.

In Chap. 32, **Kavita Gupta** and **Balvant Somabhai Parimal** elaborate, that for blind and visually impaired girls and women in India, lack of or limited knowledge about pre-menarche menstruation, their menstrual experiences, the role of external and internal psychosocial support, societal expectations of menstruating women, have far-reaching implications and describe necessary empowerment strategies.

In a final contribution to this part, **Sharon Eytan** and **Tuly Flint** turn to toxic dimensions of sexuality, focusing on experiences in the treatment of women survivors of both sexual trauma (SRT) and substance use disorder (SUD). The results of interviews with female survivors of SRT and SUD show how empowerment and recovery can succeed against the background of this dual diagnosis.

Part V women's empowerment in minority contexts in three chapters.

In Chap. 34, **Syeda Reema Zakir** and **Anastassia Zabrodska** present the results of a study on the experiences of Muslim hijab wearers in Estonia and discuss the issues common to both groups of women in different contexts.

**Misheck Dube** in Chap. 35 inquires into the psychosocial, socio-economic and cultural challenges widows in low-resource communities in Zimbabwe face. This chapter aims to shed light on the empowerment of widowed women through a multidisciplinary approach in low-resource communities, which is relevant to the interventions and which empowerment-focused interventions have proven to be contextually relevant.

In Chap. 38, **Maryam Hosseini** and **Saba Safdar** highlight women who immigrated to Canada from Iran and show that during the acculturation process, the women were able to develop strengths such as agency, independence, autonomy and competence that empowered them.

**Part VI** explores **women's empowerment from a gender perspective**.

Chapter 39 **Irma Eloff**, **Evi Agostini**, **Ann-Kathrin Dittrich** and **Kgadi Mathabathe** examine how teacher education can be used to support the goals and targets on gender equality in the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on well-being.

**Soyhan Egitim's** chapter investigates the gender gap from the men's perspective and shows, in the context of Japanese culture, why men need to use their position of power in women's empowerment for women's empowerment policies to be successful.

**A.T.P. Farisha**, **Althira Alex** and **K.P. Sakkeel** present in their chapter a study on the significance of media contagion with regard to suicides among married women in India and elaborate suggestions for new parameters for women's empowerment in Indian culture.

**Hamza Smajić and Emil Knezović** elaborate in their chapter on possible differences between male and female workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of psychological empowerment, looking in particular at the relationship between psychological empowerment and the intention to quit.

**Gundula Gwenn Hiller** explores language as a tool for gender equality and sustainable women's empowerment in her chapter. She refers in particular to public discourses and research references on gender-equitable language in Germany.

**Part VII** uses **examples of exceptional women** to illustrate the impact this has on women's empowerment.

First, **Claude-Hélène Mayer** explores how selected interventions from the context of Positive Psychology can be used to empower women from non-WEIRD samples in counselling sessions. To this end, she presents a qualitative individual case study.

**Kiyoko Sueda** focuses her chapter on the role of social capital in career development and exemplifies it in the Japanese context.

**Sumeshni Govender, Sithabile Ntombela and Sipehelele S. Makhubu** focus on gender equality issues in the South African context and examine factors that have a strengthening effect on women's empowerment, using five women leaders as examples.

**Shereen H. Shaw** explores Nawal El Saadawi and her lasting role in the empowerment of Arab women.

### **Acknowledgement**

Writing such an interdisciplinary, multi-perspective and culturally diverse book about women's empowerment is a challenging project. It could only succeed because many internationally renowned authors were willing to share their expertise and perspectives with us and to contribute them to this book. This cooperation was a great pleasure for us and our explicit appreciation goes to them.

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This publication thrives on the diverse professional and cultural perspectives that the authors provide in their contributions. We hope that this book will not only stimulate new discourses on women's empowerment, but also motivate new research projects and, above all, make a substantial contribution to the empowerment of women, without whom a sustainable future is not possible.

Defined by no man, you are your own story,  
 blazing through the world, turning history into herstory.  
 And when they dare to tell you about  
 all the things you cannot be,  
 you smile and tell them:  
 "I am both war and woman and you cannot stop me."  
 Nikita Gill

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**Part I**  
**Personal and Structural Resources**  
**for Women's Empowerment**

# Creating Women's Empowerment Through the Constructive Mastery of Life Crises



Elisabeth Vanderheiden  and Claude-Hélène Mayer 

**Abstract** Throughout their lifespan, humans experience life crises. Often these crises are connected to negative emotions, but they can also become chances for empowerment. The aim of this chapter is to explore critical life events and life crises as significant resources for women's empowerment.

The research methodology applied is qualitative in nature, and the research paradigm is phenomenological. As a research method, online questionnaires were used to collect data from women across different cultural and societal backgrounds.

Findings are presented in qualitative research reporting style, analysing the experience of life crisis events for women at micro, meso, and macro levels. Finally, conclusions are drawn and recommendations offered, focusing on responding to the overall research question of how to transform life crises and shame in order to empower women.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Life crisis · Resource · Coping · Transformation

## 1 Introduction

Critical life events and life crises are experienced by individuals during their lifetime. They “mark individual turning points and upheavals and describe phases of standstill as well as explosive changes” (Vanderheiden, 2021, 214). What is experienced as a life crisis and how strongly it affects a person depends not only on the event itself, but also on individual factors. Such events are not predictable. Life crises have far-reaching consequences for the person affected in the sense that

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they can trigger destabilisation and lead to extensive changes in a person's life. Life crises usually evoke strong emotions which are often experienced as negative, such as shame (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2019, 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to explore critical life events and life crises as significant resources for women's empowerment, thereby contributing to previous studies (Vanderheiden, 2019; Filipp & Aymanns, 2018; Capel et al., 2017). Huis et al.'s (2017) three-dimensional model for women's empowerment is used as a frame of reference for the analysis of findings.

## 2 Life Crises and Gender

Ulich et al. (1985), as cited in Kunz et al., 2009, 181) define a crisis as “a stressful, rapid—and, in its course and consequences, open—process of change in the person, which is characterised by an interruption in experience and action, caused by a partial disintegration of the action organisation and a destabilisation in the emotional field” (translated by the authors).

A changed situation arises because of the crisis, which demands solutions from the person(s) affected, “but which cannot be mastered with the previously available or self-evident possibilities of problem solving or adaptation” (Dross, 2001, 10, translated by the authors).

Life crises are typically “far outside the normal horizon of people's expectations and experiences” (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018, 31). Brandstädter (2007) also points out that in this situation, the affected individuals do not have access to existing resources and that the previous organisation of action and life is questioned by the crisis events and life crises.

Life crises often occur at transitions from one life phase to the next (Stein, 2009), but also as a result of traumatising experiences (Cullberg, 1978; Jost, 2006). It should be noted that according to Belschner and Kaiser (1995, 174 cited in Lindner, 2009, 19), life crises do not exist per se. A variety of events, changes or developments can lead to a crisis and become a subjectively perceived burden (Lindner, 2009, 2016).

According to Filipp and Aymanns (2018, 62), critical life events have particular characteristics. They (a) involve far-reaching changes; (b) are associated with experiences of loss; (c) trigger strong emotions and are difficult to predict; (d) cannot be controlled by those affected, or only to a limited extent; (e) challenge the world view as well as the self-image; (f) undermine certainties; (g) drastically influence self-esteem; (h) limit or even close off options for action; and (i) call into question the affected person's own value.

Numerous studies have been able to demonstrate clear gender differences in how life crises are experienced (Misra et al., 2000; Filipp & Aymanns, 2018). The study by Misra et al. (2000) demonstrated that women are more likely than men to experience strain from frustration, self-induced stress and pressure during life crises. Furthermore, research in the context of life crises (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018, 385),

shows that women remember more autobiographical details of their childhood, can date their memories more precisely and refer to emotionally significant events more often than men. That suggests, that women are more likely to recall life crises throughout their lives, together with the connected negative emotions.

Women and men also differ in what they perceive as a life crisis. Kendler et al. (2001) conclude that women react more strongly to stressors related to interpersonal relationships, such as loss of trust, conflicts and illnesses of individuals in their own network. Men, however, refer more clearly to regulatory and work-related stressful life events when referring to life crises, such as job loss, legal difficulties, and problems at work. In Matud's (2004) study, women more often mentioned family- and health-related events, while men emphasised relationship-, financial- and work-related events. Matud (2004) also confirms strong gender differences in the perception of life crises. Although both genders in that study experienced a similar number of life crises across their lifetimes, the crises were evaluated more negatively and seen as less controllable by women than by men. Tolin and Foa (2006) found that the real risks of certain crisis-triggering events also differed between the sexes. While women and girls were more likely than men to experience sexual assault and sexual violence against children, men were more likely to be victims of rare accidents, non-sexual assaults, death or injuries, disasters or fires, and fights or wars (Tolin & Foa, 2006).

Women seem to have more support through their networking and more coping strategies (Kendel & Sieverding, 2012, 472). This is confirmed by Taylor et al. (2000), who refer to "tending and befriending patterns of women", while men appear to follow more "fight or flight patterns". During a crisis, women rely less exclusively on their partners and more on their social networks across cultures (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018, 237).

Men and women also vary in terms of their coping behaviour (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018, 251, 360). Women often have larger social networks than men and are more likely to seek social support in stressful situations (Kendel & Sieverding, 2012, 471). Men seem to rely more often on avoidance strategies, especially when it comes to health-threatening stressors while women seem to devote their main attention to these stressors. The fact that women are more likely to focus on a stressor appears to explain why rumination—the phenomenon of repeatedly thinking about a crisis or losing oneself in endless thought loops—is more common in women (Johnson & Whisman, 2013; Kendel & Sieverding, 2012, 472). Various studies identify rumination as a particular vulnerability factor that can lead to a spiral of negative thinking, depression, an inability to act or to solve problems, and to social isolation (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018, 178; Johnson & Whisman, 2013; Jose & Brown, 2007; Krause et al., 2017).



### 3 Life Crises and Women's Empowerment

Recent studies in the context of positive psychology are increasingly revealing resources to overcome and transform life crises and other difficult and stressful situations (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2019; Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017; Wong, 2011, 2019; Mayer et al., 2022). One such study emphasises that life crises can initiate change, and can:

also initiate deep holistic learning opportunities, chances for reorientation, and manifold occasions to develop new visions as a person, organisation, collective, or society, to discover new skills and resources, and to take unknown paths at the crossroads of professional or private life decisions (Vanderheiden, 2020, ix)

There is a strong call for action regarding women's empowerment. The far-reaching relevance of women's empowerment is undisputed in terms of the living conditions of families, access to material and psychological resources or well-being. At the same time, empowerment is seen as a crucial resource for sustainable change in the lives of the women concerned, their families and societies. The term "empowerment" was primarily coined by William Penn (Heiden, 2005) and placed in the discourses of power and racism in the United States by Barbara Bryant Solomon. In the 1960s, individuals from the women's movement and from the movement for the empowerment of people with disabilities aimed to further develop the discourses on empowerment.

In the 1980s, Rappaport (1981, 1995) advocated a model of empowerment that primarily emphasises the existence of many abilities in people, proposing that supposed individual deficits are the result of social structures and a lack of resources. He describes empowerment as "a mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (Rappaport, 1987, 122). Empowerment involves increasing people's self-empowerment, self-efficacy, self-determination and autonomy in order to enable them to better shape their social environment and their own lives. It is understood as a resource-orientated learning process that opens up new scope for individual and group action by identifying or developing own or collective resources. This leads to new experiences, skills, strengths, resources, competences and knowledge of how to act.

In the 1990s, Naila Kabeer (1994, 1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2021) extended existing empowerment theories by equating the terms "power" and "choice" and defining three dimensions of choice. Her approach is characterised by the inclusion of the analytical level of choice in the face of certain framework conditions, which leads to a precise analysis of women's empowerment.

More recently, Huis et al. (2017, 1) developed a threefold model of empowerment for women at three levels:

1. The micro level, referring to an individual's personal beliefs and actions, where personal empowerment can be observed;
2. The meso level, referring to beliefs and actions in relation to relevant others, where relational empowerment can be observed; and

3. The macro level, referring to outcomes in the broader societal context where societal empowerment can be observed.

The findings of the study are interpreted based on these three empowerment levels.

## **4 Research Methodology**

The present study is qualitative in nature (Yin, 2018) and aligns with an interpretative hermeneutic paradigm (Dilthey, 2002). It is further founded on a retrospective autobiographical research approach in which individuals were asked about life crises (Creswell, 2013). A crisis is here defined as an episode, referring to a defined temporal period in someone's life with a beginning and an end. Such episodes can only be described in retrospect as part of life experiences, allowing a distinction to be made between life before and life after the crisis (Vanderheiden, 2020, 2021).

### **4.1 Sample**

Participants were purposefully sampled (Naderifar et al., 2017) and snowball sampling was used in the existing sample (Jackob et al., 2009; Gräf, 2010, 81). A total of 28 individuals participated. The age of participants varied from 18 to 82 years and here, only responses from female participants were evaluated. The nationalities of participants included German, South African, Iranian, Vietnamese, Indian, Mexican, Lebanese, Turkish, Afghanistan, Australian, North American and Canadian (Vanderheiden, 2019). Table 5 in the appendix provides an overview of the biographical data of the participants who were required to be over 18 years old and women.

### **4.2 Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting**

Data were collected through an online questionnaire (English or German) which was openly available on the Internet (Vanderheiden, 2019; Vanderheiden, 2020).

The first 15 questions request biographical data. The following 23 questions explore the terms and concepts of "life crisis", asking what the life crisis consists of, what metaphor participants associate it with, what factors they experienced as conducive or obstructive to overcoming the crisis, what consequences this crisis had for them, and how they dealt with it.

The responses of the participants were evaluated with regard to empowerment strategies and were analysed and interpreted according to common patterns of

interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Hussy et al., 2010). The findings were analysed and discussed on the basis of the three-dimensional empowerment model by Huis et al. (2017).

### ***4.3 Ethical Considerations, Qualitative Quality Criteria and Limitations***

This research incorporated the following ethical considerations: participants were informed about the objectives and context of the study; participation was voluntary and the online questionnaire could be terminated at any time; consent for analysis and publication was obtained; and anonymity was assured, as was the confidential treatment of the data collected and their exclusive use for the purposes of the study.

The study employed various quality criteria of qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, reliability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

The findings are limited, in that only subjective experiences of life crises have been collected and analysed, based on open-ended questions. The questionnaire did not refer to empowerment specifically, but implicitly, in asking for coping strategies and mechanisms. The study was based on a limited number of questions and the majority of participants were individuals who were born in or reside in Germany. The data could therefore contain a cultural and contextual bias.

## **5 Findings and Discussion**

In the following sections, findings will be presented, analysed and interpreted according to Huis et al. (2017). First the life crises are presented, followed by the empowerment aspects of the crises and the resources which they activated.

### ***5.1 Life Crisis Experiences***

Life crises have psychological and physical consequences which are frequent, diverse and long-lasting (AOK, 2017). A German health insurance study among employed people showed that conflicts in the private environment (16%) are named most frequently, followed by serious illnesses of relatives (12%) and financial problems (11%). The study showed that younger people in particular suffered from private conflicts and financial or social crises, while illness, ageing, or the death of a partner were of great importance to employed older people (AOK, 2017).

The present study draws a similar picture. The participants also experienced a wide variety of life crises. Numerous women highlighted **school- or workplace-**

**related events** such as dismissal, bullying or difficult working conditions (10 mentions: P3, P5, P12, P13, P17, P20, P22, P23, P24, P25). For example, P3 describes “a widely ramified crisis” when she writes: “On the day of the birth of my third child, I was dismissed (for structural reasons) and had not completed my studies and felt deeply worried and distressed by a crippling lack of prospects”.

In another example, P24 highlights how the “job contract was not extended due to my origin or race.”

The experience of **death** triggered life crises for several women (seven mentions). Three women experienced crises owing to the death of a parent (P1, P8, P18); two women reported miscarriages (P4, P26), one an abortion (P1), and another the death of a partner (P11). P2, for example, narrates that the death of a family member made her “doubt the meaning of life”.

**Health problems** of family members were experienced as a crisis by six women (P5, P6, P8, P10, P11, P16). These women suffered not only from the loss of a loved one, but also from “the feeling of helplessness and not being able to do enough” (P8).

**Psychological phenomena** also triggered crises for women (seven mentions), causing anxiety (P3, P15, P16, P21), but also feelings of sadness and loneliness (P22) or depression (P5) and exhaustion (P19), followed by crises arising from their own health problems (five mentions: P5, P13, P14, P16, P19). Four women (P2, P9, P21, P22) mentioned doubts or loss of purpose in life. P9, for example, writes: “It was a crisis when my reserves of strength were so depleted that I could no longer access my love. And my inner voice fell silent.”

The **fear of not being able to start a family** touched several women (four mentions: P15, P21, P22, P26). P26 described her crisis after experiencing seven miscarriages:

I had so wanted to become a mother and every time this disappointment . . . The last stillbirth, that was also such a difficult birth process. I asked myself how to go on living. I also asked myself: Why me? Why can't I have a child? It was also so terrible to feel this beloved being dead inside me.

The deep relevance of these reflections is confirmed in the research of Mälkki (2011), who explains that the reflection processes associated with life crises enable individuals to find meaning through perceptions and emotions

. . . where it appears to enable meaning making in a chaotic situation that was not understandable from within existing meaning frameworks. Furthermore, disorienting dilemmas are manifested in various emotional experiences, indicating that one's relation to these emotions—as opposed to the nature of the emotion—becomes essential with regard to triggering reflection (Mälkki, 2011, 1).

**Financial worries** (four mentions: P3, P6, P12, P13) triggered strong crises in some of the women participants. The significant association of greater financial worries with greater psychological distress is confirmed by Ryu and Fan (2022), among others. These worries can trigger major depressive episodes or anxiety disorders (Mental Health America, 2020) and are associated with negative effects in terms of experiencing meaning in life (Pew Research Center, 2021). Women react particularly intensely with psychological problems and also longer-term restrictions

of their well-being if they have financial worries over a long period. (Ryu & Fan, 2022; Archuleta et al., 2013; Ferraro & Nuriddin, 2006). Therefore, mental health problems may be more often related to financial worries in women than in men.

Crises caused by **migration** were named by three women (P12, P17, P24), although their individual circumstances differed greatly. P12 had no chance of finding a qualified job owing to her immigration from Vietnam and the non-recognition of her baccalaureate degree, while P17 could not adequately care for her sick father owing to her professional transfer to another continent. P24, as an immigrant white person in South Africa, lost her job as a result of her skin colour.

Other studies (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2012; Nirmala et al., 2014) also show that people with migration experiences often have high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological distress. Research shows that this is influenced by socio-economic, social, interpersonal and structural factors (Li et al., 2016; Trevisan, 2020).

**Separations and divorces** were mentioned twice (P1, P28) as situations that triggered crises. This is confirmed by other research. For example, Kołodziej-Zaleska et al. (2019) and Hahlweg (2018) emphasise that divorce is associated with a crisis, or is seen as a turning point in life for most people, as “one of the most stressful life events—an event which changes almost every aspect of life” (Kołodziej-Zaleska et al., 2019, 1).

Crises in connection with **education** were mentioned twice (P7, P12). These were perceived as crisis situations for different reasons. P7 had agreed to educational decisions in response to family expectations that were perceived as inappropriate, while P12 was denied access to formal education owing to her foreign school-leaving qualifications not being recognised.

Finally, **experiences of violence** triggered a life crisis for P27 when she found out that her husband had exposed her 5-year-old daughter to sexual violence. The particular dimension of critical life events in connection with sexual violence against children is cited in other studies, such as those by Justice and Duncan (1976, 111) and Jaffee et al. (2013). These authors emphasise that such experiences are crises not only for the children, but also for the non-violent parent. Although these experiences can be extremely debilitating, they can also—as in P27’s case—lead to the mobilisation of completely new resources.

## 5.2 *Empowerment Strategies*

The women identified 21 strategies at the micro level, 13 at the meso level, and three at the macro level. Altogether, 19 women focused on using primarily one strategy, and eight referred to two strategies.

Table 1 below shows that most empowerment strategies are to be found at the micro level (25 mentions). Eleven strategies were named at the meso level and three at the macro level.

**Table 1** Empowerment Strategies at Micro, Meso and Macro Levels

Micro-level empowerment		Meso-level empowerment		Macro-level empowerment	
Participant code	Number of mentions	Participant code	Number of mentions	Participant code	Number of mentions
P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26	25	P2, P5, P7, P8, P11, P16, P19, P21, P25, P27, P28	11	P12, P15, P27	3

**5.2.1 Empowerment at the Micro Level**

Most participants **remain positive and proactive**. It was important to P1 “not to give up; to describe goals and connect them with longing and drive when the first shock is overcome”. The participants found it helpful to “take one step at a time” (P3), “find solutions” (P2), “move forward with persistence” and “don’t give up” (P20). However, P10 formulates her strategy as follows: “Don’t look too far ahead, always keep an eye on the next step, don’t always succeed!” P13 states that perseverance was very important for her.

Several women achieve empowerment by **increasing their mindfulness**. For P7, it was helpful to “focus attention also on the positive aspects of one’s life, “ while P9 decided to “withdraw from the environment” to have more energy “for coping with crises”. P17 prioritised her life by focusing on “addressing the unavoidable, the imperative, leaving out or postponing everything else”.

P22 continues to develop her awareness of

... how powerful the mind can be, and to be more mindful of this. Believe in yourself and trust. The way you are, you're okay. Go with your gut feeling more. Live your inner values, greatly reduce perfectionism. Try to slow down your everyday life, take the pressure off yourself, reduce deadlines, take your time. Take pleasure in small things, especially in nature. Reduce consumer behaviour, especially television consumption (this also helped me a lot to get out of my passivity and to get an eye for other things again).

P9 was helped above all by “patience and reflection. In conjunction with impulse suppression to gain time. Withdrawing from the environment to have more energy for crisis management”.

P26 experiences “concentrating on other areas of life; maintain a positive body feeling. Retreat into meditation” as being helpful. P24 practises focusing and acting consistently: “I tried to keep my focus and my long-term goals and objectives and acted accordingly” while P28 introduces another mindfulness dimension: “I’m working on giving myself the love I crave.” P18 explains that “crying” particularly helped her. These observations demonstrate how **conscious perception and action regarding emotions** (e.g. love or sadness) are empowerment strategies, if they are transformed for personal growth and development.

Some women develop **new attitudes and skills**. P3 sums up her experience in this way: “Each stage on the way out of this crisis was longer than I originally hoped and I learned humility and patience.” P11 also highlights the development of new attitudes and skills: “I followed my heart, fought where I needed to and learned to let go where fighting and rebelling would have only caused unnecessary suffering.”

P6 and P12 describe the results of acquiring new skills. P6 explains how “very important for me [it] was that I decided to get the driver’s licence at the age of 40 and thus became more independent and freer. It was important for me to stay true to myself.” P12 emphasises that it helped her to “work hard and a lot; to learn. I like to sew and have since opened my own small tailoring business, which is very successful, which has allowed me to almost give up cleaning altogether.”

Some women succeed in establishing empowerment by **focusing on their creativity and developing appropriate forms of self expression**. P5 discovered that it had a positive effect on her crisis management to “go photographing more often. P22 recognised her rumination and focusing on negative thoughts in time to stop this behaviour by “doing puzzles, creative work, spending time in nature, gardening“. P23 managed to “sort out her head“ by painting and redesigning her living space. P28 explains: “I have worked on it in a therapy, have written diaries, have dealt intensively with this topic in my artistic work.“ P25 listened to music and learned to play the guitar and piano. P26 was “concentrating on other areas of life; learning to sing in order to develop or maintain a positive body feeling”.

Other women concentrate on **physical or sporting activities**. P8 states that “sports helped me as a distraction and balance”, while P22 decided to “reduce consumer behaviour, especially television consumption (this also helped me a lot to get out of passivity and to regain an eye for other things), also rediscovering the joy of movement and incorporate it consistently into everyday life (cycling, yoga, hiking, jogging, etc.)”. P24 clarifies that “I tried to keep my focus on . . . what I like doing, doing sports etc.”.

Participants develop empowerment in connection with their **religious and spiritual orientation or practice**. P1 specifies “hope and pray” as being the significant mantra for her crisis management, and P12 also emphasises the relevance of “having hope, staying positive, and believing in God”. P22 felt “the idea of individual power animals” strengthened, and thus inner rise of positive feelings/to feel power again.“ Of particular relevance to P22 is “the knowledge that behind every dark phase also comes the light. The path can be difficult, but when you see the light again and everyday life has more bright days, in retrospect you have learned a lot about yourself and how to live a good life.”

Some women find it empowering to be as informed as possible about **roots, causes, and coping options** related to their specific crisis. P14 states that she needs to “inform myself about the disease and all the consequences and options. Not to invest energies in ‘why-me?’ questions’ but to accept the crisis as it is and actively shape it or make the best of it.” P16 reports that **reading** helped her “to open up to new things”. P23 also emphasises that “obtaining information, reading technical literature” was very important to her.

Table 2 provides an overview of these micro-level strategies.

**Table 2** Empowerment Strategies at Micro Level

Strategy	Participant code	Mentions
Increasing mindfulness	P7, P9, P17, P18, P22, P26, P28	7
Staying positive and proactive	P1, P2, P3, P10, P13, P20	6
Developing new forms of creativity and self expression	P5, P22, P23, P25, P26, P28	6
Development of new attitudes and skills	P3, P6, P11, P12	4
Concentration on physical or sporting activities	P8, P22, P24	3
Practising religious and spiritual orientation	P1, P12, P22	3
Awareness of crisis causes and coping options	P14, P16, P23	3

### 5.2.2 Empowerment at the Meso Level

The participants successfully establish empowerment in social relationships and interactions with people to whom they are connected through friendship or partnership. P4, P7, P8, P16, and P19 are empowered by **talking to friends about stressful experiences and stressors** which the crisis brings. P25 seeks out her mother to talk to in this regard. P1 recommends the option of searching for “help” when “things can’t go on”. P5 was able to cope with her crisis through reflection with her new boyfriend, and P11 found strength with her seriously ill and now deceased spouse: “We cried and laughed together. Until the end.”

P21 and P28, whose crisis was burdened by the fact that they suffered from not being able to live a partnership, decided to take a flirting course and to approach men themselves (P21) or to use dating platforms (P28). P28, whose crisis was triggered by a completely unexpected separation and later divorce, also initiated, like P27, an empowerment process through **therapeutic support** for herself and her daughter in response to sexually violent experiences by the child’s father.

Table 3 provides an overview of empowerment strategies at the meso level.

### 5.2.3 Empowerment at the Macro Level

Since the strategies studied here relate to life crises, most of the strategic decisions do not primarily affect the macro level. However, three participants did make strategic

**Table 3** Empowerment Strategies at Meso Level

Strategy	Participant code	Mentions
Talking to friends about stressful experiences and stressors	P4, P7, P8, P16, P19	5
Reflecting with partner	P5, P11	2
Actively searching for a partner	P21, P28	2
Actively seeking help	P1	1
Talking to a family member	P25	1
Seeking therapeutic support	P29	1



**Table 4** Empowerment Strategies at Macro Level

Strategy	Participant code	Mentions
Self-determined economic existence	P12	1
Job change	P15	1
Career change	P27	1

decisions which are structural in nature. P12, who originated from Vietnam, experienced the crisis of having little or no access to qualified jobs in Germany. However, she has succeeded in building up her own **self-determined economic existence**: “In the meantime [I have] opened my own small tailoring shop, which is very successful” and she “almost completely abandoned” the cleaning job she hated.

Another macro-level empowering decision comes from P27 who made a **career change** by training as a therapist, following her daughter’s experience of sexual violence from her ex-husband. P27’s decisions affecting “My own therapist training. The continued support for my daughter”, together with her desire “to compensate for what my ex-husband destroyed” have an impact in social contexts. Similarly, P15, after a year abroad, looked for a **new job** in her country of origin. Table 4 identifies these empowerment strategies at the macro level.

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to present life crises experienced by women of different cultural origins and to explore the empowerment strategies developed and activated by these women on micro, meso and macro levels. Most of the life crises were experienced at an individual (micro) level and included work- and school-related events, death, health problems, psychological phenomena, family difficulties, financial problems, migration, separation and divorces, and violence.

Empowerment strategies are used to overcome life crises at different levels. Women feel the most empowered when they address their life crises in a positive and proactive way. They feel further empowered by mindfully and consciously dealing with emotions, new attitudes and skill development, creative expression, sportive activities, spiritual practice and exploration of causes of life crises on a deeper level. At a meso level, the women in this study were mainly empowered through therapeutic support; at a macro level they felt empowered when they could use societal structures to overcome unemployment and job loss.

Women activate different resources to overcome life crises: on an individual (micro) level they use personal resources which are part of their personality and identity, such as an optimistic attitude. However, they also draw on their personal beliefs and faith and the increase of their financial resources. At meso levels, they activate strengths and faith, but also communication and problem-solving skills, transformational skills, the ability to live and work in a different country, self-

confidence and a strong value set, future orientation and love. Finally, at group (macro) level, the women participants used resources of membership in social groups, cultural mediators, membership of their cultural group of origin and the financial support of friends and family.

Future research should focus on exploring different attitudes to gender issues not only in a diverse group of women in Germany, but also on women in various countries. Accordingly, different intersectionality criteria should be taken into consideration, such as first language, ability and disability, gender, age group, educational level, social strata and profession. Emotions in the context of women, life crises and empowerment could also be explored.

Finally, findings should be used to empower women at micro, meso and macro levels through professionals such as counsellors, consultants, coaches or therapists. Furthermore, the findings could be used to develop educational and training programmes to support women’s empowerment and resource activation during and after life crises.

**Acknowledgements** We thank the participants for their openness and willingness to narrate their life crises, their empowerment strategies, and the resources they used for transformation.

## Appendix

**Table 5** Biographical data of participants (Author’s own construction)

Code	Age	Nationality	Religion	Family status	Education	Profession
P 1	60	German	Catholic	Divorced	Master	Judge
P 2	55	German	Catholic	Married	Master	Therapist
P 3	43	German	Lutheran	Married	Master	Project manager
P 4	55	German	Catholic	Married	High school certificate	Office employee
P 5	20	German	Agnostic	Single	High school certificate	Volunteer in adult education organisation
P 6	82	German	Catholic	Widowed		Retired tailor
P 7	50	German	Lutheran	Married	Diploma	Office employee
P 8	41	German	Catholic	Married in a gay marriage	Master	Teacher
P 9	57	German	Catholic–Worships Maria	Married in a gay marriage	Bachelor	Accountant
P 10	70	German	Catholic	Married	Master	Retiree

(continued)

**Table 5** (continued)

Code	Age	Nationality	Religion	Family status	Education	Profession
P 11	58	German	Lutheran	Widowed	Diploma	Freelance organisational consultant
P 12	45	German	Catholic	Married	High school certificate	Self-employed
P 13	52	Dutch	Catholic	Married	Secondary school certificate	Retired salesperson
P 14	55	German	Catholic	Married	Doctorate	Professor
P 15	43	German	Lutheran	Married	Bachelor	Ministerial officer
P 16	50	German	Catholic	Divorced	High school certificate	Retired bank clerk
P 17	56	German	Catholic	Single	Doctorate	Leading manager
P 18	48	German	None	Married	Master	Manager
P 19	53	German	Catholic	Married	Master	Lawyer
P 20	71	German	Catholic	Married	High school certificate	Retired physio-therapist
P 21	55	German	Catholic	Single	High school certificate	Teacher
P 22	38	German	Lutheran	Single	High school certificate	Bank clerk
P 23	38	German	Catholic	Widowed	High school certificate	Educator
P 24	43	German	Catholic	Separated	Habilitation	Professor
P 25	18	German	Christian	Single	Grade 10 IGCSE	Student
P 26	47	Iranian	Muslim	Widowed	High school certificate	Professor
P 27	60	Lebanese	Christian	Divorced	High school certificate	Psychiatrist
P 28	70	German	Spiritual	Divorced	High school certificate	Artist

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# Transforming Intercultural Critical Incidents of Women Into Transcultural and Transcendental Growth Experiences



Claude-Hélène Mayer , Ashley Jacobs, Mahlatse Malesa, Jessica Meiring, and Bianca Victor

**Abstract** Intercultural communication is increasing globally, as well as in post-apartheid South African contexts. Intercultural human interaction is often experienced as critical when dissimilarities between cultures occur. These experiences are opportunities for inner growth and empowerment when reflected upon. The study uses a qualitative research design, following an interpretative hermeneutical case study approach, exploring the in-depth experiences of four women in the South African context through autoethnographic accounts. The authors present their personal intercultural experiences as women in South Africa. The sample consists of five South African women between 24 and 28 years of age, who belong to different culture and language groups in South African society. They present selected intercultural critical incidents (CIs) which they have experienced. Data are analysed, interpreted and reported in a qualitative reporting style. Please add findings. The conclusions respond to the research question of how women in South Africa of different cultural origins experience intercultural CIs and how they transform their experiences into women's empowerment and growth. Recommendations for future research and practice in the field of women's empowerment are given.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Interculturality · Psychology · Critical incidents (CIs) · Transformation · Transcendence · Transcultural growth

## 1 Introduction

The importance of intercultural communication and interaction is increasing with the rise in globalisation of markets, technology, and affairs of national states (Suneetha & Sundaravalli, 2011). Intercultural communication depends on how people comprehend the way in which their dissimilarities affect their abilities to communicate

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with each other (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012). People utilise various cues to communicate with other people (Sauter et al., 2010). Communication takes place in the form of spoken words, but also in the form of non-verbal communication (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978). The meaning of non-verbal communication increases in complexity when individuals interact and communicate across cultures (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013). Both verbal and non-verbal communication play a role in the experience of critical incidents (CIs) (Wight, 1995; Liu, 2021).

A critical incident can be considered as a social evaluation of a particular situation, that has some significance for those involved (Liu, 2021). Usually, the situation raises questions relating to values, attitudes or behaviours (Liu, 2021). According to Wight (1995, p. 128), CIs in cultural interactions are “brief descriptions of situations in which there is a misunderstanding, problem or conflict arising from cultural differences between interacting parties or where there is a problem of cross-cultural adaptation”.

Research has shown that culture and race are not the only influencing aspects of CIs and critical experiences, but that intersectionalities play an important role in managing diversity in the workplace and beyond (Mahadevan & Mayer, 2017). Challenges of intersectionalities are experienced with regard to work, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, country of origin and host country, culture, race, and socio-cultural factors (Ali et al., 2016). Intersectionalities are not merely drawing attention to race and ethnicity of a variable influencing gender. They are also about the experiences of differences in hierarchies which influence interactions across cultures. These power relations are further influenced through the quality, power, oppression and injustice created through experienced differences (Rahman, 2017). Therefore, research needs to focus on exploring and analysing the complexity of interactional situations and experiences and their qualities. This is possible in autoethnographic intercultural CI research.

Research in South Africa has seldom taken women’s perspectives from different cultural viewpoints into consideration (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013; Mayer & May, 2018). Autoethnographic research, which provides women with a voice by presenting their experiences, is rare (Mayer & May, 2018). This study responds to the research question: *How do women of different cultural origins in South Africa experience intercultural CIs and how do they transform their experiences into women’s empowerment and personal growth?* Women refer to intercultural experiences with individual of other cultural background from within and without South Africa. The findings of this study contribute to gaining new insights and building new knowledge regarding women’s unique experiences and transformation of CIs into increasingly transformative intercultural interactions and empowerment.

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to the discourse on CIs experienced in post-apartheid South Africa with special regard to the complex experiences and narrations of South African women who find themselves in intercultural CI situations. The women’s narrations are autobiographical in nature and represent different individuals who belong to different cultural groups in South African society. They also refer to interactions with South Africans and international contacts. These autobiographical narrations provide in-depth insights and contribute to the improved

understanding of how women of different cultural origins in South African society experience intercultural CIs, and how they deal with them to transform the experiences into individual growth and women's empowerment.

## 2 The South African Context and its Cultural and Gendered Complexity

South African society has been described as extremely complex and hybrid when it comes to intercultural interactions (Scheider, 2018; Sleeter, 2018). During apartheid, individuals were classified according to racial categories: "white", "black" and "coloured" (O'Malley, 2021). During this political era, individuals were ascribed to these racial groups based on their physical appearance. Although apartheid ended in 1994 and South Africa became a democratic society, the racial classifications from the past are still vivid (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2021) and two more categories, namely "Indian" and "Asian", have been added. Since the end of apartheid, South African society has, however, gained increasingly in intercultural contacts in different fields of society, such as educational institutions, workplaces and leisure areas (Mayer et al., 2018).

The cultural complexity is determined not only by the ongoing racial classifications, but also by the cultural, ethnic and language diversity which builds the foundation of the society (South African Government, 2022).

South Africa is often referred to as the "rainbow nation", describing the diversity of cultures adopted by different groups of people, characterised by ethnicity, race, socio-economic inequalities, political history, and language (Wiggill & Van der Waldt, 2020). This diversity can contribute to the tension experienced by people from different cultural backgrounds (Wiggill & Van der Waldt, 2020).

Adding to the cultural complexity is the diversity of ethnic groups within South Africa. It can be argued that globalisation and affirmative action increase the need for individuals to be able to interact in environments that are ethnically diverse in this context (Zhuwao et al., 2019). Similar to racial categories, some dominant ethnic groups within South Africa are White, Coloured, Indian, and Black (Adams et al., 2014). Each ethnic group has been influenced by the country's history of colonisation and apartheid. For instance, the White ethnic group arises predominantly from Dutch and English settlers, as well as other immigrants from Europe. In comparison, the Black ethnic group belongs to the population of Central and Southern Africa. Individuals identify with a particular ethnic group as part of the larger South African context, forming an identity related to their ethnic origin (Adams et al., 2014).

South Africa also has a multitude of languages, bringing cultural complexity from their rich diversity (Government of South Africa, 2022). The Government of South Africa (2022) has identified 11 official languages, with English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans being the most commonly spoken in South African

households. Other dominant languages include Sepedi, Setswana, and Sesotho (Government of South Africa, 2022).

During the past years, research on women in South Africa has increased, but it is still underrepresented in comparison to research on men (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013). According to Doriani (1991), the study of the experiences of women, specifically in the form of autobiographies, is relatively new, and female literature on the study of the “self” in autobiographies and autoethnographic research—specifically that of Afro-American black women—is very scarce. Women’s autobiographies are often overlooked, depersonalised, conflated and abstractly generalised (Doriani, 1991; Mayer & May, 2018). However, in order to understand the self-portraits of women, researchers need to explore female autobiographies more studiously. Given the historical marginalisation of women all around the world (see Introduction to this book), as perpetuated by cultural, religious, social and even political norms, female voices hold valuable insights to contribute to research and practice. According to Mabokela and Mawila (2004), as cited in Mayer (2017), South African women have historically been reduced to “second class citizenship”, with their rights and opportunities being regarded as inferior to those of their male counterparts. Similar to the Afro-American rise of the female voice, platforms for the expression of the female voice in South Africa only arose in the 1990s and are still in the process of being expanded (Mayer, 2017).

### 3 Critical Incidents in Intercultural Contexts

During the past decades, globalisation and improved technologies have increased the possibility for people from an array of diverse cultural backgrounds to interact, and to become more connected to one another (Liu, 2021). According to Engelking (2018), nearly anyone who has had encounters with others from different cultures, has at least one story to tell about them. CIs often highlight various differences or misunderstandings that stem from different cultural viewpoints or perspectives (Tran et al., 2019). Although CIs are important, especially interculturally, they do not have to be negative. They just have to be significant to deal with or to learn from. Those who are involved must reflect on the incident, and should try to be more aware of their own and others’ cultures, to remain informed (Tran et al., 2019).

CIs in intercultural situations are those that allow individuals to reflect on cultural assumptions, and understand how they responded to another person in the intercultural interaction (Madrid Akpovo, 2019). CIs tend to be handled with insight and understanding in South Africa (Madrid Akpovo, 2019). In comparison, cultural CIs in New Zealand are at times handled with frustration (Brunton & Cook, 2018), while another study found that counselling students in America handle CIs with insight (Erby, 2019). Through cultural interactions, awareness and reflection, people are able to learn from others through CIs (Erby, 2019).

Focusing on intercultural CIs from a South African perspective, Ntuli (2012) believes that owing to the racial segregation that occurred pre-1994, South Africans

often did not make an effort to understand or educate themselves about any cultures, including verbal and non-verbal behaviour, other than their own. A lack of understanding or knowledge of other cultures can cause avoidable conflict within societies. Attempts to better manage CIs are associated with an increased sensitivity towards and awareness of intercultural interactions, with the aim to interact with each other with respect and to learn to adapt (Ntuli, 2012).

According to Engelking (2018), CI training tools are effective in intercultural contexts because they stem from an individual's lived experiences and so provide an authentic, subjective, highly emotional encounter with the situation. In addition, the value of CIs is that they can be used in a variety of contexts—for instance, but not limited to cultural assimilation, role plays, discussions, reflective stories and case studies. CIs are used to establish critical thinking skills as well as intercultural and foreign language competence among students who study abroad (Engelking, 2018).

## 4 Research Methodology

This research study is anchored in a qualitative research design and an interpretative hermeneutical paradigm (Dilthey, 2002). It uses a narrative approach from an autoethnographic case study perspective (Ellis et al., 2014) to present, analyse, interpret and discuss the experiences of women from their emic and personal perspectives. In autoethnographic research, the selves and the socio-cultural contexts are connected through the research topic (Ellis et al., 2014). Autoethnographic approaches can bring about emotionally rich insights (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012) and new perspectives with regard to gender questions (Hunniecutt, 2017).

Autoethnography aims to explain and analyse personal experiences to better understand cultural experiences derived from the etymology of its name (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach centres on the researcher being familiar with participants and their experiences and reflections on these events (Gottlieb & Mosleh, 2016), whereby the researcher relives and re-encounters the experienced situation (Chang, 2013). Autobiographical narrations present personal experience in an attempt to fill or add to voids in research, and to “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience” (Hayano, 1979, p. 3). Accordingly, autoethnography works with the “reconstructive memory” of the researcher which is viewed as the memory that reconstructed meaning-based situations (Mayer & May, 2018).

The case study design is implemented to gain layered and intricate explanations regarding phenomena, interests or problems as they occur, or have occurred, in their natural contexts (Crowe et al., 2011). In order for research to be classified as a case study, it needs to (a) address a specific phenomenon, (b) study the phenomenon within its original context, subject to space and time, and (c) give an account of detailed, various sources (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017).

The insight into this emic experience of women in a specific socio-cultural context provides a deeper knowledge and understanding (McAlpine, 2016) with

specific regard to the narrated experiences of the social, contextual and cultural perspectives (Berry & Patti, 2015).

#### ***4.1 The Sample and Sampling***

The sample consists of four master's students who attended a course in cross-cultural psychology at a university in Gauteng, South Africa in 2021. All four participants are female and South African citizens. They are all enrolled in a master's programme at a South African university and study the same subject. Individuals participating in the course were invited to join this research project on a voluntary basis to write about her autoethnographical experiences. Table 1 provides the demographic data of the individuals who decided to participate.

#### ***4.2 Quality Criteria and Ethical Considerations***

This autoethnographic account is anchored in qualitative research criteria, including confirmability, credibility, and trustworthiness. These criteria were fulfilled by a thorough documentation of the study (confirmability), presenting accurate findings and interpretations based on an in-depth analysis of the autoethnographic account (credibility), and the presentation of the findings in the context of the narrators (trustworthiness) (Kortjens & Moser, 2017). Intersubjective validation processes were used to overcome the individual potential biases of the researchers (Yin, 2018).

In terms of ethical considerations, the subjects of research are treated in a respectful, ethical, accountable and empathetic manner (Elms, 1997; Ponterotto, 2015; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2017).

#### ***4.3 Limitations of the Research***

The study uses a qualitative research design and is limited to the subjective, in-depth insights presented in the written autoethnographic experiences of a relatively small

**Table 1** Demographic data

No	Gender	Age	Race	Culture/ ethnic group	First language	Upbringing in province	Upbringing rural/urban
1	Female	25	Black	Sepedi	Sepedi	Limpopo	Urban/rural
2	Female	28	Coloured	Coloured	English	Gauteng	Urban
3	Female	24	White	White	Afrikaans	Northern cape	Rural
4	Female	26	White	White	English	Eastern cape	Urban

sample of master's students in South Africa. The data are biased in terms of gender since only narrations from women are presented, and in terms of socio-cultural context since all autoethnographers are students living in the socio-cultural hub of South Africa, the Gauteng province. Autoethnographic presentations can evoke strong feelings in readers (Bochner & Ellis, 1996) and make the presenters vulnerable (Lichtman, 2014) when presenting emic perspectives, thoughts, experiences and feelings.

## 5 Findings

Findings build a foundation for rich, in-depth research. In the following, the autobiographical narrations are presented. While the first and second each describe a CI taking place at work between two members of different ethnic and language groups in South Africa, the third and fourth narrations present intercultural CIs between the South African narrator and individuals from outside South Africa (China and Australia). Part of the analysis contains the idea to reflect upon potential transformation of the CIs for future learning based on the experienced CIs.

### 5.1 *Lost in Translation in the Eastern Cape of South Africa*

A 25-year-old female student describes an intercultural CI which she experienced during her internship in a province she did not grow up in. She highlights that the incident could not be resolved in her favour.

*In the year 2020 I was doing an internship as a counselling psychologist in the Eastern Cape. As interns we were the youngest in the office and both me and the other intern did not speak nor understand isiXhosa. The language and cultural differences affected the way we understood each other and how we communicated with clients. One of our duties as interns was to answer phones and make telephonic appointments. This proved to be challenging as my home language is Sepedi and I did not know how to fluently speak isiXhosa. One day I was left in the office and the phone rang. It was an old Xhosa-speaking lady that wanted to make an appointment and check the dates of her grandson's follow up appointments. She insisted on speaking isiXhosa irrespective of whether I understood her or not—a common misconception in Grahamstown is that, if you are Black, then you can speak isiXhosa, as it is the dominant language. As the lady kept speaking in isiXhosa, I kept asking her to repeat what she was saying as I could not understand nor hear her properly. This aggravated her even more and resulted in her rudely asking where the receptionist was and asked that she would rather speak to her and not me. I told her that the receptionist was on lunch and she said that she would call when the receptionist came back. This really hurt me, because she made me feel as though I could not assist her because I could not speak isiXhosa. She also misunderstood me*

*asking for clarification as me not listening and not paying attention to what she was saying.*

For this young woman, the CI was about a strong language barrier she experienced in a professional context. She believed that she could not communicate successfully with the client on the phone owing to missing language skills, and the inability to communicate in another language common to both of the interactants. The narrator expresses her concern that there is a common misconception and stereotype that Black people in the town all speak one specific language. This perception made it difficult for her to change the conversation into English since the client ascribed a specific language to the narrator's racial background, being Black. The narrator felt hurt since she could not assist the client owing to communication barriers and the inability to overcome the obstacles within the communication. Her strategy was to repeatedly ask the client on the phone what she had said, thereby creating the misunderstanding that she would not listen, since the client would not understand that she could not speak the main language spoken in the town. The narrator, as well as the client, left the situation frustrated and stressed, while the narrator was also saddened and depressed that she could not fulfil the role given to her as an intern. The client preferred to return to the easiest solution (from her point of view) to speak to someone familiar (the receptionist) in her first language and was not willing to speak another than her own first language.

This CI is about learning to better navigate cultural differences. The narrator has learnt that cultural and language differences play a vital role in the interactions that she will have, especially in South African provinces where there is one dominant language or culture. In no way does a hostile reception of differences reflect on the competence or abilities of the narrator, but rather on the relationship between the narrator and the other. The narrator needs to maintain her self-esteem while being attacked, and not interpret the interaction as incompetence on her part. In future, the narrator can try learning the basic greetings in the dominant language of isiXhosa, and state or disclaim that she is only able to speak in English. If that will be a problem, then the receptionist will be back to assist in a language the client can understand. This will help the narrator take back control of the CI, while maintaining professionalism and a kind manner of communication.

## **5.2 *Respectful Greetings***

The following CI was experienced by a 27-year old Coloured woman. The incident happened in the workplace and, similar to the incident described in Sect. 5.1, related to ethnic cultural differences, as well as age- and generation-related ways of communicating.

*As a 27 year old Coloured female, it is not always easy to be understood by the older generations from other cultures. Last year, while I was still employed at a well-known mining corporation, I found myself stuck in a situation that I did not know how to get out of. One morning, when I arrived at work, I greeted everyone*

*who was standing in the lobby. However, I had realised that there was a Black lady, aged 63 who was not too happy with the manner in which I greeted. Later that day, she confronted me and told me that she does not appreciate the manner in which I greet and refer to her. I asked her how she perceived my greeting and she called me rude and said that she is not my friend nor my age so I should address her with more respect. Eventually I became rather upset because I had no idea what I did wrong. She stormed off as soon as I asked her what I said that had upset her, but one of the younger Black employees that witnessed it all, told me that the lady wants to be greeted as an individual and be acknowledged as “Ma”—which means mother or [is] seen as a term used to address elderly women in the Black culture—followed by her surname. It was clear to me that me saying “hello guys” is not how the lady would like to be addressed in future. Until today, I have not had a chance to apologise or rectify the situation as the lady never spoke to me again.*

In this CI, the narrator experiences a clash with a woman in her workplace based on the different intersectional categories of age and generational belonging, professional role and role expectations, language, and cultural background. The CI deals with the clash regarding expression and experience of respect, particularly the manner of greeting across cultural, language and generational gaps. Since the narrator is not aware of what behaviour is expected in the Black woman’s culture, she is empowered by a younger Black employee who explains to her what kind of behaviour the elderly woman expects from her.

In future, in an attempt to empower herself, the narrator could learn more about the different cultural signs or ways in which to show others respect across multiple cultures and generations. Furthermore, because the narrator lives in a country where there are multiple officially spoken and written languages, she could try to learn the basic greetings of various cultures. In doing so, it could be noted that she is trying to learn more about those around her and is not ignorant of the fact that there are so many members of different groups in South African workplaces. In future, the narrator should not allow someone who has intercultural issues to just walk away. Instead, she should attempt to follow up with that person, so that the person can also learn, and be guided along the intercultural path of understanding. Although in this case the narrator’s colleague assisted her, it may be preferable to obtain knowledge or guidance directly from the individual who had the initial problem with whatever was done.

### **5.3 Value Differences in Chinese and South African Cultures**

A young, White, Afrikaans-speaking woman aged 24 years, experienced a CI with a Chinese investor at a mine in her home town.

*In 2020, I was fortunate enough to complete my Psychometric Internship honours in my home town at the local cement mine. At the mine I observed various cultures interact with one another, but what was most interesting is that non-verbal communication was more prevalent, especially when one of the Chinese investors came to*



*visit the mine. We had to prepare for the Chinese man's arrival. As this was my first time interacting with someone from Chinese culture, I took it upon myself to prepare myself and broaden my knowledge of the Chinese culture. I found out that the Chinese culture is extremely focused on their status, and their title, which is normally passed down to them from their parents and their grandparents. This was a strong contradiction to my culture which is the South African culture. As a South African, we must build status and earn our titles, through either education or hard work (achievement). I also observed that the Chinese man liked to communicate his title a lot and be addressed by this title (not by Sir or Mr). It was quite fascinating to see the South African men at the mine, wanting to shake hands with the Chinese man. They felt a bit uncomfortable when they realised he did not extend his hand once, but rather just nodded or bowed to greet them.*

Different intersectionalities play a role in this CI. In particular, it deals with the intersectional aspects of nationality, hierarchy, non-verbal behaviour and value differences. The narrator explains that she found herself in a work situation in which she experienced her first direct contact with a Chinese investor in the mining industry. Here, the narrator presents her emic perspective on the experience of witnessing the situation between employees and Chinese investors, a perspective anchored in its various intersectional aspects. The view of the narrator might be gendered in a male-dominated workplace interaction, from a woman's point of view, insofar as the narrator is impressed by the status and hierarchies which are on display.

Possible methods to empower the narrator in this particular CI would include the narrator educating herself and others on the correct and appropriate greetings of the Chinese culture, more specifically male Chinese greetings. The narrator could have taken control of the situation if she had educated the South African men on the appropriate greetings. This would have been likely to eliminate the uncomfortable factor between the two cultures when they greeted each other, because the South African men would have known not to extend their hands in a handshake. Another way the narrator could have empowered herself is by hosting a cultural information session within the mine prior to the Chinese man's arrival. Such an action could have included all the individuals involved in hosting the Chinese man, and the information session could have focused on verbal and non-verbal communication within the Chinese culture. The narrator could have also empowered herself by approaching the Chinese man and the South Africans when they greeted each other, so as to inform the Chinese man about the ways South Africans greet each other verbally and non-verbally in this culture, and how the concept of status works within our South African culture.

## 5.4 *Communication Differences in Australian and South African Cultures*

In the following, a 26-year-old white woman experienced an incident between herself and an Australian visitor to South Africa, involving cultural values, upbringing, and the learned use of language.

*An experience which highlighted misperception was an interaction between myself and an Australia visitor. My strong cultural values are kindness, empathy, and helpfulness. The visitor and I were walking down the passage when he suddenly tripped and fell. As he landed on the floor he screamed, 'Ouch!' My first response was to grab his arm and I said, 'Oh, shame, I am so sorry.' He looked up at me and I noticed confusion on his face. His response to me was: 'What do you have to be sorry for? You have not done anything wrong.' I had never had someone question the meaning of 'sorry' in a similar situation before. I continued to respond to the Australian visitor and explained to him that it is a form of endearment and reflects empathy towards the situation. However, the Australian visitor was not impressed and advised that his perception was that I had done something to cause his tripping. He further advised that in his culture, 'sorry' is a sign of regret and used when one has done something wrong.*

In this autoethnographic case, the intersectionalities of nationality, culture, gender and the use of English language play an important role. The narrator presents a first-hand experience of an intercultural CI situation with an Australian visitor. She explains her verbal reaction to an accident and his response to her reaction. The CI might be influenced by gender roles, in that the male visitor could be embarrassed, as a man, who would want to be viewed as rather strong and not show vulnerability, who slips in front of a woman. The two individuals discuss about their perceptions of how the word "sorry" is understood in different cultures and contexts, and that when empathetically intended, it can be easily misunderstood as an apology for someone making a mistake.

Empowerment of the narrator lies in demonstrating understanding and sympathy to the Australian visitor by acknowledging how the miscommunication occurred, and the awareness that the English language can be used in various ways, depending on the meaning attached to the word in different cultures. The narrator could have solved the miscommunication by explaining why the word "sorry" was used. This could be done by explaining the cultural value of empathising with someone who has potentially hurt themselves, or by stating that the English word "sorry" in her South African environment is commonly used when acknowledging someone has injured themselves. She could have taken a proactive approach.

The narrator could be empathetic towards the male visitor, acknowledging how slipping may be embarrassing and make the Australian visitor uncomfortable. The narrator is empowered by understanding how men in particular feel embarrassed by making mistakes, which show potential weakness. Lastly, the narrator could develop cultural awareness and use the learnings from this CI for her following intercultural encounter. Accordingly, she could use this experience to build her cultural

competence through reflection and knowledge-building. These solutions empower the narrator as they focus on self-development and understanding, as opposed to finding excuses for the experience.

## 6 Discussion

The CIs described happen to the young women based on experienced differences in culture and values, language, age, nationality, generational belonging, ethnic group, professional role and role expectations, and non-verbal ways of communicating. These CIs remain unresolved with regard to the situation as such, but they are used for transformation, inner growth and empowerment by the narrators through increasing understanding and reflection on the thoughts, feelings and behavior of self and other in the CI.

Table 2 provides an overview of the CIs and the intersectionalities involved, and presents potential empowerment and growth aspects through transforming the negative experiences into experiences full of intercultural learning, growth and empowerment.

As described above, intercultural communication can lead to misunderstandings and negative feelings if dissimilarities are experienced (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012). The CIs show that verbal and non-verbal communication need to be taken into consideration (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978; Hurn & Tomalin, 2013; Wight, 1995; Liu, 2021). The CIs experienced by the narrators are based on differences in values, cultures, languages, attitudes, gender and behaviours (Liu, 2021) and are anchored in complex intersectionalities (see Mahadevan & Mayer, 2017). Power, hierarchies (Rahman, 2017) and the complexity of the South African context play an important role in the CI (Scheider, 2018; Sleeter, 2018), as does South African history (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2021). This is the case in two of the narrations presented. As suggested by Tran et al. (2019), Ntuli (2012) and Engelking (2018), these CIs are used to reflect, build deeper knowledge and inner growth, critical thinking, language competencies and self-development by the women involved, to empower themselves within the context of intercultural interactions.

## 7 Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter addresses CIs experienced from an autoethnographic background, based on intersectionalities in intercultural CIs. The research question was: *How do women of different cultural origins in South Africa experience intercultural CIs and how do they transform their experiences into women's empowerment and personal growth?*

In conclusion, it is highlighted that the narrators have gained intercultural awareness from the experience of intercultural CIs through in-depth reflection and

**Table 2** Overview on CIs, intersectionalities and empowerment

Critical Incident	Ethnic, cultural, national language groups involved	Intersections which create conflict	Potential solution and empowerment of women
Lost in translation in the eastern cape of South Africa	Narrator: Sepedi Client: isiXhosa-speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Language</li> <li>– Age</li> <li>– Professional role</li> <li>– Role expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learn how to navigate cultural differences</li> <li>– Learn different languages of the region</li> <li>– Do not let hostility impact on your self-esteem</li> <li>– Say openly what competences you have, which ones not (in terms of language)</li> <li>– Take control actively</li> <li>Behave professionally, no matter what happens</li> </ul>
Respectful greeting	Narrator: Coloured Woman: Black	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Age and generational belonging</li> <li>– Language</li> <li>– Professional role</li> <li>– Role expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learn about different cultural signals</li> <li>– Cultural awareness and language training in officially spoken languages in the country</li> <li>– Actively seek solution with the conflict partner</li> <li>– Actively seeking guidance and knowledge from cultural mentors</li> </ul>
Differences in values in Chinese and south African cultures	Narrator: White, Afrikaans-speaking South African Investor: Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Nationality</li> <li>– Non-verbal communication differences</li> <li>– Value differences</li> <li>– Hierarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Educating herself about behaviour in foreign (Chinese) culture</li> <li>– Taking control to educate others regarding the culture-specifics</li> <li>– Hosting a cultural information session for employees</li> <li>– Mediating between the people of different cultures</li> <li>– Explaining cultural differences and values when witnessing the CI</li> </ul>
Differences in communication in Australian and South African cultures	Narrator: South African Visitor: Australian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Language</li> <li>– Culture</li> <li>– Nationality</li> <li>– Gender</li> <li>– Use of English language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Demonstrate understanding and sympathy</li> <li>– Acknowledge miscommunication</li> <li>– Understand English language use</li> <li>– Convey meaning of language across cultures</li> <li>– Empowering through understanding cross-cultural gender concepts</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 2** (continued)

Critical Incident	Ethnic, cultural, national language groups involved	Intersections which create conflict	Potential solution and empowerment of women
			– Building intercultural awareness and knowledge through reflection and acceptance

discussion. They have transformed the CIs into learning situations which lead to an understanding of the complexities of CIs in terms of influencing intersectionalities across ethnic, cultural, language and international boundaries.

Based on this autoethnographic CI research study, it is recommended that future research should focus more intensively on CIs experienced by women of different intersectionalities (culture, language, ethnic group, age, generation, nationality, value set, professional role and more), thereby not only focusing on the critical experiences as such, but even more on the growth and empowerment potential that lies in the CI experience.

On a practical level, the CIs may be used for training and consultancy purposes, especially with regard to intercultural interactions in South African contexts (work and general) and women's emic experiences. The findings from CIs not only provide insight into challenging situations, but also offer growth and empowerment opportunities and resolution from in-depth inside information, from which they can serve as examples of learning for inner growth and transformative intercultural interactions.

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It is through these interests that she began to realise the importance of cultural experiences and the essential role they play in understanding other individuals, and the way in which we communicate with one another.

# Women's Empowerment through Intercultural Communication and Identity Development in South Africa



Shamini Chetty, Anike Theron, Lindiwe Sibisi, Dikeledi Hlongwane, and Claude-Hélène Mayer 

**Abstract** The study explores three women's intercultural experiences within the Gauteng Province in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Their experiences are influenced by diverse intersectionality's their cultural background, language competencies, age, gender, socio-economic status as well as upbringing. The study explores how women use intercultural communication situations to develop their own identity and empower themselves through overcoming interculturally challenging situations.

In terms of its methodology, this study is qualitative and uses a social constructivist research paradigm. The researchers present four autobiographical narrations, analysed and interpreted in detail through content analysis. Limitations and ethical considerations are highlighted.

Findings show the described experiences in intercultural situations which touch mainly on four themes, namely: non-verbal and verbal intercultural communication challenges, intercultural communication in the new world of work, intercultural conflicts, and identity development. This article focuses on intercultural communication situations which had, according to the narrators, a major impact on their identity development. This is of major importance since South African society requires women with new and integrated identity concepts, to overcome concepts of Apartheid and separation, and empower women of different cultural backgrounds. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations for future theory and practice are given which can be applied, primarily in the South African society to empower women in intercultural contexts.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Intercultural communication · Narrations · Intercultural conflict · Intercultural communication barriers · Identity development · Verbal communication · Non-verbal aspects new work

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## 1 Introduction

The study of intercultural communication situations has increased during the past decades (Jandt, 2003; Dearsdorff, 2009; Bennett, 2013; McKinnon, 2017). Recently, researchers have explained the linkage between the inherently stressful experiences of intercultural communication and intercultural identity development (Kim, 2018). In the South African context, intercultural understanding and communication studies have—in the beginning—often been used to “legitimize the opposite of the field’s intentions—racial separation rather than intercultural understanding” (Tomaselli, 2020, p. 19). It is highlighted that women still experience gender and racial biases (Rainers, 2021). In communication situations, women are three times more often interrupted by men than vice versa and patriarchy is (still) a common concept in South African society which also impacts women in academia (Dlamini & Adams, 2014). Further, women are usually not supported by their male colleagues at work (Rainers, 2021).

However, after the end of Apartheid, South Africa has taken a major turn toward an increased understanding of the gendered, hybrid and cultural complexity of human interactions within the country (Mittelmeier et al., 2019) and has aimed at empowering individuals in particularly disadvantaged groups and developing integrated identities (Dlamini et al., 2021). Previous studies have focused on women empowerment in the context of education, human and women rights, household status, social policies, employment, and income (e.g. Akram, 2018; Kazembe, 2020). Only recently, studies have highlighted that more research regarding intercultural communication and identity development is needed to understand and foster the positive aspects of gender-related upbringing and intercultural understanding. Thereby, autoethnographic studies can be helpful to understand the emic perspective of an individual towards a specific topic. Women’s voices have often been overheard in the past and/or reduced to a single story that does not allow multifold interpretations (Mayer & May, 2018; Sueda et al., 2020).

This chapter aims to contribute to the discourse on intercultural communication and identity development in the Post-Apartheid South in women representing different intersectionality’s in terms of age, socioeconomic background, and culture. It thereby aims further to present an emic, autoethnographic perspective to give women of diverse backgrounds a voice and make their emic perspective understood. The experience of intercultural communication situations can also contribute to their empowerment and personal identity development. South Africa builds the macro-context of the research, while organisational life, in these cases at work and academic contexts, is viewed as meso-contexts that are taken into account, influencing the women’s experiences. Finally, the micro-context of the individual life of the women is also taken into consideration when analysing intercultural situations and identity development.

## 2 Empowerment of Women in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Empowerment is defined as the process by which women who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 2005). Other researchers (e.g. Sharaunga et al., 2019) define empowerment as a multidimensional process of increasing the capacity/capabilities of individuals or groups to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment can happen through education (Moolman, 2013; Wittmann, 2012), thereby opening the possibility to create a meaningful contribution to society, as well as through monetary, increased employment skills, and expertise (Sharaunga et al., 2019), such as highlighted in the new gender equality movement of the South African government (Department of Minerals and Energy, 2021).

In contemporary South Africa, gender equality is promoted effectively, for example in the parliament where there are more female than male parliamentarians.; yet the country has globally one of the highest rates of violence and rape against women (Frenkel, 2008). This highlights the continuities of women's struggles betwixt the periods of apartheid and post-apartheid as women are 'both empowered and victimized, seen and unseen, included and excluded' (Frenkel, 2008, p. 3). Working class women on the African continent seem to bear a double load of doing unpaid domestic and emotional labour (Fakier & Cock, 2009) and being vulnerable (Enaifoghe et al., 2021). However, social interaction is not only based on gender and gender concepts, but also on other intersectional aspects, such as race, age, sexual orientation, etc. (Mayer, 2019; Mayer et al., 2018). The notion of intersectionality developed as a reaction to the multiple social identities of class, gender, and race that women experience (Moolman, 2013). It looks at the experiences of lived identities as mutually constitutive and intensified by oppressive systems of domination (Gouws, 2017). For instance, the social identities of South Africans cannot be understood outside the context of the historical discourses of apartheid and race (Moolman, 2013), which highlights the double-barreled nature of women's intercultural experiences. This is because gender is viewed as a measure of status as it relates to one's social position, which usually affords women fewer privileges, resources, and power (Allen, 2018). Women are empowered during daily interactions when they unify by defining common aims or foci (Anyikwa et al., 2015) and when they fully realise their identities and who they are (Mandal, 2013). When women collaborate across cultures and thereby define their identities, women further highlight what they have in common (Parry, 2000) and how they can unite best to collaborate and achieve power (Johnstone et al., 2016). Further, collaborative, and mutual pursuits, such as mentorship, serve as endeavours of empowerment because the formation of such relationships fosters growth, and women are said to acquire a sense, of worth and purpose as a result, thereby developing their identity and sense of who they are (Anyikwa et al., 2015).

### 3 Intercultural Communication and Identity Development

Barmeyer and Mayer (2020) mention that bringing cultures together can bring about constructive and enriching aspects of cultural diversity. Understanding cultures need emic and etic approaches (Triandis & Brislin, 1983) to deeply comprehend them through analysing the similarities and differences (Helfrich, 1999). The emic perspective on culture, which is used in this research study, can help to receive an in-depth view of how an individual understands the world and its cultural and intercultural relationships (Galperin et al., 2022). Etic approaches, on the opposite, explore a subject from an outsider's perspective (Galperin et al., 2022). The emic, cultural focus is the key to knowing how to empower individuals and their identities.

An individual's identity can be defined by the social groupings they belong to and the emotional value and importance they place in being part of these groups (Kim, 2018). Similarly, Mahadevan and Mayer (2017) define identity as a concept that is developed according to the dialectics of people and society during socialisation processes. Crocker et al. (1994) elaborate that whilst personal identity is made up of one's unique characteristics, social identity can be influenced by the racial, ethnic, religious, and gender groups a person belongs to. In a multi-cultural context, Kim (2018) speaks about an intercultural identity that develops when an individual has accumulated numerous intercultural experiences. This identity becomes adaptable and open to other cultures.

It is in this multi-cultural context that intercultural communication and identity are connected. According to Kim (2018), the development of identity is influenced fundamentally by interactions during information gathering from one's environment. These include communication that takes various forms such as observations, face-to-face interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, and in a learning environment such as in schools where we learn about different cultures (Kim, 2018). Taking direction from Weick et al. (2005), language and communication are important as it is how people make meaning and give meaning to different situations and contexts. Kim (2018) asserts that communicating across cultural divides presents many challenges. These challenges include questioning one's assumptions of another culture. It is during these challenging intercultural communication exchanges that an opportunity for identity development takes place. Kim (2018) contends that one's identity learns to adapt by reorganising one's inner self, using new information from a culture that is different from one's own, and assimilating attitudes and behaviours of the "other" culture. Patchwork identity thereby refers to a process in which individuals shape their identity through adopting segments and intersectionalities ("patches") derived from different cultures to form their unique self, which consists of a broad range of cultural patterns and elements (Welsch, 2009). The narrator aims to understand her cultural transgression through patchworking their identity and aims to attribute meaning to her social position. As a result, the different elements and patterns from distinct subcultures blur the boundaries of these cultures to get a holistic view, understanding, and awareness of cultures.

Intersectionality refers to the study of the way our different identities interact with one another and is based on the notion that social constructs that constitute an individual have material significance (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2001). According to Moffitt et al. (2020), intersectionality implies that individuals construct and make sense of their identity by including the explicit recognition of the power that shapes the how, when and in which ways the construct is applied to whom rather than understanding their social identity category (e.g., race, age) as a single objective. In essence, intersectionality allows for the recognition of the individual's social location (the combination and interaction of all their social categories) rather than the single social category alone. According to Crenshaw (1991), who introduced the concept of intersectionality, intersectionalities in intercultural identity development include gender, race, social class, and sexuality. However, any relevant social category related to oppression should be taken into consideration when aiming to understand the intersectionalities of intercultural identity development such as religious identity, ethnicity, and group membership since intersectionalities are viewed as being included in power relations and power struggles within and across cultural contexts (Mayer & Flotman, 2017; Mahadevan & Mayer, 2017).

This article aims to explore gender empowerment in the context of intercultural communication situations and identity development. The overall research question which is being responded to is the question: How are women in South Africa empowered in intercultural communication situations while developing their identity?

## 4 Research Methodology

This research study is qualitative (Creswell, 2013) and presents three selected autobiographical pieces (Ellis et al., 2013). All three pieces describe a situation of intercultural communication and are analysed concerning their potential for empowering identity development. The research approach is narrative and explores the topic from an autoethnographic case study perspective (Ellis et al., 2013). The autoethnographic pieces are presented in a qualitative reporting style and are analysed and interpreted to discuss the experiences of women from their emic perspective. Ellis et al. (2013) emphasise that autoethnography help to connect deep insights into the individual's worldview and reflections (Gottlieb & Mosleh, 2016).

The narrations refer to aspects of gender and identity in intercultural situations (Hunnecutt, 2017). Further, autoethnographic approaches present the experiences to others who might share similar or different intersectionalities from the inside (Chang, 2013; Hayano, 1979). Mayer and May (2018) have mentioned in autoethnographic research on women that they work with the reconstructive memory of the researcher and their reconstructed intercultural meaning-centered experiences (Ellis et al., 2011).

In this research, the authors take on a study design that is implemented to gain explanation regarding intercultural situations of women in Post-Apartheid

**Table 1** Demographic data of narrators

No	Gender	Age	Race	Culture/ethnic group	First language	Upbringing in province	Upbringing rural/urban
1	Female	45	Indian	Indian	English	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Urban
2	Female	22	Black	African/Zulu	IsiZulu	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Urban
3	Female	24	White	Afrikaans	Afrikaans	Mpumalanga	Urban

South Africa and explore the insights of these situations in their natural surroundings (Crowe et al., 2011).

Thereby, the case study addresses the specific phenomenon of the intercultural communication situation in a specific context, providing a detailed insight (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Thereby, the specific experience within its socio-cultural context is taken into perspective (Berry & Patti, 2015).

The term “autoethnography” was first used in the 1970s (Adams et al., 2017), allowing the writer to talk about her own experiences (Wall, 2006). Autoethnography is here defined as a research method that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to form cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Thereby, the life events described are always relational, contextual, and cultural (Ellis et al., 2011), adding to previous research through insider knowledge (Adams et al., 2017).

The sample consists of three women between 20 and 45 years old and of different cultural backgrounds. They all live in Gauteng, South Africa, are female, and are South African citizens. All of these women are enrolled in a Master study’s course at the time of the autoethnographic writings. Table 1 provides the demographic data of the individuals who share their autoethnographic experiences.

The qualitative research criteria for this study include confirmability, credibility, and trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Confirmability is ensured through documenting the study’s aims, methodologies and findings, while credibility includes the in-depth analysis of the autoethnographic narrations. The presentation of the findings in the context of the narrators is used to create trustworthiness. The researchers discussed the narrations intersubjectively and thereby evaluated them according to different levels of analysis (Yin, 2018).

Ethical considerations were used to explore the findings in a respectful, ethical, accountable, and empathetic manner (Elms, 1997; Ponterotto, 2015; Ponterotto, & Reynolds, 2017). The discourse on ethics in autoethnographic studies is diverse (Bochner, 2017; Tolich, 2010). Autoethnographic experiences are always relational and thereby usually touch on the experiences with others while often not focusing on the others as a reference point, but rather using a self-focused approach (Edwards & Parson, 2017). In this study, the authors considered ethics of the self (Rambo, 2016) and others (Ellis et al., 2013), thereby representing multiple voices (Lester & Anders, 2018) in an ethical, acceptable, and conscious manner.

As all research is limited, this study comes with the limitation of being autobiographical in nature, using only subjective individual experiences as their point of reference, focusing on women only, and thereby carrying a gender bias. Further, the research is conducted with South African individuals only for a specific reason. It only gives specific insights into the voices presented which are not generalizable.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

In the following, three narrations will be presented and interpreted concerning the women's experiences as well as their personal intercultural communication and identity development and empowerment.

### 5.1 A Cultural Awakening

The first narrator is a 45-year-old Indian female, born and raised in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. For the last 20 years, Sandton, an upmarket suburb in Johannesburg is her home. The woman narrates the following intercultural experience situation.

*Growing up, I didn't have much contact with people from other races or cultures except for when we went to the shops or restaurants, etc. I went to an all-Indian school. After I got married, my husband and I lived in Vereeniging, a small Afrikaans-speaking town in the Vaal Triangle. This is where my first real, meaningful encounters and relationships with white, Afrikaans-speaking people happened since I got a job at a bank and had to deal with customers. This meant that I had to speak Afrikaans to all my customers as they had told me in my first meetings with them that they do not speak or will not speak English. I quickly learned that as a culture, the Afrikaans-speaking community is very proud of their language and my being willing to assimilate and adapt to their culture in the form of language, meant that I had gained their trust and respect. They also asked me questions about my culture, and we had many great discussions on the similarities of our cultures.*

The experiences in the Afrikaans community shaped the woman's intercultural identity development in that it allowed her to become increasingly empowered as an Indian female living and working in a predominantly White, Afrikaans community. She was able to communicate more confidently with individuals of other races and cultural backgrounds, because of her interactions and conversations with her Afrikaans-speaking colleagues. More importantly, she was able to dispel any stereotypes that she may have initially had about the Afrikaans community because of her intercultural experiences with them.

Kim (2018) highlights that when one is placed in a multi-cultural context, an intercultural identity forms as a result of multicultural experiences. The narrator believes that her first experiences as related above, were the beginning of her intercultural identity. The more time she spent in the company of her



Afrikaans-speaking colleagues, the more open she became to their culture and language. Through communicating in their language as well as in her own, she made sense of their way of life, and their culture. The conversations they had, allowed them to find similarities in their cultures and helped them to connect and form mutually respectful relationships.

Similarly, the narrator realized during her intercultural identity development that she found herself being more empowered as an Indian female in a predominantly White community. The empowerment overweighs potential oppression and domination on a system's level (Gouws, 2017). Through frequent communication she found herself changing from being a cautious, introverted person in settings where other race groups were present, to becoming more confident and self-assured. This allowed her to be more outspoken and even challenge her Afrikaans-speaking friends about the role their community played during Apartheid. She felt particularly emboldened as a young Indian female to let her White Afrikaans-speaking friends know how Apartheid affected her and her family. Through this, the narrator facilitated deep and honest conversations with her White Afrikaans-speaking colleagues and thereby understood herself and members of other communities concerning the historic context (Moolman, 2013), her social positioning (Allen, 2018), as well as her personal redefinition (Mandal, 2013).

## 5.2 *The Beginning of a New Life*

This woman hails from Durban, in Kwa-Zulu Natal. She is 22 years old and the primary source of influence in her life has been a mixture of African cultural and religious heritage and her strong Christian belief.

*A few years ago, I moved to a different province to pursue my tertiary studies. As soon as I stepped foot into my tertiary institution, I knew my life would change forever. The person I thought I was walking into the institution was not the same person that walked out. I immediately was confronted with many experiences I had never been exposed to before. The first is encountering diverse individuals from all over the world on a large scale. As I made it through the institution I was met with a familiar face, one that I had last seen in the senior primary. As we conversed, I felt at ease and could tell that we would be good friends. She then introduced me to other like-minded individuals that I instantly connected with. I then continued my journey to my first lecture where I was introduced to a new set of practices and a new learning environment. I will never forget the feeling of sitting in a lecture hall for the first time instead of at a desk in a classroom which is what I had become accustomed to. The lecturer greeted all of us in different languages, further emphasizing the fact that I was going to be living in an entirely different world. This day and every other day after that was the beginning of a new life.*

The assimilation into a new context wherein the narrator was exposed to different cultures, places, people, languages, and relationships spurred her identity development. Living in a different province was a factor that fostered a new cultural identity as she identified with a different regional culture, supporting her in forming a patchwork identity (Welsch, 2009). This is because the narrator adopted a new

way of living and working. The relationships that she formed with the individuals she met developed the characterisation of herself as a friend. The attendance of her first lecture cemented her identity as a student. All these experiences brought about factors that became a part of her identity. One can say language served as the basis for which these experiences could be characterised as meaningful as it provided a means of understanding and allowed her to interact with different individuals. Furthermore, the Christian and African upbringing both emphasise community and acceptance, which made the narrator more open and adaptable to the new life she found herself living. It can be said that the knowledge the narrator gained through her intercultural interactions, the new identities she acquired as a university student and a friend in a regional context, and the new experiences she was exposed to, encouraged the narrator to continue to explore different intercultural contexts and embrace her own intercultural identities that she may have subdued to try fit into her new environment (Allen, 2018). Her growing friendships with diverse women encouraged the visualization of a society in which, women were viewed as authors of their own stories. One in which women were not defined by their race, culture, gender, etc., but by their passions and contributions to society. By virtue of engaging with other women, the narrator realised that those aspects that differentiated women were the same aspects that brought them closer together. This is because she discovered commonalities in her and her friends' experiences that fostered a sense of sisterhood (Parry, 2000). They realised that there is strength in numbers and if they stuck together and supported each other, they would be a force to be reckoned with (Johnstone et al., 2016). Those battles and obstacles, that seemed unwinnable alone, suddenly became a possibility to be overcome together, forming a common identity (Anyikwa et al., 2015).

### 5.3 Patchwork Identity Shaping Cultural Identity

Growing up in the quaint town of Trichardt in the Mpumalanga region of South Africa, the narrator was exposed to pleasant and safe social conditions. Presently, she lives in the city of Johannesburg as a 24-year-old female who culturally identifies as a Caucasian female living as a middle-class citizen. Her cultural background can be described by how her identity was shaped by the Afrikaans, white, and Christian communities.

*Patchwork identity development in a cultural context manifested itself in my context where I grew up in a small Afrikaans and predominantly white Christian area. My culture was predominantly shaped by my language, ethnicity, religion, and the geographical area where I lived. My beliefs and values were shaped by my parents who raised me in an environment that mainly consists of the same members of the same culture. Due to the geographical area and size of the community, I had little room to do my self-reflection to observe my surroundings through a subjective perspective as I only knew what I knew. As I went to university, I suddenly was surrounded by people from different cultures where I could subjectively observe and reflect on other cultural development opportunities which I would align with my cognitive process and knowledge system. This became embedded in*

*my cultural identity as I adopted some aspects of different cultures that contributed to my complex cultural identity. A good example would be that I moved into a student house with English-speaking people from different cultures and backgrounds. Immediately my social circle included English people, some were religious, some were not, and some had a different religion than mine. As I communicated and connected with my friends, my cultural identity was questioned and shifted to the development of multiple cultural identities that contributed as fragments to my whole identity. In my case, I had adopted a dynamic and pluralistic cultural patchwork identity.*

*Another example of my experience of cultural identity development would be when I was in University, I lived with a Xhosa female. We became friends as she was my next-door neighbour and studied the same degree. When her parents would come to visit our university town, I would often be invited with them to enjoy lunch or dinner together. Her parents, being curious, asked me many questions regarding my life story and how I grew up. However, when her parents and I would have conversations, I would remain eye contact which I perceived as a token of respect. When my parents came to visit, she would also be invited to eat with us where my neighbour would behave out of her character and not remain eye contact with my parents whenever they spoke to her directly. For approximately 4 months I experienced this behaviour from my neighbour when we were surrounded by older adults. I decided to have a conversation with her as to why she chooses not to remain eye contact. She then replied by stating that in her culture it is seen as disrespectful to look an elder in the eye when they have conversations with them. I immediately reflected on my conversations with my neighbour's parents in which I would maintain eye contact. Only after our conversation about our cultural differences could I fully understand our situation and different social positions. I noted that a single scenario can have different perceptions based on the people involved and their cultural backgrounds shape their identity.*

*I was also empowered by the knowledge that I have gained through learning more about other cultures, but also by sharing what my culture entails I could enrich the knowledge and perceptions that other people have of my culture. Soon, my trait of open-mindedness would develop to better understand my cultural identity and the identity of others, I also could not adapt my behaviour if there were no communication between me and my neighbour from another culture.*

As the narrator involves herself increasingly in other cultures, her interest and values changed in alignment with her changing socio-cultural environment. Through a process of self-reflection, she deconstructed and constructed these factors that contribute to the development of her cultural identity (Moolman, 2013). She had to ensure that her role is clear to allow her to cope with the development of her cultural identity and retain her unique values and interests to ground her identity (core) as her environment and the diverse people in her new environment changed. At first, it was challenging for her, as she experienced a culture shock, however, she used the techniques of maintaining, repairing, forming, and strengthening these constructions of her identity to create a dynamic patchwork cultural identity.

As a result of forming a patchwork identity (Welsch, 2009), the narrator's knowledge of different cultural elements increases and diversity can be better understood. The process of constructing and deconstructing empowers the narrator to shape their identity and draw from certain attractive elements from different cultures, connected to her role as a woman in society (Allen, 2018). This empowers the narrator to take charge of who they want to be, enables the narrator to have the authority over choices, and allows the narrator to submerge certain pre-conceived cultural boundaries.

It can be highlighted that all three autoethnographical narrations relate to intercultural communication learning and the development of intercultural identities. In all of them, learning about the emic perspectives of the new cultural context was a very important part of the development and empowerment process (Triandis & Brislin, 1983). The narrators felt empowered through the increase in intercultural understanding (Helfrich, 1999) and developed and expanded their socio-cultural identity parts (Crocker et al., 1994) thereby forming more elaborated intercultural identities (Kim, 2018). The narrations show that intersectionalities play a role in the intercultural experiences, relating to race, social class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991) within power-related contexts (Mayer & Flotman, 2017; Mahadevan & Mayer, 2017). The situations described are informed by power relations which are influenced by language and gender, institutional contexts (university), and power in family relationships. Thereby, the gender aspect plays an important role in the contexts described, since it provides gendered boundaries and opens spaces for intercultural communication on individual and organizational levels of communication.

## **6 Conclusions and Recommendations for Theory and Practice**

In this chapter, the examples of autobiographical narrations of women in contemporary South Africa illustrate how experiences of intercultural communication situations contributed to their personal growth and their empowerment. The empowerment was experienced through the experience of difference, irritation, misunderstanding, or failure and the resulting reflections, changes, and developments that were needed in terms of managing the situation for all individuals involved.

Women empowerment was experienced through:

1. Women becoming for confident and outspoken through intercultural settings, fostering the cultural exchange of ideas and experiences on individual and collective levels
2. Women getting together and supporting each other across cultural divides
3. Women create their patchwork identity consciously, thereby creating authority over choices, and submerging pre-conceived cultural boundaries.

The empowerment experiences mainly refer to the individual empowerment level. That does not mean that other levels, such as organisational, social and group-orientated, or societal levels are not important. They were just not in the focus in the above-described narrations.

It is recommended that future research includes a wider range of individuals narrating intercultural experiences within the South African contexts. Thereby, individuals with different intersectionalities should be studied further. These gendered experiences need to be explored by triangulations of theories and

methodologies to gain more substance. However, from a practical perspective, it is recommended that industrial and organizational psychologists, educators, intercultural trainers, consultants, and coaches are aware of the topics women face in intercultural contexts in academia as well as in other work-related contexts and that they create awareness of the empowerment potential of women in South Africa.

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# Sense of Coherence of Institution-Confined Teenage Girls at Risk



Gillie Pragai Olswang, Orna Braun-Lewensohn , and Tal Litvak-Hirsch

**Abstract** Teenage girls who suffer from neglect, violence, and/or incest are considered to be girls at risk. They are at a heightened risk of dropping out of formal-education institutions, being exposed to conflicts at home and within their peer group, experiencing alcohol or drug abuse, and attempting suicide. It is well understood how such circumstances may impact personal resources, such as sense of coherence (SOC).

The current study aimed to examine the personal resources that at-risk teenage girls possess, their perceptions of those resources, and how those perceptions can change within a short period of time.

The subjects of this study, conducted in Israel, were girls aged 14–17, who were confined to a therapeutic, short-term institution for intervention during a crisis. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 girls, to understand their perceptions of their own personal resources.

We found that the girls perceived the environment as difficult to understand and felt that they did not possess sufficient personal resources to cope with challenges. From this, we understood that there had been an impairment of their SOC. However, we found that the girls had a tendency to focus forward and set goals for the future. This tendency indicates a strengthening of the girls' personal resources, that is, a positive change in SOC.

The current research sheds light on the inner world of girls at risk from a salutogenic perspective, rather than focusing on pathogeny. The ability of the girls to perceive themselves as having strengths and personal resources may help them to better cope with future stress, to adjust to changes that are still ahead of them, and to draw on their own resources in a variety of stressful situations. This suggests that it may be worthwhile to use more positive, salutogenic language and attitudes in educational-therapeutic institutions, to help to empower such girls.

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**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Girls' empowerment · Girls at-risk · Salutogenesis · Sense of coherence · Self-esteem · Qualitative methodology

## 1 Introduction

Stress has been an important subject of research (e.g., Davidson & Baum, 1986; Selye, 1978; Van Der Kolk, 2021). Previous studies have focused on strength and resilience mechanisms (Antonovsky, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987) and, today, there is an extensive body of knowledge about the diverse responses to stress among adults (e.g., Bjorkman & Malterud, 2012; Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2019), children (Braun-Lewensohn, 2015; Frydenberg et al., 2012), and adolescents (Ishizu, 2017; Yeager et al., 2016).

Adolescents face a variety of stressors on a day-to-day basis, such as social stress (van Roekel et al., 2015), including bullying and violence (Muradwij & Allwood, 2021); family-related stress (Lev-Wiesel & Sternberg, 2012; Wareham et al., 2021); stress related to self-esteem, body image, and sexual identity (Cribb & Haase, 2016; Moksnes & Lazarewicz, 2016); and stressors that are result of living within low-income families (Ponnet, 2014) or in unsafe environments (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016).

Teenage girls at risk are a unique population among adolescents. The term refers to girls aged 12–21 who have dropped out of formal education or are at risk of dropping out due to exposure to risk factors such as complex relationships and conflicts within the family, emotional or physical neglect (Malvaso et al., 2016), and violence or abuse (Lansing et al., 2016). These girls' social relationships tend to be unstable (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000) and they often experience alcohol or drug abuse and suicide attempts (Glowacz et al., 2020). Studies suggest that social and behavioral problems might increase risk behaviors (Lansing et al., 2016). All of the above bring these girls into adolescence with a lack of meaningful resources that could help them to cope with challenges and stress during that developmental stage.

Feminist approaches refer to the concept of "girls at risk" from an inclusive perspective, according to which the girl's identity is shaped by their "intersectionality" (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015) and the connections between the margins in which the girl is. Not everyone who grew up with a lack of resources or in a state of deprivation, exhibits the same harm, however, the chances of such a girl being caught in a marginal position over a longer period, is higher (Oppenheim-Shachar, 2019).

In recent decades, more studies focused on the coping of at-risk teenage girls, their personal resources and resilience have been conducted around the world (Manner et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2009). A variety of factors have been shown to enable teenagers to develop strengths and resilience and to cope with stress. Such factors include support at school and in the community, as well as extra-curricular activities (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2015) and positive thinking (Frank et al., 2017).

## 1.1 Salutogenic Theory and SOC

The current study was conducted in light of salutogenic theory (Antonovsky, 1979), which suggests that stress is an important factor in our everyday life and that people have diverse resources that help them to deal with stress. Sense of coherence (SOC), the main construct in this theory, represents the extent to which a person can use internal resources to stay healthy. It includes three components: comprehensibility (i.e., life experiences are perceived as rational, understandable, consistent, and expected), manageability (i.e., a belief that one has the available resources to cope with stressful situations), and meaningfulness (i.e., the motivation to cope and the commitment to invest emotionally in the coping process; Antonovsky, 1987). According to the theory, when people with a strong SOC face stress, they understand its essence, find their own resources to successfully cope with that stress, and are motivated to do so. Naturally, people have different levels of SOC, which depend on environmental characteristics and life experiences (Antonovsky et al., 1980). An extensive body of knowledge supports findings of negative correlations between SOC and depression (e.g., Luutonen et al., 2011), anxiety (e.g., Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2015), daily stress, and physical symptoms (e.g., Idan & Margalit, 2012), as well as positive correlations between SOC and health, quality of life, and well-being (Antonovsky, 1979; Eriksson & Lindström, 2005; Lindahl et al., 2021).

Studies suggest that SOC can change over time (Feldt et al., 2011; Rivera et al., 2013; Silverstein & Heap, 2015). Since adolescence is a time of many changes, especially for forming views about oneself, it is important to study adolescents' resilience, strength, and resources, as well as changes in those variables.

Studies conducted among at-risk adolescents have found negative correlations between SOC and risk factors such as living with a single parent (e.g., Wadsby et al., 2014), parents' low education (Ristkari et al., 2009), low socio-economic background (Downe et al., 2022), drug abuse (Rivera et al., 2013), and a variety of mental and behavioral problems (Honkinen et al., 2009). On the other hand, Carlén and her colleagues (Carlén et al., 2020) found that a strong SOC protects mental health in adolescence. A broad review of SOC in adolescents (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2022) concluded that "During adolescence, the SOC may contribute to moderating and mediating stress experiences and may also play a protective role" (p. 147).

Numerous studies have examined SOC quantitatively. However, SOC can also be examined qualitatively, although there is only a limited number of such papers compared to studies that have examined SOC quantitatively (Antonovsky et al., 2022). This implies that studies that used qualitative methods to measure SOC among a specific population such as girls at risk, are even more scarce. Thus, the present study expands our knowledge in that specific area. In particular, we examined how girls at risk who are confined to a therapeutic institution perceive their personal resources and their strategies for coping with a variety of different stressful situations.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 *Field of Research*

This research was conducted in a therapeutic-intervention institution for girls facing acute risk and stressful situations. It is a short-term, inclusive boarding school to which girls are admitted for a 3–6 month stay. The institution's goals are to keep the girls away from the harmful environment in which they had been living, to cut off deterioration processes that the girls were facing as a result of exposure to crisis life events, and to start a therapeutic program with the girls. Intervention programs in the institution address the unique physical and mental needs of these girls. Addressing physical and personal security needs reduces their fears and enables the girls to feel safe and to devote themselves to learning, to thinking about their own needs, and to finding their self-identity. Later, in a safe, caring therapeutic environment, the girls can begin to process their experiences. The use of gender-based language and thinking is intended to empower the girls. The girls are encouraged to speak up and to let their voices be heard, to make choices, to identify their own personal needs in the face of society's needs, to ask questions, and to think critically. The goal is for the girls to have positive experiences and a sense of success, which will help to strengthen their self-esteem and empower them.

The institution can accommodate up to 60 girls at a time. The girls are 12–18 years old. New girls enter a sheltered area, in which there are more staff members to watch and care for them. Most of the girls stay in that area for about 6 weeks. During that period, they are expected to adapt to the institution and its rules, language, and ways of behavior. After that, most of the girls are ready to move to a slightly more open part of the institution, with rules and boundaries that are similar to demands in a normative boarding school. In that more open part of the institution, the girls have more responsibilities, and the staff expect more from them. Within a short period of time, the staff study the girls' strengths, needs, and abilities, in order to find the most suitable, long-term institution to meet the needs of each girl.

### 2.2 *Study Design, Paradigm and Participants*

The first author conducted interviews with 12 girls aged 14–17 years old. Eight of these girls were born in Israel. They all came from complex families of low to medium socio-economic status. The interviews were conducted using a qualitative-constructivist paradigm (Seidman, 1991) that relates holistically to the phenomenon under investigation, recognizes that the objects of research construct their own reality and emphasizes the situational context in understanding the phenomenon which is the focus of the research (Stake, 1995). During the interview, the interviewees could explain their identity (Litvak-Hirsch et al., 2010) and perceptions. Thus, such interviews met the needs of the girls in the institution: Giving the girls an

opportunity to tell their life story helped them to let their voices be heard and to create their own narratives.

We invited girls who had been in the institution for at least 2 months to participate in the research. Within this period of time in the institution, the girls were able to develop relative trust in the staff and get mentally and emotionally stronger, to be able to bravely tell their life stories. During the last month of their stay in the institution, the girls are usually able to relate to their past and take a reflective point of view. Naturally, motivated girls with high verbal abilities were the ones who were interviewed.

### **2.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

We obtained the consent of the girls and their parents for their participation in the study and the recording of the interviews. We used in-depth interviews, with open ended questions to clarify unclear statements. The interviews began with an initial opening question such as: *“Please tell me your life story the way you see it.”* Later, depending on the extent to which they were able to describe themselves, the girls were asked about their perceptions of their abilities and strengths, how they coped with stressful situations before entering the institution, and how they cope with such situations in light of their stay in the institution. All of the names that appear in the text are pseudonyms and demographic details were changed to preserve the girls’ privacy and confidentiality.

To analyze the data, we divided the findings into themes and types of key content that came up in the interviews (Lieblich et al., 2010). We constructed categories for each of the three components of SOC: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987). The disassembly of the findings into those three components of SOC is a bit artificial, but has been done before (e.g., Ozanne et al., 2012). Of course, the three components are related to one another. However, this categorization enabled us to take a salutogenic look at how the girls perceive their resources.

### **2.4 Ethics**

The study was approved by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs as well as by the ethics committee of the Conflict Management & Resolution Program, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, under which the study was conducted. Before approaching the girls at this institution, the consent of each girl’s guardian for her participation in the study has been obtained. After receiving all the approvals, the first author approached the girls themselves, and according to the constructivist qualitative approach, explained them about the research and its purpose, about the need to record them and let them understand that they could stop the interview

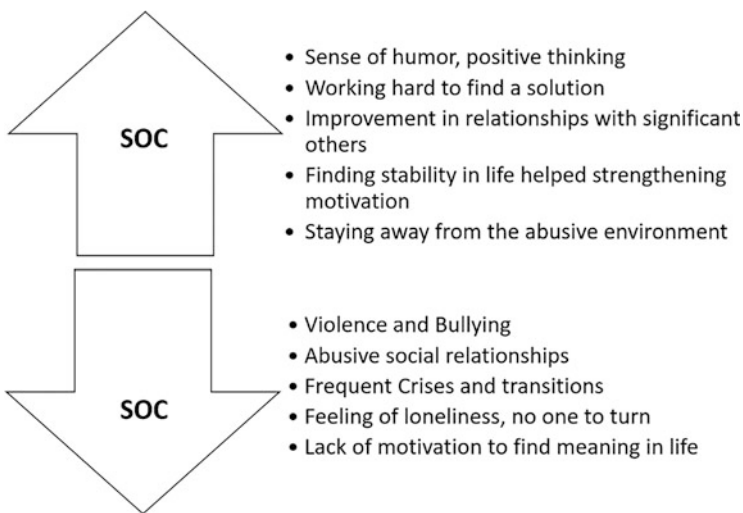
whenever they wanted. Only after receiving their approval, the interview was conducted.

### 3 Results

This research revealed that the girls perceived their environments as unstable and threatening. The interviewees experienced themselves as having only limited resources to cope with these environments. At the same time, the girls also referred to a change that occurred in their perceptions of their environment, themselves, and their abilities to cope with stressful situations. Figure 1 is a graphic overview of the causes of SOC impairment and the resources that the girls have described, that enabled strengthening of SOC. Below we use examples from the interviews to demonstrate how comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness were expressed in the interviews, with a possible change in these components during the girls' stay in the institution.

#### 3.1 *Violence and Bullying Weakened the Comprehensibility Component of SOC*

Most of the girls opened the interview by relating to a crisis event or to a sequence of stressful events. Later in the interviews, they described many violent incidents,



**Fig. 1** Causes that weakened SOC on the one hand, and the resources that strengthened SOC, on the other hand

bullying, and verbal and physical abuse alongside experiences that caused them to feel rejected, lonely, and abandoned. The described violence came from relatives and peers. Olga experienced a complex relationship with her father, who used to hit her daily: *“I remember from a very young age that my father used to beat me.”* Sky described a confusing relationship with her father, which included experiences of togetherness, affection, and warmth: *“Daddy . . . picked oranges and squeezed them straight into my mouth.”* However, later in the interview, she described extreme violence from the same father: *“. . . He beat me up. I was afraid to stay there . . . I went through a very severe violence with my father. . . beatings with a belt.”* The harsh contrast between the positive and negative experiences with her father was confusing and evoked a feeling that, for Sky, reality was chaotic and incomprehensible.

In most of the interviews, the girls also described incidents of violence and bullying by their peers, including ostracism, social difficulties, and abusive social relationships. It was clear from the way the girls described these experiences that they could not find a reason for the bullying and that these experiences were a major source of stress. For example, Stephanie told her life story through a social lens: *“I had a very hard time in elementary school. . . no one wanted to be with me . . . I couldn’t find friends . . .”* Stephanie described a peak event of social rejection and violence: *“And the boy had an iron ruler and he hit me on my back for no reason.”* She experienced the environment in which she lived as not only violent and hurtful, but also incomprehensible. Stephanie asked directly: *“It hurt me . . . Why were they doing this to me? For what reason? I did nothing to them.”* Her question sums up a perception of most of the girls: The environment is confusing and unstable. From these reports, we understood that these girls had experienced impairment of the comprehensibility component of SOC.

### ***3.2 Frequent Crises Weakened the Manageability Component of SOC***

One theme that came up in all of the interviews was that of acute crisis events or frequent, sudden transitions. These events were perceived as dangerous and distressing for the girls’ mental health. They included immigration to Israel, a sudden change in family composition, sexual assault, outbreak of mental illness of a parent, murder within the family, and hospitalization in a psychiatric ward. Several girls had experienced more than one crisis event. Most of the girls divided their lives into the period before the event and the period after the event. This division may imply that the girls experienced these events as traumatic events that left their mark on their souls. This may explain why the girls felt that they lacked the resources necessary to cope with the crises they faced. Examples of these crisis events are presented below.

Immigration to Israel was experienced as a negative change in the lives of some of the girls. For example, Olga opened the interview by referring to her family’s

immigration to Israel, as well as frequent transitions between educational institutions. Sky, too, reported great difficulty as a result of frequent changes and instability in her life: *"I didn't have a stable place. . . my father always moved houses and my mother always moved cities, and it was very, very difficult."* The girls felt that they did not have the resources and strength to cope with stressors.

In addition to individual crisis events, some of the girls told their whole life story as a sequence of dramatic, severe events. It seems that the intensity and frequency of the tough events contributed to the girls' feeling that their lives were moving on an unexpected, winding track. It was difficult for them to anticipate or prepare for the future. The girls experienced their environments as unstable and felt that they lacked the tools to deal with this instability. Olga, using very descriptive language, describe her life as a roller coaster going up and down: *"All the ups and downs. . . suddenly this. . . and suddenly this. . . my life is like a movie."*

Another common theme was an experience of not receiving help and having no one to whom they could turn. For example: *"The staff did not really do anything . . . they never believed in me"* (Aliza). The girls needed help and in the absence of such help, it can be understood that they may have experienced not only a lack of internal resources, but also a lack of external resources that could have helped them to cope with their difficult life events. The sequence of dramatic events and the feeling that they were all by themselves seems to have contributed to the weakening of the manageability component of their SOC.

### 3.3 Weakness of the Meaningfulness Component of SOC

Several girls referred directly to the absence of a sense of meaningfulness, especially in the context of finding their lives to be not valuable. Descriptions of self-harm or suicide attempts shed further light on the difficulty of the girls to find the motivation to cope with the problems they encountered. For example, Greenie's suicidal acts, which began when she was only 10 years old, clearly expressed impairment of the meaningfulness component of SOC.

Olga expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with life in figurative language that leaves no doubt as to the impairment of her sense of meaning: *"I did not want to be at all. I just wanted to die. . . [paused for a second] I was homeless in the soul."* Later in the interview, she described feeling that her life was worthless: *"I had a shitty life . . . [whispering] I felt . . . like. . . someone who has fallen and cannot get up."* Gal described acts of self-harm: *"There were some stages when I gave up on myself. . . I thought: ' . . . So what. . . so I'll die.'" Olga' and Gal's descriptions imply that, sometimes, they did not feel sufficiently motivated to try to cope with the difficulties they faced.*

Aliza incorporated in her life story a number of statements about her perceptions regarding the significance of her life. For example: *"My life sucked."* Aliza had experienced violence from her father, massive use of addictive substances, and street life. These hard experiences may explain why she perceived life as meaningless: *"I*



*did not care . . . I had no more strength; I wanted them to leave me.*” Also: *“Then, when you want to stop that (feeling), then you start cutting yourself . . . .”* Her words evoke a sense of great confusion and difficulty in finding the strength to cope.

So far, we have described experiences and events that point to impaired SOC among these girls. The examples we have presented indicate damage to each of the three components of SOC. The events described were difficult to hear, to read, and to analyze, due to the intensity of the described violence, the girls’ experiences of having no one to whom they could turn, their depression, and their inability to find meaning in life. If we, as researchers, found these stories difficult, we can understand that the girls’ own experiences were many, many times as difficult.

However, all of their life stories also included experiences of courage and strength, joy, optimistic vision, or hope and the girls referred to positive qualities that could help them to make changes in the future. Toward the end of the interviews, sometimes in response to a clarifying question about coping, the girls included descriptions of successes, abilities, and examples of finding resources within themselves that may contribute to strengthening their SOC, as described in the next section.

### **3.4 Factors that Strengthened SOC**

Our findings include descriptions of vulnerability and difficulty, alongside statements of strengths and abilities. These seem to imply the existence of coping resources, which may have strengthened the various components of SOC. For example, throughout the interviews, the interviewees described themselves as working to help their families; they looked with humor at things previously seen as hard or traumatic; and they all set goals for their futures. Thus, they perceived their environment as sufficiently stable and perceived themselves as having the motivation to cope with challenges. We will review several examples that illustrate this.

Julia opened the interview by describing a life of poverty. But, she also mentioned working hard to help her family and having the strength to rise from a state of crisis: *“I always knew how to move forward . . . no matter how hard I fell, I always tried to climb up.”* Greenie described a change in the relationship with her mother, following processes she went through at the institution. Strengthening the bond with her mother was a positive change in Greenie’s perception of the environment, which she now saw as more stable and support-providing and, therefore, as more manageable. Aliza mentioned an improvement in her ability to ask for help from staff members.

All of the interviewees chose to end the interviews by relating to their futures. They set goals, were brave enough to dream about having a successful and meaningful life, and were motivated to fight for a better life. Ilana stated that she was willing to work hard to achieve her goals: *“. . . I will manage to work through it . . . Even though I fell so many times in the past, I am able to lift myself.”* She now

trusted her personal resources, which allowed her to dream: *“I am dying to be a pilot. . . a dream I have had since I was seven years old.”*

Tiferet addressed the change in her ability to perceive her life. She said: *“I have a great life. It is only now that I realize it . . . The ability to see the little things in life enables me to appreciate my life.”* Finally, Aliza skillfully described a positive change in her perception of life as meaningful: *“I want life. I have dreams . . . I want to have a job, to complete my studies in high school, join the army . . . I know that my life is worthy and valuable.”*

## 4 Discussion

Our research findings show that the girls who stay in this specific institution have difficult, painful, complex lives. Their parents were occasionally warm and loving and, at other times, terribly violent or abusive. This inconsistency contributes to the girls’ perceiving the behavior of people around them as difficult to predict. Home, which is supposed to be a safe place, was perceived as insecure and unstable. We understood how, in these circumstances, the girls would perceive their environment as incomprehensible and exhibit relatively weak SOC.

Horrible experiences of bullying by their peers contributed to the feeling that the environment is unpredictable. Some girls used the fact that they are immigrants as an explanation for the violence. They interpreted that being immigrant meant that they did not understand the social codes and that society might find it difficult to accept them because of their otherness. In a broad review of salutogenesis and migration, Daniel and Ottemöller (2022) found that migrants tend to have relatively low SOC. However, a holistic perspective and the identification of cultural values or practices may serve as general resistance resources and promote mental health.

In crisis situations, seeking help from relatives is important. Sometimes this help even saves lives. However, these girls described a feeling of having no one to whom they could turn, a lack of support from educators and professionals, and a lack of faith in their abilities to help themselves. This may have caused them to give up or to feel depressed, which could reduce their self-esteem and harm their motivation to cope with the stressful situations that they faced. Such feelings weaken SOC (Moksnes & Lazarewicz, 2016).

In addition to being immigrants, another shared experience of several girls was that of having experienced many transitions and changes, while feeling that they had only limited strategies to predict changes and to successfully cope with those changes. Various studies have found that lack of educational and employment frameworks was positively associated with anxiety and depression (Basta et al., 2019; Meier Magistretti & Reichlin, 2022). It is possible that the frequent changes in the lives of the girls in our study contributed to their feelings of anxiety/depression, as reflected in the girls’ suicide attempts and in direct statements about how they saw their lives as worthless.

One important aspect of this research lies in the fact that it combines a salutogenic perspective with gender-sensitive perspectives. The results of the study show that girls have unique needs, which require gender-sensitive responses to them. Such responses are given in the shape of gender-sensitive language in the institution itself. Also, unique programs for girls at different developmental stages are being supervised by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (The Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, 2022) and more such programs should be introduced and budgeted according to needs. At the same time, these girls in our study also described abilities and resources, which we could emphasize and focus on, because we chose to look through prisms of resilience and strength, as the salutogenic theory suggests. Conducting this research from a salutogenic perspective allowed us to examine the strengths of these girls. We found that the girls were able to change their perceptions of their environment. The girls' stay at the institution and being away from the abusive environment might have given the girls an experience of stability and security. This feeling enables the girls to relax, be less tense and thus be able to feel that they have more resources to deal with the environment. Even if the environment did not change, the way the girls could look at it—changed. All of the interviews ended with the girls' requests to focus their minds on the future and to look forward. They expressed a desire to start a family, to study, and to acquire a profession. This ability to plan ahead suggests that the girls may perceive their environment as more comprehensible and stable and life as valuable and meaningful.

The changes we described reinforce our understanding that the girls learned to use varied coping strategies that helped them to cope with stress situations and to reflect back at their life in a more positive way. For example, there are girls who described unbearable stressful events in the period before they arrived at the institution. However, as they continued in the interview while progressed in their life-story chronologically, they added positive reflections about themselves, about the way they acted in the context of those events. Clearly, the events themselves had not changed, however the girls could have experienced themselves as having strength, resilience and diverse coping-strategies that helped them to act in the best way they could, in the hard circumstances.

We assume that these changes in the girls' perceptions of their environment are small. But, as small these changes in the perceptions of the girls are, their meaning is indicative of a possible strengthening of their SOC. They may only be first steps in a long process that will probably include more ups and downs, failures, or disappointments. These girls still need caring, supportive adults to whom they can turn, who will be there in times of need. In order to meet such needs, programs that empower parents and strengthen the secure base with their offspring might be helpful (Al-Yagon, 2015).

Antonovsky (1987) suggested that SOC develops during childhood and adolescence and remains stable from early maturity. Researchers disagree about the degree of that stability. Schnyder et al. (2000) argued that SOC is an independent measure of a person's worldview. Therefore, we argue that if worldview changes, so can SOC. Lindahl et al. (2021) quantitatively examined SOC and found that it can change in a period of 6 months after an accident. The present study examined

SOC qualitatively, so we cannot relate to values of SOC. However, the findings presented here may reflect a change in SOC, as we have suggested above. The apparent change observed in the present study did not occur after a one-time traumatic event, as in Lindahl's study, but was observed after the removal of the girls from their harmful environments and an intensive therapeutic intervention of about 3 months. These findings suggest that it is possible for SOC to change, even in such a short time.

Another important aspect of these findings is that they imply that when given the opportunity, girls at risk are able to express themselves. The participants in this study proved that they had the ability to let their voices be heard and to speak up and that they were willing to see themselves in a better light. It seems that the girls had also strengthened their belief in themselves and in their ability to find the resources needed to cope with their environment.

One limitation of this study is that it was carried out in only one institution, which is the only institution of its type in Israel. The lack of similar institutions meant that we could not compare data from different institutions. This may limit the generalizability of these findings. In addition, the results of this study give but a glimpse into the world of girls at risk, as reflected from only 12 interviews, and as it emerged at the point in time at which the interviews were conducted.

## 5 Conclusions and Implications

This chapter sheds light on the SOC of teenage girls at risk. The findings presented here reveal that this population experiences both acute, one-time events and ongoing stressful events. These difficult life experiences contribute to the adolescents' perception of their environment as difficult and chaotic and themselves as lacking the resources to cope with events in their environment. However, therapy, rehabilitation, and an empowering attitude in a therapeutic institution away from the abusive environment seem to allow adolescent girls to acquire a positive perspective on their environment and themselves. Thus, we conclude that SOC can be strengthened with positive changes during this important developmental period. Looking at the girls' resources through the lens of salutogenic theory can allow for fundamental changes. A strong SOC can serve as a significant resilience factor (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2022) and strengthening SOC can help at-risk populations in a variety of stressful situations. Thus, it is important to help staff members in therapeutic and educational institutions to become familiar with salutogenic theory, to get to know programs that can help at-risk adolescents to strengthen their SOC through empowering experiences, the acquisition and development of a variety of coping mechanisms, and the strengthening of their personal resources. A holistic perspective and the identification of cultural values may serve as general resistance resources and promote mental health (Daniel & Ottemöller, 2022). Salutogenic talk therapy may be another way to strengthen SOC (Langeland & Vinje, 2022).

Helping adolescents to experience challenges as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful may be a key to helping them to lead better, healthier lives.

Future interventions may include follow-up studies among these girls in order to examine changes over time. It is also important to examine young women at risk, in addition to teenagers. In addition, we suggest future studies that examine factors that were not considered in the present study as strengthening or weakening SOC. For example, the connections of learning disabilities to cognitive mechanisms that might enable the girls to change their perceptions (Al-Yagon, 2012); Examination of girls with and without PTSD in relation to their SOC and other personal resources; Finally, this study focus on girls who experienced adverse childhood events. Thus, we suggest a future study that include parents of girls in such an institution which will investigate the parents' perception of SOC.

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# Young Female Current and Former Service Users and Female Staff Coping with the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of the Women's Courtyards



Gila Amitay  and Dalit Yassour-Borochowitz

**Abstract** Young women suffering from distress and social exclusion have little access to vital social resources. If in ordinary times they endure poverty and distress, during a pandemic, their circumstances deteriorate considerably. “The Women’s Courtyard,” a social service operating in three Israeli cities—Jaffa, Netanya, and Haifa—is designed specifically for young and adolescent women, mainly from the Arab Muslim and Jewish Ethiopian communities, facing these challenges. It maintains an “open space” and offers a variety of activities and pro bono services, including employment, welfare, healthcare, and self-advocacy.

The aim of this paper is to portray the challenges and practices service users and providers faced in coping with the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study, consisting of semi-structured interviews with young women and staff from all three “Courtyards,” was based in grounded theory, combined with critical research.

As an essential service, the Courtyards functioned as a safe and stable space during the pandemic and its prolonged lockdowns. The staff’s familiarity with situations of extreme distress made it easier for them to cope with pandemic-related distress, despite the latter showing marked differences from routine stress. Staff highlighted the crucial role played by the social resources and networks the Courtyards had in place prior to COVID-19: strong social and volunteer networks, as well as other organizations the Courtyards customarily cooperated with before the pandemic.

This article focuses on the strength of open community spaces that are applying critical feminist practices. It also emphasizes the need to establish stable and strong social networks for service providers working with women in extreme distress.

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**Keywords** Women's empowerment, critical social work · Feminist social work · Lived experience knowledge · Social exclusion · Young women · Women's courtyard

## 1 Theoretical Background

### 1.1 *The Transition to Adulthood for Socially Excluded Females*

The transition to adulthood is a major developmental stage for every young person. During this period, the ground rules tend to change, as do social expectations. For young females without family support, the transition to adulthood is more challenging, as they lack the support that usually provides both a security net and a place to live until they attain fiscal self-sufficiency (Kendig et al., 2014). Young women who lack family support suffer from unstable employment, more incidents of violence and higher arrest rates. They find it difficult to complete their education, and marry and start families younger, which further impedes their educational and professional attainments. Finally, having less family and social support, they tend to suffer more emotional difficulties (Courtney et al., 2010).

Research addressing the community responsibility is relatively scant, and the social context in the majority of studies is rarely considered a significant factor. This is despite today's widespread acknowledgement that community is a significant basis for integration and reintegration of socially excluded people and populations (Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014; Walker et al., 2016).

During the coronavirus pandemic, women found themselves at home caring for children or infirm relatives at higher rates than men, many losing their employment as a result (Alon et al., 2020). Consequently, their pandemic-induced decline in earnings and occupational status in the context of the pandemic was greater than that of men (Kristal & Yaish, 2020). Staying at home also increased the incidence of serious injury, even death, among women suffering gender-based violence (GBV) (Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2020).

### 1.2 *Feminist Social Work*

Feminist social work emphasizes the influence of gender on the power relationships inherent in it as a material factor in the experience of women suffering social exclusion (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009; Fook, 2016; Orme, 2009). Another important conceptualization in feminist social work is intersectionality, which emphasizes that when a person is on society's fringes in one sphere, there is a significant chance that that individual will be on the fringes of other spheres as well. This observation generates the recognition that there is a multiplicity and diversity of

life experiences and lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). To understand the variety of female experiences in various social situations, one must observe the intersection of social situations which they inhabit, which both affect and dictate their life experiences. In contrast to the narrow perspective of the gender lens, observation via intersectional lens offers deeper insights into how dimensions of power, historically-structured inequality, and life experience help construct gender-responsive work in general, and in relation to the pandemic in particular (Ryan et al., 2020).

Feminist social work combines the professional theoretical approaches of social work aimed at helping people attain a decent standard of well-being and a good life together with feminist approaches grounded in both theoretical and activist orientations. According to the feminist approach, the purpose of social services is to resist the social replication underlying suppressive power relations.

Critical thinking about social services has evolved from understanding that socially excluded people, who generally require social services, possess unique knowledge relevant to forming optimal working approaches for reducing these barriers and the social exclusion itself (Komem, 2006; Krumer-Nevo and Barak, 2006).

### ***1.3 The Research Context: The Women's Courtyards: An Alternative Critically-Oriented Service***

“The Women’s Courtyard” was founded in 2003 by a social worker and a criminologist who sought a new and different way to work and interact with young and adolescent women coping with extreme situations of social exclusion, poverty, hardship, and danger. The Women’s Courtyard offers a unique approach to working with such young women, relying on social work critical theory (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009), seeking to understand how social power structures are reproduced in the lives of the Courtyard service users, mapping the nature of the actions, and trying to employ alternative action within these power structures. The first Women’s Courtyard was founded in Jaffa, and offered a hairdresser, an open space structured like a large living room, a kitchen to prepare meals, and two smaller rooms for private conversations, all free of charge. The Women’s Courtyard organizes regular recreational activities and classes, as well as free employment, welfare, finance, health care and self-advocacy services for its visitors. Adolescent and young women can choose with which staff member they want to speak. Some adolescent and young women visit for an activity, and others come to stay in the Courtyard and eat. Courtyard staff members are women only and mostly social workers. Currently, there are three Courtyards—in Jaffa, Haifa, and Netanya. These provide services for girls and young women experiencing extreme poverty and social exclusion, and each has a unique character within the application of critical social work principles. Each

Courtyard works with approximately 50–70 women who visit the Courtyard on a regular basis, and many dozens more who visit intermittently.

The purpose of this study is to examine the coping mechanisms employed by the young women and female Courtyard staff to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. To investigate this, we chose to concurrently also study how “graduates” of the Women’s Courtyards are coping to determine how their stay at the Courtyards contributed to their adult lives today. Specifically, the goals the study are to describe the coping practices of the young women and the staff in its work in extreme situations in general, and the impact of the coronavirus on the daily lives of young women who face social barriers and many hardships and how the young women and the Courtyards staff coped—or failed to cope—with supporting the young women facing the unique difficulties arising from the pandemic.

## 2 The Research Method

The research method is grounded ethnography, combined with critical research. The process of constructing the research was carried out using the Grounded Theory Approach (Charmaz, 2005). Based on critical approaches, this study considers every person as possessing knowledge and abilities (Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2006). We view the young women and staff at the Women’s Courtyard as women possessing important and unique knowledge for establishing a successful and relevant learning space for themselves.

By using semi-structured interviews with the young women and staff members, the main difficulties they were currently experiencing and those they experienced in the pre-vaccine period of the pandemic will be mapped. During this period, Israel experienced lockdowns and restricting movement and access for most of the population, causing many women to experience loneliness and deprivation. In interpreting the interviews, we will try to structure possibilities for action as well as solutions applicable to future crises (Lavie-Ajayi, 2014), using research methods of knowledge extraction and merging of knowledge.

The sample group consists of women, current and former users of the Women’s Courtyards’ services, as well as current Women’s Courtyards’ staff, both social workers and volunteers. There are three Courtyards and the population that uses the services of each is slightly different. Whereas Jaffa and Haifa are mixed towns where both Jews and Arabs live, Netanya is mainly characterized as a city with a large immigrant population, from Ethiopia in the 1990s, and most recently from France. Today, each Courtyard is regularly visited by about 40 girls. Every Courtyard has a regional coordinator, a social worker, an employment coordinator, and permanent volunteers. The Women’s Courtyard Society has a permanent group of supporting women, and recently established a Board of Directors, reflecting the institutionalization of the organizational processes. The study was approved by the Co-CEO, who founded the organization, as well as by the current CEO, and was approved by the Yezreel Valley College Ethics Committee (Approval No. EMEK 2020–92).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the entire sample group: young women, Courtyard Alumni, and female staff from all three Courtyards. The interviews were conducted both by the principal researchers, and by research assistants with masters degrees, with socially excluded young women.

### **3 Findings**

The findings indicate that the Women’s Courtyards were significant for the young women and female staff in the pandemic’s first phase, as felt both in their activity, and in the absence of activity during lockdowns. The findings focus on three main themes: (1) the Courtyard’s significant role in daily life and satisfying the young women’s various needs; (2) the difficulty in operating the Courtyard and implementing the Courtyard’s role as a unique space; and (3) the Courtyard’s strengths as highlighted during the pandemic’s first phase.

#### ***3.1 The Courtyard’s Significant Role for the Young Women***

##### **3.1.1 “I Really Believe that Loneliness is Above all Else”: Solitude**

Both young women and staff reported feelings of boredom and loneliness during lockdowns, when the Courtyards were closed. For example, see the following two quotes:

*You’re locked in a room and can’t leave. When I was in quarantine, I really became sort of depressed. It was very, very difficult. I found it hard to talk about, hard to communicate. It pushed me into a very, very tough spot.* (Young woman).

*I believe we need to understand how few supportive social circles these young women have, which the pandemic highlighted prominently. I believe that women are affected economically and in terms of family violence and other injuries, more than other population groups. I think they are less visible, more transparent...* (Manager, Haifa).

##### **3.1.2 “The Situation Is Much, Much Worse”: Financial Pressure and Domestic Violence**

The lockdowns caused many households to lose employment, and created a situation in which a single space was occupied together by a number of people for extended periods of time, which intensified pre-existing family pressures in the lives of the Courtyard’s youngsters. This was reflected both in increased economic hardship (we are dealing here with young women who suffer economic hardship in any

event), as well as familial pressures and domestic violence, which intensified as a result of circumstances.

*[You] do nothing at home. And you have nowhere to go. You're not even allowed to go. It wasn't easy. But in all this, I did manage to work a little at various different places with a good friend of mine. I worked every time doing something else, just to keep me from becoming depressed, like people who have no money"* (Young woman).

*On the margins, as a minority, we had those who faced real violence. I believe there's a lot more... in the first few months, when many were furloughed, there was a lot more drinking ...* (Netanya employee).

### **3.1.3 “Sometimes This Is the Only Place in the World (For Them)”: A Safe Space to Go**

When the Courtyard was recognized as an essential service, and reopened, it was experienced by the young women and staff as a safe space to go to. On the matter of a lack of any safe space during the lockdowns, one of the young girls said:

*I often wanted to go, but couldn't. Or I needed something, or I had to talk to someone, but there was no one"* (Young woman).

*I think there is no substitute to our physical presence here, I think we understood and managed to convince whoever we needed to, that they can't close the Courtyard; it's destructive, it's dangerous, it's a question of life and death, we have to be here. I think the personal connections are very significant... For me it was more essential than the supermarket. It's like, it's the soul, it's beyond basic necessities. It's the need to be normal just for a moment"* (Social worker, Haifa).

## **3.2 *The Difficulty in Operating the Courtyard as a Special Space***

### **3.2.1 “Capsules are so Unsuitable to the Courtyard!”**

The young women experienced difficulties in maintaining social distancing, as well as difficulties concerning the need to visit at pre-planned times, in arbitrary capsules, and not spontaneously. In fact, the regulations that dictated social distancing and limited the number of visitors at any given time, were completely contrary to the Courtyard's *modus operandi*, and complicated resuming activities:

*Every girl came when she was registered. I couldn't see the girls I wanted to.* (A Young Woman).

*We tried options of limiting the number of girls visiting, to devise a specific capsule -list. It's the antithesis of what happens here. The whole point is for the girls to come and go as and when they please. Yet suddenly, we had to place limitations, and choose who could come at what times* (A social worker).

### 3.2.2 “As if Everything Stopped Breathing”: A Double Emergency

Female staff describe an experience of a “double emergency,” both with regard to their families and personal lives, and with regard to the girls and the need to find solutions and cope with two fronts simultaneously.

*The coronavirus caught me at the beginning of my pregnancy, and no one knew, except for a few. . . Suddenly, they started to talk about a lockdown, and the directives from the Ministry of Welfare were not clear. There was panic from above, which makes it very difficult to remain calm. But there was also panic from below, from the girls, who were very anxious that the Courtyard would close, and what would happen. (A Courtyard manager).*

*At the time, I was taking care of two children who were at home on Zoom meetings. One, who suffers from ADHD. In fact, the kindergarten teacher kind of neglected them. He was at kindergarten, then, and she stopped organizing Zoom meetings....and I'm with the kids, and I also need to keep the organization running (CEO).*

### 3.2.3 Dilemmas Concerning Availability for the Courtyard’s Young Women

Female staff talk about a multiplicity of dilemmas concerning their availability to the young women and the Courtyard, when they were at the same time coping at home, which demanded a significant time investment from them due to the lockdowns; children and family staying at home, commitments to care for elderly parents, and more. Moreover, questions arose concerning the need for physical proximity in the face of a pandemic that demanded social distancing.

*When we all returned quickly to operating full time, one of my children remained alone at home all year on Zoom meetings. I mean, so the challenge was at home.. On days on which the Courtyard was closed, I did administrative work from home. However, as a freelancer, I admitted defeat, because of a child and the coronavirus, it was giving something up professionally (Employee, Haifa).*

*When they started to vaccinate everyone over sixteen, there were a few here who consistently campaigned against vaccination, and preached coronavirus denial, etc. I admit, that was my limit. It was a matter of being responsible, since I went home every day to unvaccinated children, and I help an elderly mother (Employee, Haifa).*

### 3.2.4 “Cases were Being Handed down to us left Right and Centre”: Organizational Level Challenges

During the lockdown, workers observed and experienced an increase in the number of referrals to the Courtyard, which resulted in overload, as well as organizational and emotional difficulties.

*I believe this is the year in which we received the largest number of referrals from welfare services since the Courtyard opened. They simply threw everything during the pandemic to us, because we were working. The incidences of violence increased markedly, as did poverty, and the girls we served felt that no one saw them, which only worsened the*



*situation. We were like...In the past, we never stopped admissions at the Courtyard, but we can't work so intensely at the level of efficiency we would want to, with the numbers involved (Employee, Haifa).*

Moreover, there was a sense that presence in the intersection of multiple fringe positions further exacerbated the young women's situation; since even in normal times they cope with particularly difficult lives and exclusion. The regulatory demands caused by the pandemic (vaccinations, social distancing, limiting attendance numbers), were especially difficult for the young women.

*I think that it's possible that the Arab women were a little more resistant to the coronavirus regime. Like, in relation to masks and social distancing, and all that. For instance, more fines for failure to mask in the Arab community, greater resistance toward the police, acts of defiance against government, and recently against these laws. Examining the difficulties surrounding the pandemic—it's possible their financial difficulties were more significant. But that is also because their starting point was lower (Social worker, Haifa).*

### **3.3 The Courtyards' Strengths Emphasized During the First Wave of the Pandemic**

#### **3.3.1 "We are Used to Working in Extreme Conditions all the Time"**

Staff mentioned their coping skills, difficulties notwithstanding, since they were familiar with extreme circumstances as part and parcel of their professional expertise:

*I think one of the reasons the Courtyard did survive this is because we are used to working in extreme conditions all the time. We are accustomed to crises; we are used to things not working according to plan, and we always need a "Plan B." (Employee, Haifa).*

*On a professional level, I think we knew everything, I mean, it didn't surprise us like it did others. We knew that our youngsters would be the first to get hurt, we knew it would take time to realize the true costs, we knew that loneliness was more difficult than the economic conditions, the violence, and sexual vulnerability, we knew that their emotional resilience was precarious, and that anything, all the more so something so enormous, is devastating (Employee, Haifa).*

Coincidentally, they—and particularly management—were concerned about resource reductions:

*It was not clear whether the Ministry of Welfare would pay the budgetary allocation per person or not. And indeed, ultimately, for one month they paid 40%, and for a second 70%. I mean, it took time, and there was uncertainty. The municipality could say, "Carry on as usual," "just work as usual, don't spare any expense." ... A large entity can handle it, but an NGO can't (Courtyard manager).*

### 3.3.2 “The Haifa Network Managed by ‘K’ Is Truly Significant and Big and Powerful”

Staff stressed the importance of the resources accumulated before the crisis: a strong social network in the area, a lot of work on the part of volunteers who mobilized swiftly to act, gathering all the resources possible, from any and every organization, society, or individuals. Underlying all this one can see the importance of relationships and connections between entities, organizations, authorities, and individuals who constituted the support network.

*I was happy to be at that juncture, because of my position I could ultimately make sure, as I said before, that everything would be funnelled into the neighbourhood, and reach the girls. As well as the things I obtained in a roundabout way, which also made a difference in the neighbourhood...It was an extremely difficult time in society. The stagnation... It was hard to run an organisation without reserves (A Courtyard manager).*

*Connection to concrete assistance [was important]. They were anxious about leaving home, etc. Emotional support was lacking, even if it was just understanding that they were not alone. . . . So, we started to develop all sorts of solutions.... we organized a regular day each week to distribute food. They would arrive in turn to pick it up, and by the way inquire “How are you,” etc., meaning a face-to-face meeting. we had an open group Zoom meeting once a week. We had all sorts of things that the volunteers thought of. (Employee, Haifa).*

*The network maintained in Haifa by “K” is super important, and vast, and very strong. And the pandemic was exactly the situation in which to test it. Everything we needed, from tampons to single-use utensils, masks and gloves and thermometers, to a learning space that cost 9,000 shekels, driving the girls around, nothing was neglected, everything worked, the entire support network came together, all the organizations. It’s also really about maintaining the relationships, personal, professional, and in the community. . . From the perspective of community solutions, we are very well connected. Haifa is a very feminist place, many of the first feminist organisations were founded here, and there is a very broad range of committees, communities, and forums, and we are involved in all of them. And again, it’s also very personal, and it is very much “K” (Employee, Haifa).*

## 4 Discussion

The work of the female staff at the Women’s Courtyards, is work amid tension, being together but apart, of establishing a spontaneous space that had to become structured during lockdown. The staff, all female, also coped with a state of dual emergency, both at the Courtyards with the young women who experience extreme hardship all year round, and the added emergency associated with the pandemic. Moreover, they had to cope with policies that were not always suitable to the Courtyards’ needs and circumstances. Another double marginality experienced by staff was coping with the double emergency in their own homes—caring for their own children and parents, which overnight became more intense due to the pandemic.

The findings illustrate the role of urban and community support networks. With the establishment of the Women's Courtyards, groups of women who support them also formed, offering womanpower, resources, and the possibility of weaving broader ties within the communities. The Courtyard's communal and organizational network of contacts was an anchor for finding lacking resources, the need for which only intensified during the pandemic. The power and importance of the communal social network is referred to extensively in social work literature (Orme, 2009; Madgaykar et al., 2020) and human service knowledge (Barnetz & Vardi, 2014; Pitowsky-Nave, 2022;). Beneficial communality is an empowering factor for socially excluded communities, and all the more so feminine communities (Ryan & El Ayad, 2020).

To conclude, one can see that organizations like the Courtyards operating on the basis of critical feminist social work faced paradoxical situations during the coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, they (as well as all other systems), were subjected to rigid regulation and rules that often contradicted the Courtyards' basic operating principles. On the other, the professional skill demonstrated by Courtyard staff and volunteers, based on understanding the multiple marginal circumstances, the complexity of distress and exclusion, and the need to find unique solutions for each young woman tailored to her own needs, all prepared them for the difficult and complex management that the pandemic forced on their daily routine.

Repeatedly, participants expressed appreciation and emphasized the importance of constructing a dedicated group of volunteers, as well as maintaining reciprocal relationships with the immediate neighbourhood, and the wider environment (welfare, municipality, other organisations). The ability to rely on, and be supported by, these networks, was what ultimately "compensated" for the lack of formal conventional resources.

In conclusion, on the policy level, there is material importance to creating sustainable communal and municipal support networks as a safety net for times of emergency. On the professional knowledge level, to successfully cope with an emergency, one must develop the ability to act from humanistic and professional considerations, and sometimes juggle several different observational and decision-making methods; a significant strength of the female staff at the Courtyards was ultimately their ability to be simultaneously weak and strong, to be experts with knowledge, yet at the same time lacking in knowledge and control of the situation.

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# Implementing a Strengths and Competencies Based Wellness Program for Mothers Living in a South African High-Risk Community



Izanelle van Schalkwyk  and Anthony V. Naidoo 

**Abstract** This chapter presents the implementation of a wellness program to strengthen the personal and parental competencies of mothers living in a South African high-risk community. Research-generated academic information with contextual data obtained via participatory processes informed the content and focus of the program. The effective implementation of the Power Moms Wellness Program (PMWP) was a complex process combining conceptual knowledge, practical expertise, with the integration of contextual knowledge. A review of relevant literature provided the theoretical underpinnings of the four modules of the PMWP and its 20 sessions. The PMWP was underpinned theoretically from a Strengths perspective—particularly an eudaimonic approach typical to Positive Psychology’s salutogenic focus—to fortify the personal/psychological and maternal capacities of the participants’ existing skills, strengths and competencies. A community-based participative approach was utilised to inform and guide the ethical and practical processes in designing and implementing the PMWP with a social worker reference group from the community and the research group as soundings boards. We describe functional strategies of the PMWP related to the specified structure of the sessions and related content, aims, outcomes and give examples of some activities of the PMWP. We also provide one session of the program to illustrate the particulars of implementing the PMWP in the participants’ families and community.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Implementation · High-risk community · Intervention program · Mothers · Positive psychology · Strengths · Strategies

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## 1 Introduction

The science of well-being and health innovation entails much more than effective evidence-based interventions (Fernandez et al., 2019). The extent to which programs are implemented with high levels of completeness to translate evidence from research into effective practice is central to implementation science (Powell et al., 2015). The process of implementation mapping (IM) comprises six steps and several tasks (Kok et al., 2017). This chapter focuses on the program implementation plan (step 5) which includes the describing of the constituent process in developing an intervention program to strengthen the personal and parental competencies of mothers in a South African high-risk community. The accumulation of the complexities of mothering in the context of a South African high-risk community (Kruger, 2020) and the reality of many “poverty traps” undermine the mental health and functioning of mothers (female caregivers) (van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021a). The need for the development of the programme to strengthen mothers’ personal and parenting competencies within this context is based on recent research showing that mothers’ struggles and suffering affect the entire family (van Schalkwyk, 2019). Therefore, the need for a contextual understanding of structural conditions and particularly for the inclusion of a participatory and social justice approach to such program development was evident (van Schalkwyk, 2020).

While existing parenting programs provide valuable guidelines with regards to a psycho-educative and action-based format, the content of the wellness program in a particular SA high-risk setting required due consideration of the local contextual conditions (van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021a). For that reason, development of the psychoeducational program was both culturally relevant and grounded in evidence of effectiveness (Castro et al., 2004; Lachman et al., 2016). Guidelines from various parenting programs were incorporated as best practices toward effective implementation. The use of recommendations especially regarding practicalities about barriers and facilitators of programs developed in the South African context (Wessels, 2017; Shenderovich et al., 2019) was rather important in this setting, as it could not be assumed that mere presentation of good information equals the effectiveness of the wellness program (Myers et al., 2019; Wessels et al., 2016).

Prevailing statistics indicate that non-nuclear family configurations have families headed by single moms as the norm—which means that most children in the high-risk community are living and growing up with mainly mothers/grandmothers/aunts as heads of households (van Schalkwyk, 2020; Delft census, 2011). Therefore, the mental health and functioning of mothers (female caregivers) were important objectives for parenting programs in the South African context (Kruger, 2020; van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021b). Also, while parenting programs are implemented widely in high income countries, there is scant evidence of the effective implementation of such programs in developing countries in Africa (Shenderovich et al., 2019).

The PMWP was developed as a public health or a health promotion program to benefit participants and their community (Kok et al., 2004); and the theoretical

underpinnings of this program for mothers guided the functional strategies employed in this program and practicalities (the how to do) were fundamental to successful implementation in a risk-saturated South African community, called Delft. Based on research conducted in this community (Van Schalkwyk, 2019), several indications of needs and resources were initially identified as nodes for attention. Further explorative consultation with social workers working in the Delft community and with mothers attending a photo-voice activity helped identify the prevailing concerns of mothers living in this community (see Van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021b). A community-based participative approach was utilised to inform and guide the ethical and practical processes in designing and implementing the PMWP with a social worker reference group from the community and the research group as soundings boards. Ethical clearance was also attained via Stellenbosch University’s Research Ethics committee and the local Department of Social Development.

Evaluating the impact of the PMWP included efforts to investigate the quality of the implementation of the program in a real-world setting. Evaluation included both process evaluation and outcomes evaluation utilising quantitative measures and qualitative processes, based on the written feedback of the participants’ experiences of the PMWP. Findings endorsed the positive effect of the PMWP for mothers in this challenging context: process evaluation offered valuable insight about feasibility and the kinds of practices and logistical matters to be in place to ensure high participant engagement and quality delivery. The use of quantitative measures was valuable to show participant satisfaction in terms of high attendance and involvement which were supported by qualitative findings revealing the “active ingredients” contributing to the program outcome (see van Schalkwyk, 2020).

## ***1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings***

It is important to indicate that the PMWP was directed by a well-being perspective (cf. Positive Psychology) with a point of departure that the presence of well-being requires specific strengths associated with high wellness (Carr et al., 2020; Fredrickson, 2009; Keyes, 2007; Seligman, 2011). The focus of the PMWP was salutogenic by enhancing the existing personal strengths and maternal capacities of the participants (Carr et al., 2020). Therefore, the point of departure of the PMWP was a strengths approach (Saleebey, 2011, 2013) guiding us to identify those assets and resources implicit in how mothers in Delft—notwithstanding its high-risk stigma (Dziewanski, 2020; Malherbe, 2019), manage life’s challenges with resilience in every-day life (Lazarus et al., 2014; Marujo & Neto, 2014; van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021b). This point of departure resonated with Positive Psychology that well-being is about “optimal psychological functioning and experience” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 142); and “individual flourishing is dependent on coping with negative external forces and the collective efforts to improve complicated large systems such as social justice, political freedom, and the human ecology” (Wong,

2020, p. 569). So, the well-being of individuals and living a better life requires efforts to improve both one's own life and the wider community.

Consequently, the PMWP was considered as a vital link towards the empowering of women, namely single mothers, "to change the odds" (Wray, 2015, p. 229). Apart from program content, this empowering process entails best practices categorised as structural, personal, and programmatic factors (Shenderovich et al., 2019; van Schalkwyk, 2020, Wessels, 2017). Therefore, empowerment and personal resilience as the "respecting, and promoting local capacity and positive outcomes" (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013, p. 336) are aligned with a strengths-based perspective.

## 2 The Power Moms Wellness Program (PMWP)

The PMWP was developed as a primary intervention for functional mothers seeking assistance in caring for themselves and their families; and it was not construed as a program for mothers needing more specialised assistance with attention such as mood disorders or needing assistance with at-risk children. Using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979) as a broad framework and review of the literature pertaining to parenting programs (reported in van Schalkwyk & Naidoo, 2021a), four modules were identified for the PMWP. The theoretical underpinnings of the four modules of the PMWP and practical directives are summarised in Table 1.

The conceptualised objectives of the program were operationalised in the four modules. The first module called *mattering* was based on the insights of well-being literature arguing for the protection and promotion of positive human health (see Table 1). The second module called *mothering* drew from models such as Walsh's (2016) resilient family processes and communication. The third module called *managing* covered coping with personal well-being (Prilleltensky, 2019); relational well-being and the quality of relational connecting (Ryff, 2014); and, coping with environmental or collective well-being and its drivers of wellness or risks (Blackie, 2015). The fourth module called *mentoring* is linked to each module focusing on the rendering of guidance about competent mothering practices and modelling this behaviour in the community (Taliep, 2015). The program is embedded in continuous mentoring processes associated with the strengthening of mothers' resilient coping and in the empowering of the community (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013).

Theories associated with resilient coping in the face of negative experiences were incorporated in all the modules, given the intentional focus on well-being, in the context of extant stressful and traumatic conditions and events in this community (Joseph & Linley 2006; Wong, 2020). In this sense resilience implied more than simple adaptation, but also inferred involved strengthening of the mothers' capability to cope successfully in the face of adversity and risk over time while being boosted by *protective factors in the individual and the environment* (Masten, 2001, 2015). Since the healthy dealing with adversity and trauma can offer opportunity for positive changes—called adversarial growth (Ryff, 2014)—strategies of stress-related growth were incorporated in the family resilience (Walsh, 2016) and



**Table 1** PMWP: Theoretical underpinnings of four modules and functional strategies

Content	Theorist/Model
Mattering module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-acceptance; Autonomy; Mastering the environment and Purpose-in-life (Deci &amp; Ryan, 2001; Diener, 2000; Diener &amp; Diener, 2008; Keyes, 2005, 2007)</li> <li>• Mattering (Prilleltensky, 2012, 2019)</li> <li>• Daily practices and resilient coping (Masten, 2001, 2015; Ungar, 2015)</li> </ul>
Mothering module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parenting styles and practices (Baumrind, 1967; Dakers, 2018; Sanders, 2012)</li> <li>• Relational processes and communication (Gergen, 2009; Isaacs et al., 2018; Ryff, 2014; Walsh, 2016)</li> </ul>
Managing module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing self-mastery and personal strengths (Peterson &amp; Seligman, 2004; Prilleltensky, 2012)</li> <li>• Managing relational connecting (Joseph &amp; Linley, 2006; Masten, 2015; Ryff, 2014)</li> <li>• Managing forgiveness (Peterson &amp; Seligman, 2004)</li> <li>• Managing collective well-being (Blackie, 2015)</li> </ul>
Mentoring module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring and selected mentorees (Taliep, 2015) as well as continuous processes (Brodsky &amp; Cattaneo, 2013)</li> </ul>
Practical directives	Theorist/model
Keys for successful application	Fredrickson (2009), Lyubomirsky (2007), Seligman (2011)
Moral competencies	Peterson and Seligman (2004)
Experiential learning	Kolb (2015), Lyubomirsky et al. (2005)
Group activities	Lambert et al. (2013)

mothers' abilities to apply risk modifiers to manage difficulties. Furthermore, as sustainable wellness is not found merely in genetic make-up, nor in only changing the circumstances, but in the human being's daily intentional activities [mattering] (Lyubomirsky 2007; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), quality social ties [mothering] (Ryff, 2014) and constructive coping behaviour [managing] (Prilleltensky, 2012), the systematic and skilful practices of strengths were integral to the PMWP (Carr et al., 2020; van Schalkwyk, 2020).

## 2.1 PMWP and Functional Strategies

We combined participatory psycho-educational activities with group processes (Lazarus et al., 2014) to enact the process goals of the PMWP as our dominant functional strategy. To enhance mothers' acquiring of the pertinent skills for personal and parental competencies, we adopted experiential learning principles for the PMWP (Kolb, 2015). The utilising of group dynamics is particularly effective in the African and South African context (Van Den Driesshe, 2016), such as the Delft community where the cultural practices of many mothers could be described as collectivistic (Ebersöhn et al., 2018). Particularly in this challenging context, we

intentionally used practices to promote accomplishment assisted by the intentional use of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009), social support (Lyubomirsky, 2007); and repetition based on Kolb's experiential learning (2015). Mothers were encouraged to apply these learning aids in their daily routine and ordinary activities (cf. Masten, 2001). In addition, group-determined values, such as courage, excellence, and self-regulation (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004), conceived as moral competencies, were used to guide these processes to attain pro-social behaviour (Haidt 2006).

### 2.1.1 Structure of PMWP Content

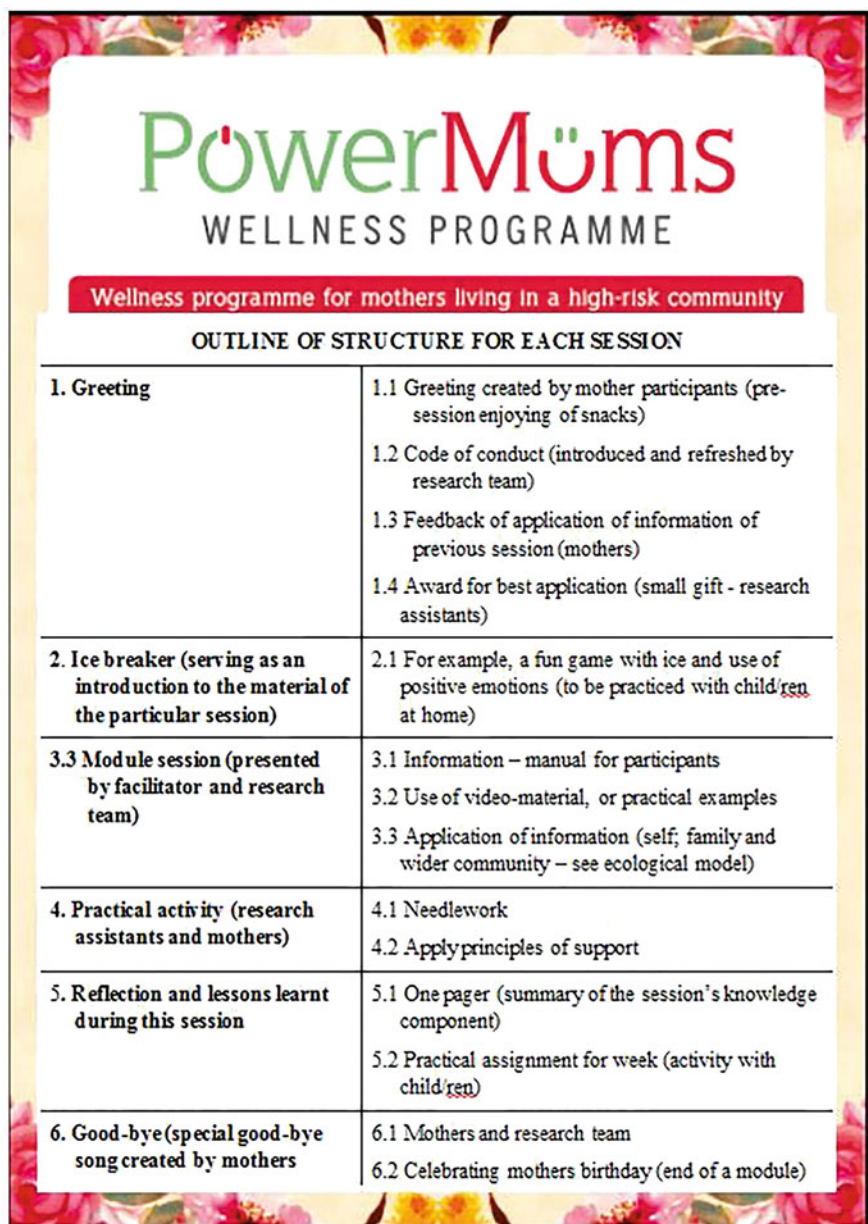
The PMWP consists of 20 sessions. Except for the introductory session that served to orientate the mothers towards the program, establish group terms of engagement (a code of conduct), each session focused on the key theme of a particular module (1) Mattering (personal wellbeing); (2) Mothering (mothering practices); (3) Managing (coping matters related to personal, relational and collective wellbeing); and (4) Mentoring (practical implementing of the modules and with other mothers of the community). In line with Kolb's cycle of learning (2015), each session, had a specific structure with six components (see Table 2).

The sessions of the four modules followed a similar format and typically ran for about 2 h each. Each module included four sessions with mothers meeting once a week on a weekday; and an additional session on a Saturday at the end of a module for mothers and their children (this was limited to mothers' children in middle childhood) (Fig. 1).

Each aspect of the PMWP was designed to optimise mothers' engagement program and effective application in the home and wider community context. Therefore, the use of home practices was essential, also used by evidence-based programs like Triple P (Sanders, 2012), and The Incredible Years (Borden et al., 2010), since between-session implementation of new skills was one of the hypothesised mechanisms of change in behavioural parent training (Berkel et al., 2018; Chacko et al., 2016; Kolb, 2015; Wessels, 2017). The program made space for the participants' child/ren to participate in one session at the completion of each module. These sessions were presented mostly as fun activities on Saturdays to encourage skills as indicated in the wellness program (see Fig. 2).

**Table 2** Structure of the sessions of the PMWP

Structure of sessions	
1. Group check-in	Activities to encourage group cohesion
2. Ice breaker	Activities to encourage engagement
3. Learning focus of the PMWP	Activities aimed at experiential learning
4. Practical activity	Activity to deepen a sense of belonging
5. Reflection	Application and mother-and-child activity
6. Good-bye song	Activity to activate mentorship



**PowerMums**  
WELLNESS PROGRAMME

Wellness programme for mothers living in a high-risk community

OUTLINE OF STRUCTURE FOR EACH SESSION

<b>1. Greeting</b>	1.1 Greeting created by mother participants (pre-session enjoying of snacks) 1.2 Code of conduct (introduced and refreshed by research team) 1.3 Feedback of application of information of previous session (mothers) 1.4 Award for best application (small gift - research assistants)
<b>2. Ice breaker (serving as an introduction to the material of the particular session)</b>	2.1 For example, a fun game with ice and use of positive emotions (to be practiced with child/gen at home)
<b>3.3 Module session (presented by facilitator and research team)</b>	3.1 Information – manual for participants 3.2 Use of video-material, or practical examples 3.3 Application of information (self, family and wider community – see ecological model)
<b>4. Practical activity (research assistants and mothers)</b>	4.1 Needlework 4.2 Apply principles of support
<b>5. Reflection and lessons learnt during this session</b>	5.1 One pager (summary of the session's knowledge component) 5.2 Practical assignment for week (activity with child/gen)
<b>6. Good-bye (special good-bye song created by mothers)</b>	6.1 Mothers and research team 6.2 Celebrating mothers birthday (end of a module)

Fig. 1 PMWP: Outline of the structure of each session



Fig. 2 Enhancing mother-and-child interacting via fun activities

## 2.2 *Descriptive Content of the Wellness Program and Structured Sessions*

Following a set structure and process of the PMWP for each session contributed to mothers' experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 2015; Holzkamp, 2010; Rodrigo, 2016).

Moreover, the structure and process fostered a connectedness, sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013), and sense of community (Lazarus et al., 2017), and also enacted the objectives of mothering, mattering, managing and mentoring of the program.

### 2.2.1 Program Aims and Outcomes


The aim, outcomes and possible activities of each session of the four modules of the PMWP are elucidated in Table 3.

### 2.2.2 Manualisation of Program Procedures

The first author developed a facilitator manual (in English) in a format accessible to local, community-based facilitators and a separate booklet for mother participants. In the next section we use the main components of one session of the PMWP as an example (facilitator's manual) to explain the 'how' of implementation.


**An Example of a PMWP Session** The structure of each session consists of six components, namely greeting, icebreaker, teaching, practical activity, reflection, and good-bye song (see Fig. 1). At the beginning of the session, some time is spent to present the overall aim of the PMWP; and, more specifically the outline of the particular facet for the current session. Information and some activities of the first

**Table 3** Module aims and outcomes of the PMWP

 Power Moms Wellness Program (PMWP)				
Module	Aim	Outcomes	Possible Activities	
1.	Mattering sessions	To encourage personal Well-being	Stronger sense of being worthy and feeling valued.	PMWP activities
1.1	Self-acceptance	To enhance self-acceptance	Honest accepting of Strengths and non-strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-care and manicure</li> <li>• Self-compassion and gratitude journal</li> <li>• Celebrate worthy efforts (candle-exercise)</li> </ul>
1.2	Autonomy	To enhance sense of autonomy	Better awareness of choices And self-control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use activities about “choose your words and change your family”</li> <li>• Use personal stories of the community to illustrate responsible choosing</li> </ul>
1.3	Coping	To enhance coping	Better coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moms talk in small groups to answer a letter published in a local magazine: Case study: <i>“How do I cope with a husband who drinks and stays away?”</i></li> </ul>
1.4	Purpose-in-life	Better understand meaningful existence	Better wisdom to use this insight: My life matters!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colour-in activities for mothers-and-children to share stories (meaningful life-examples) e.g., Mr. Mandela</li> </ul>
2.	Mothering Sessions	To strengthen competencies	Improved mothering abilities	PMWP activities
2.1	Best parenting styles	To improve parenting practices	Better use of healthy parenting practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use videos of four different parenting styles</li> <li>• Game for mothers (distinguish the parenting style)</li> </ul>
2.2	Healthy relational interactions	To communicate more effectively	Better communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss 12 ways to improve communication skills; develop feeling-words vocabulary</li> <li>• Use a game to illustrate the effective use of non-verbal skills, e.g., pay attention to body language</li> </ul>
2.3	Constructive conflict management	To cope better with conflict in the home context	Better coping skills to manage conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use video-material to show good and less effective coping skills</li> <li>• Coping with conflict (moms and kids)</li> <li>• Moms talk in group about conflict skills they are good at; moms talk about past and present coping with conflict that they are <i>not</i> happy about</li> </ul>
2.4				

(continued)

**Table 3** (continued)

 Power Moms Wellness Program (PMWP)				
Module	Aim	Outcomes	Possible Activities	
	Address risk behaviour	To promote family resilience via the use of risk modifiers	Better family resilience via the use of risk modifiers	Mapping those protective factors that make your family strong: (1) Social & Emotional Competence of children; (2) social connections; (3) concrete support in need
3.	Managing sessions	To improve coping skills (managing)	Better managing of self, others and environmental stressors	PMWP activities
3.1	Personal managing	To improve self-mastery	Better use of strengths and positive emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life stories of power moms and personal strengths</li> <li>Power moms sharing examples of “feeling valued”</li> </ul>
3.2	Relational managing	To strengthen relational interaction	Better relational connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of a game (ice cubes) and discussing the relational difficulties to win as a team</li> </ul>
3.3	Managing forgiveness	To manage to forgive	Managing to forgive completely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The use of four stations (with different items) for mothers to partake in the act of forgiveness in practical ways.</li> </ul>
3.4	Collective managing	To master environmental stressors	Managing risks Protecting resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using the toolkit of Dee Blackie (2015) to indicate and discuss the resources and risks of the community with discernment.</li> </ul>
4.	Mentoring	To mentor other mothers in Delft	Mentoring with acquired skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentoring to selected mentorees (friends of moms)</li> <li>Mentoring mothers of Delft community per event</li> <li>Mentoring mothers of other communities per event</li> </ul>

Note: We used different colours used to demarcate the respective PMWP modules

session (self-acceptance) of the first module (mattering) is given as an example for implementation (facilitator’s manual).

*Module 1: “Mattering” and Self-acceptance (session 1).* The facilitator stipulates the aim of the session (To enhance personal well-being via self-acceptance); the outcome (Better understanding of a healthy self and having the courage to apply the information); the specific activity (Needlework); and, homework activity for mothers and their children (1) Mom’s gratitude journal; (2) Celebrating my child’s best effort(s) during the week [candle-exercise]).

After the warm welcome and the presentation of the terms of engagement also called our code of conduct (presented by one of the mothers), a research assistant stages the ice-breaker as a group activity: All participants stand in a circle; every

participant gets a chance to introduce herself by stating her name accompanied by a movement or amusing gesture (adapted from Plummer, 2008); and, participants add some interesting information about their names (Marujo & Neto, 2018, APPC, Potchefstroom). This game teaches, amongst others, self-awareness, awareness of others, non-verbal communication, taking turns and listening (Plummer, 2008); and finally appropriate fun movements were added as an expression of “I love ME!” The icebreaker offers a spontaneous opportunity to use positive emotions and evokes lots of laughter.

The facilitator introduces the first session of the mattering module about self-acceptance (as a facet of personal/psychological wellness, Keyes, 2005) by giving a short description about “self-acceptance” by embracing both the strengths and vulnerabilities of self. The facilitator uses activities, such as personal stories by means of video material /You Tube, for example, Brenè Brown’s story of being honest about her vulnerability; and, having the courage to embrace imperfectness (Brown with Oprah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XTcB1evO8c>). Information about self-acceptance is further explained in terms of nurturing personal strengths, such as kindness/compassion; and, viewing my negative characteristics (also called non-strengths) as areas for growth. To guide this information and the application thereof, i.e., to translate into appropriate behaviour (see character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)) for self, family and community (ecological theories), mothers complete a worksheet in their flip files as ‘classwork’ (see Fig. 3).

**MATTERING AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE: Describe aspects of your personality (personal qualities) and functioning (behaviour) in the past + present which you are “happy” about: Use words such as I am....; or I can....**

1. I am a .....person (name your good qualities).

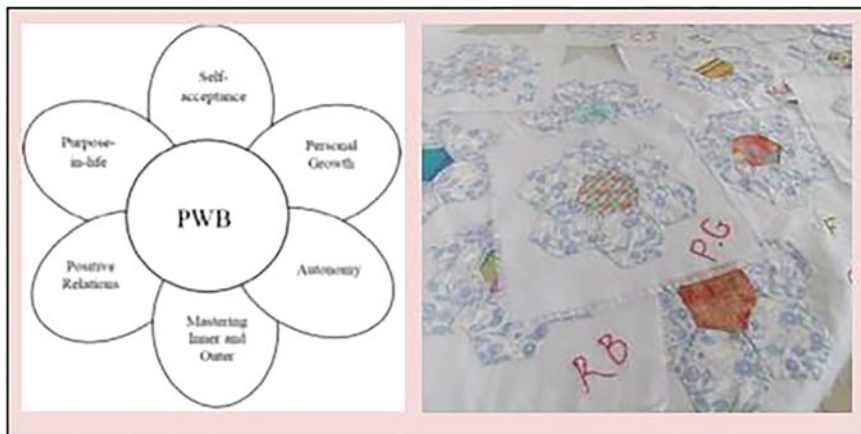
2. One of my healthy habits is to .....

3. I get compliments for.....

**Optional activity: Self-care (enjoy a manicure) or enjoy a cup of tea with a good friend.**

Fig. 3 Worksheet for Power Moms Wellness Program (PMWP)





**Fig. 4** Needlework activity and personal wellbeing (flourishing/high wellness)

Once this exercise is completed and some mothers have the opportunity to share their understanding of self-acceptance, mothers take part in a practical activity, namely needlework focusing on a flower (Flourishing as an illustration of high wellness [Keyes, 2005]—see Fig. 4). This activity offers mothers the chance to talk about the content of this session and sharing within small groups. Research assistants are responsible for this activity and relaxing music can be played in the background.

Once the mothers have completed the needlework section of the session (20 min) with the guidance of the two research assistants, we can sit down in a circle format to discuss in a reflective manner the following: (1) What did I appreciate most from the program content this week? (cf. Seligman, 2011); and (2) how can I apply this information and skills mattering (“I feel valued”) in the home context (this is part of the mothers’ files). This is followed by the handing out of the summary of the session (one pager). Then, mothers are given the assignment for the mother-child home activity and the needed items, namely, a candle and a small candle stand. This activity is called “Celebrating the Child’s worthy effort” and is based on Seligman’s (2011) guidelines. Mothers are invited to, for the next week, at a specific time, for example, before they enjoy their evening meal to engage specifically with their child/ren to talk about some of the good things that they have done during the particular day, and to reflect on how it makes them feel (Adapted from Greeff, 2005). The aim of this activity is to create awareness about good choices and good deeds on a daily basis (for example, helping a fellow-learner at school) and to increase self-respect. One evening per week can be used as a special celebration where a candle is lit and the child is given the opportunity to be acknowledged in this way (see Bögels & Restifo, 2014, p. 84).

Each of the sessions of the PMWP was presented in this way. Additionally, the worth of positive emotions, such as contentment and perseverance, motivation,



committed effort, social support, and the role of repetition (Lyubomirsky, 2007) was constantly emphasised.

Overall, qualitative findings about the effectiveness of the PMWP with specific reference to implementation showed the importance of the quality of program content and facilitator behaviour. For example, mother participants emphasised “the outstanding information of the wellness program”; and they encouraged the use of simple language in presentation of subject matter; they enjoyed the facilitator’s positive energy in the presenting of the module-sessions: “The way the information is presented adds to the participants’ confidence to apply the information. . . It makes me feel stronger—so I can also do it this way.” (Tracey [pseudonym used]).

### 3 General Discussion

The undertaking of the PMWP was grounded in the quest to translate theory and research into practice (Kok et al., 2017; Titler, 2007). Seeking situated knowledge to inform the content and modus operandi for the context-appropriate program, the conceptualising of the needed program happened with the participation of mothers as co-researchers. Still, the implementing of the PMWP was done with the insight that having the evidence base for a program is not in itself sufficient to ensure that the program delivered is effective, since institutional “readiness” (will and capacity) is also a major factor (Ward et al., 2016), as well as the need for contextual relevance (Lazarus et al., 2017).

Describing the process of implementation of the PMWP in Delft provides a real-world application of the pursuit of this objective (Wechsberg et al., 2017). Since different settings (field conditions) present numerous influences which also had to be reckoned with for effective implementation, the particular setting of Delft offered an apt example of the complexities integral to implementation and every step of implementation mapping (Fernandez et al., 2019; Rodrigo, 2016). Therefore, the content (for example, showing the interconnectedness of cycles of mattering, mothering, managing and mentoring) (cf. Myers et al., 2019) is inserted or rooted in the use of realities specific to this context, for example, focusing on abusive relations, gangster violence and risky sexual behaviour (Lachman et al., 2018). At the same time, the PMWP retained the common core elements of evidence-based parenting programs, showing its contribution to resilient family functioning (Isaacs et al., 2018; Walsh, 2016) even in risk saturated contexts, such as Delft. Ultimately, all the steps of the implementation process were enthused by the empowering of women, namely single mothers to encourage their personal well-being as well as their parenting capabilities.

## 4 Conclusion

This description of the PMWP was used to illustrate effective implementation in a challenging context. We also presented one session of the program to exemplify the particulars of implementing the PMWP to fortify women, namely single mothers. We showed that the empowering of women is grounded in effective application, that is, to give mothers appropriate tools to use with confidence in their ordinary daily activities. Also, the implementing process cannot omit theoretical underpinning, since this knowledge offers the necessary basis for the psychological, social, and behavioural tools (mechanisms of change). This chapter described the importance of integrating solid conceptual grounding and practical expertise, with the inclusion of contextual knowledge to achieve the program's objective.

Evidently, implementation of programs to encourage women's personal and parenting competencies also includes the extent to which it is implemented properly. This reality holds this promise of sustainable and long-term empowerment for mothers in high-risk contexts who are pivotal resources for social cohesion in families and the wider communities.

Recommendations for future research should address how group-based interventions could be used to offer mothers living in challenging contexts those "safe spaces" in sustainable ways. Such enabling or "curative" spaces could offer mothers opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills, meeting new mothers and in this way to extend and create their social networks. It is recommended that parenting programs in the South African context specifically utilise mothers' social skills, such as, sharing their relational and mothering experiential wisdom in their daily enterprises. Based on these meaningful meetings and experiences of social support, it is recommended that future research investigates the best practices for "top-up sessions" (also called "booster sessions") suggested after 6 months of the implementation of intervention programs. In this sense empowering could be viewed as a process—versus once-off occasions—where these top-up opportunities could be vital for mothers over time in order to maintain and enhance the positive effects of learnt skills. Along similar lines, mechanisms for converting community interventions such as the PMWP into self-help support groups should also be pursued and encouraged.

Ultimately, we recommend the mix of research methodology processes and the science of being human in challenging contexts from an emic, Afri-centric perspective toward the unique dynamism in the making, implementation, and appraisal of wellness programs for all women living under the African sun.

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# Psychological Perspectives on Financial Empowerment of BIPOC/Non-WEIRD Women



Sadé Soares  and Nancy M. Sidun 

**Abstract** An anthropological and historical framework elucidates the layered challenges underlining the financial status of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC)/ non-WEIRD women, highlighting the difficulties in obtaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1-No Poverty, 5-Gender Equality, 8-Decent Work and Economic Growth, and 10-Reduce Inequalities. Approximately 2 billion people globally are financially impoverished, and two in three adults worldwide are financially illiterate. As a result of systemic inequality and conditions of poverty, women and girls make up most of the poorest people. Women earn 60–75% of what men earn, with BIPOC women averaging 60%. Histories of cultural, interpersonal, and structural traumas perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of maladaptive social and economic effects and responses, including financial well-being. Multiple organizations and nations have identified that those psychological aspects, including mental health concerns, beliefs about money, and relationships with money, significantly impact financial empowerment and economic well-being. This conceptual chapter will explore the intersection of gendered and racial challenges to financial well-being. Financial well-being is the ability to have personal wealth serve life goals. It entails informed decision-making and a healthy relationship with money via saving, investing, using credit wisely, and planning for the future. Psychological principles are examined to support efforts toward BIPOC women’s empowerment. Moreover, the current status of women’s empowerment activities, with a particular focus on the emerging field of financial psychology, is discussed. Themes of financial psychology include identifying and changing how individuals think, feel, engage with, and make meaning of money and finances.

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## 1 Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1–No Poverty, 5–Gender Equality, 8–Decent Work and Economic Growth, and 10–Reduced Inequalities (UN E/SA, [n.d.](#)) highlight significant issues that affect women globally, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) and women who are not from Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies. Women represent 67% of the financially illiterate people globally (Schoch & Lakner, [2020](#)) and are over-represented among the poor. Worldwide, 330 million women and girls, 4.4 million more than men, live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than US \$1.90 a day (UN GC, [n.d.](#); UN Women, [n.d.-a](#)). Extreme poverty includes multiple socioeconomic dimensions, such as access to social protection measures and services, ability to express opinions and choice, power to negotiate, employment opportunities, and social status. Furthermore, poverty is a root cause of many human and labour rights violations (UN GC, [n.d.](#)).

Given this harsh reality, financial empowerment is critically important for women, particularly for BIPOC/non-WEIRD women. Financial empowerment represents much more than access to economic resources, it consists of the full range of agency that allows women to determine how money is managed in the household, have control over their work and lives, and have input into economic decision-making in all parts of their communities (UN Women, [n.d.-c](#)). This conceptual chapter addresses the layered challenges to BIPOC/non-WEIRD women obtaining UN SDGs 1, 5, 8, and 10 and becoming financially empowered. This chapter reviews the limitations of current financial empowerment efforts, such as microfinancing and financial literacy. Progress and ongoing challenges to women's work, pay and equity in household management are reviewed. Financial psychology, which involves understanding one's relationship with money, is introduced as an essential factor in enhancing women's empowerment.

## 2 Women in the Labour Force

Ending all discrimination against women and girls, including reducing inequalities in the workforce are crucial for a sustainable future for the world. Global statistics have demonstrated that empowering women and girls engenders positive growth, including reduced poverty, reduced food insecurity, and increased economic productivity, for all (UN Women, [n.d.-d](#); UN Women, [2018](#)). However, while meaningful progress has occurred with women in the workforce, significant inequalities still exist. Women make up 46.3% of the world's workforce (Ortiz-Ospina et al.,



2018). Among prime working-age women (aged 25–54), workforce participation is 61.4% compared to 94% for men (UN Women, 2018). Across the globe, the workforce gender gap widens, with Northern Africa and Central, Southern, and Western Asia having less than 40% female workplace participation. In addition, laws in developing and developed economies negatively impact women’s mobility, access to education, workforce participation, and safety in all regions (World Bank, 2022).

A 2018 assessment revealed that 104 of 189 economies maintained laws preventing women from working in specific jobs, and 59 of those economies had no laws on workplace sexual harassment (UN Women, n.d.-c). In 18 economies, husbands had the legal right to prevent their wives from working (Wood, 2018). Ultimately, women are more likely to be unemployed than men (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2018). When women are engaged in the labour force, their work tends to be over-represented in informal, lower-paid work with greater job insecurity (ILO, 2018; UN Women, n.d.-b; UN Women, 2018). Furthermore, over 2.7 billion women worldwide are legally limited from having equivalent positions to men (UN Women, n.d.-c).

### 3 Gender Wage Gap

Once women participate in the labour market, they experience a gender wage gap of 23%, implying that women earn 77% of what men earn, with BIPOC women averaging 60% (Blelweles et al., 2021). However, these figures are misleading and vary dramatically depending on race and ethnicity (UN Women, 2018). Data from 37 countries indicate that the gender wage gap is slowly decreasing; nonetheless, at the current rate of change, equal pay will not be achieved for multiple decades until 2086 (ILO, 2016; UN Women, n.d.-b). There is also gender-based occupational segregation where women and men are employed in different occupations (horizontal segregation) and at various positions, grades, and levels (vertical segregation) (UN Women, n.d.-b; UN Women, 2018). Salaries of jobs traditionally associated with men are typically higher than those of historically women-dominated positions, even if they require the same level of skill (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2014). Women also experience pay disadvantages at the top and bottom levels of jobs and occupations (ILO, 2016) and experience a “motherhood penalty” after having children. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the women with children pay gap is 31% and 35%, respectively, compared to 4% and 14% for women without children (UN Women, n.d.-b). Historically, systems were created that channelled women, especially women of colour, into lower-paying positions, undervalued women’s work, and penalized them for having children, which has continued to present (AAUW, n.d., AAUW, 2021).

## 4 Women-Led Households

Regardless of labour force participation, women in every society worldwide disproportionately bear responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work (Burn, 2011; Ortiz et al., 2018; UN Women, 2018). On average, women spend 18% of their day on unpaid care and domestic work compared to 7% of men (UN Women, 2018). In countries where water and fuel must be gathered, women overwhelmingly assume this obligation (Mungekar, 2019). In sub-Saharan African countries, the combined time women spend collecting water daily is 16 million hours, compared to 6 million for men (UNICEF, 2016).

Beyond responsibility for household labour, worldwide women-led households are increasing (UN, 2017a). In 103 countries, including countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, East Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Southern and Eastern Africa, 28% of households were headed by women (Saad et al., 2022). The United Nations database on Household Size and Composition Around the World (2017) reports that 21% of families with children under age 15 are led by single mothers (UN, 2017a). However, not all women head of households are single mothers. According to the United Nations (2017b) Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, the head of household is the individual responsible for most of the family's affairs and economic support. Saad et al. (2022) found that women-headed households varied in composition, with the most common being the following: single mothers (18.7%), women living alone (14.6%), and women living with children as well as other male and female adults (12.3%). Of note, the husband was present in 9.5% of women-headed households (Saad et al., 2022). By continent, the median percentage of women-led households is as follows: 19% in Asia, 27% in Africa, 22% in Oceania, 34% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 37% in Europe, and 47% in Northern America (UN, 2017a).

With the rising numbers of women-led households, women are increasingly managing family affairs, including budgeting and responsibility for the family's financial resources. Accordingly, national and community-based financial improvement initiatives are shifting to a focus on women as the target audience (AEF-Brasil, 2021; Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). Indeed, global financial initiatives, such as micro-loans/credit and income transfers, have been directed toward women (AEF-Brasil, 2021; Khamar, 2016), highlighting women's role in family budget management worldwide. Additionally, women are active in civic engagement that directly impacts the financial status of their families and communities (World Bank, 2018).

In Latin America, households led by women are increasing at a faster rate than male-led households (World Bank, 2015). In Brazil, 90% of the participants in a national strategy to reduce family indebtedness were women (AEF-Brasil, 2021). While the program focused on families, program leaders discovered that, in most cases, women were the "legally responsible" party for family finances (AEF-Brasil, 2021). Australia's National Financial Capability Strategy focuses on women and Aboriginal Peoples (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). Women not only impact

their financial circumstances by managing their families' budgets, but their civic engagement also engenders significant financial improvement for themselves and their communities. In Brazil's Salvador de Bahía neighbourhood, women-led grassroots organizations have steered initiatives that successfully improved the financial well-being of Afro-Latino/a families (World Bank, 2018; Perry, 2013). These initiatives limited projects that would have relocated long-standing and often marginalized community members, expanded public assistance programs, promoted education on land rights, and advocated against racial profiling and police violence (Perry, 2013).

Though this phenomenon varies widely by country, culture, and family, women are increasingly responsible for family budget management; however, they continue to experience low educational attainment, unstable employment, and income instability worldwide (AEF-Brasil, 2021; ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2018). Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other women of colour continue to experience further economic disadvantages due to historical trauma, race-based inequities, and biases. Therefore, financial empowerment may seem incredibly elusive for BIPOC women. For example, Indigenous people comprise 8% of the Latin American population, yet 14% of the poor and 17% of those living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2015). Overall, Indigenous people perceive little opportunity for social mobility, and they believe their children will have limited options for financial inclusion (World Bank, 2015). This overlay of financial insecurity and discrimination negatively impacts women's perceptions of their potential in life. These limiting beliefs impact the economic and overall well-being of BIPOC women and indicate that interventions beyond financial education are needed. Individuals who do not foresee a viable economic future have no incentive to budget, save, or follow monetary policies.

## 5 Beyond Microfinancing

Microfinancing has been a primary financial empowerment strategy for women worldwide. Indeed, over 90% of microfinance borrowers in South Asia, the largest microfinance market, are women (Khamar, 2016). While microfinancing has been demonstrated to increase women's physical and social mobility (Klasen & Schüller, 2011), other researchers have reported concerns about the effects of microfinancing. Islam et al. (2018) noted that many microfinancing organizations adopt and enforce strict loan collection strategies, adding additional financial pressures to disempowered women. When examining microfinance borrowers in Bangladesh, Islam et al. (2018) found that 12 out of 20 respondents borrowed from multiple microfinance institutions due to the inability to pay previous microfinance loans. These borrowers reported experiencing psychological distress and placing limitations on personal needs, such as food and clothing, to repay these loans (Islam et al., 2018). To expand the benefits of microfinancing, some lenders have added self-help groups, which provide financial and life skills training and offer social support and community participation (Brody et al., 2015). A systematic review of self-help group

studies did not find a statistically significant effect on psychological empowerment, defined as the confidence to make decisions and act on them. However, women who engaged in these groups perceived themselves as more economically and socially empowered (Brody et al., 2015). These results indicate that while women may have more access to and ownership of financial resources, they do not feel empowered to make relevant decisions. These self-help groups may also place additional stressors on microfinance borrowers, as the group's repayment performance impacts each borrower (Islam et al., 2018). Consequently, women who cannot repay their loans experience undue pressure and distancing from their social groups. Though intended to promote financial and social support for women, microfinance lending and related self-help groups may result in more harm and loss of social capital for women. Therefore, a more holistic approach to financial empowerment is necessary.

## 6 Beyond Financial Literacy

As exemplified by self-help groups, the role of financial education, and financial skills-building is an essential yet incomplete step toward financial empowerment. Indeed, financial literacy has been insufficient to explain or improve financial behaviours. Fernandes et al. (2014) examined 168 papers, spanning 201 studies from 1969 to 2013. Their meta-analyses found that financial literacy explained only 1% of later financial behaviours. There was also no significant effect on income level or type of financial training intervention (Fernandes et al., 2014). Kaiser & Menkoff (2016) also conducted a meta-analysis of 126 studies examining the impact of financial literacy. Researchers found that overall financial literacy impacts low-income individuals and economies less, and financial behaviours involving debt were challenging to address via financial education/literacy campaigns (Kaiser & Menkoff, 2016). Moreover, making financial education mandatory led to diminishing effects on financial behaviours (Kaiser & Menkoff, 2016). Both groups of researchers identified that providing financial education or financial literacy interventions at the time of an impending financial decision was best. The limited impact of financial education on later financial behaviours and implications of emotional and mental influences indicate that another factor may be missing in attempts to address economic empowerment. This factor is psychological. A growing number of professionals, organizations, and nations, to include the United Kingdom's Institute for Government, Australia's National Financial Capability Strategy, and Brazil's transdisciplinary financial education program, have begun to identify and implement strategies focusing on psychological aspects of financial well-being.

United Kingdom's Institute for Government, a non-governmental agency aimed at improving the effectiveness of government and public policies, emphasised the impact of psychological influences on behaviour, including financial behaviours (UK Institute for Government, 2010). Effects to consider included social norms, subconscious cues, emotional associations with the issue, and how different actions

make us feel about ourselves (Institute for Government, 2010). After considering these factors, the United Kingdom implemented compulsory automatic enrolment into pension plans, with the option for employees to opt-out. Employers that did not previously practice automatic enrolment reported increased employee engagement in a pension plan, from 36 to 71%, increasing employee savings for retirement (United Kingdom's Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). Australia's government developed a national financial capability strategy that considers the following: influences on financial decision-making, willingness to seek help, motivation, and confidence regarding finances (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). Brazil initiated a transdisciplinary financial education program that includes psychological principles: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Underlying these titles is the expressed intent for participants to understand that their financial decisions are impacted by their strengths and weaknesses, ability to effectively manage stress, approach to conflict management, communication skills, personal and societal values, and ethics (AEF-Brasil, 2021).

## 7 Introduction to Financial Psychology

According to Australia's National Financial Capability Study, women experience more stress managing finances than men (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021), highlighting an emotional component to money management. In addition, the American Psychological Association (APA) conducts an annual survey examining sources of stress amongst Americans. From 2007 through 2020, money and finances have been a leading cause of stress, with 60–76% of Americans reporting stress about money (APA, 2007–2020). To address the mental factors of financial management, professionals trained in financial psychology promote financial health by integrating the monetary, behavioural, cognitive, and emotional elements of individuals' lives (FTA, 2014). Specifically, these professionals, titled financial therapists, facilitate increased insight into one's emotions and thoughts as well as identification and resolution of unhealthy behaviours related to money (FTA, 2014). The financial psychology field is in its infancy and current research is mainly representative of the minority world, limiting the globalization of the findings. However, current trends from both the minority and majority worlds would suggest increasing awareness of the psychological factor of financial decision-making.

One significant aspect of financial psychology is money scripts. Money scripts are beliefs about money that are thought to develop in childhood and go on to impact adult financial decisions (Klontz & Britt, 2012). Klontz et al. (2011) identified four different money scripts: money avoidance, money worship, money status, and money vigilance. Money avoidance includes beliefs that money is bad or corrupt (Klontz & Britt, 2012). Money status involves prioritizing financial status. Money worship includes beliefs that more money will increase power and happiness. Finally, money vigilant individuals focus on financial frugality. Money avoidance, money status, and money worship are associated with lower income and poor

financial health. Money vigilance, however, is associated with saving and improved financial health (Klontz & Britt, 2012).

In a United States sample, money scripts were statistically significant in predicting various financial behaviours. For example, they explained 25% of the variability in compulsive buying, 20% in financial denial or inability to acknowledge a financial problem, and 10% in hoarding behaviours and workaholism (Klontz & Britt, 2012). In another study, participants who engaged in a 6-day integrated financial therapy and personal finance program reported the following: decreased financial and overall distress, reduced worry about money, reduced feelings of inadequacy, and positive changes in their beliefs about money (Klontz et al., 2008). While the vast majority of financial psychology research is conducted in the minority world, the implications of financial psychology interventions are far-reaching.

## 8 Culture Plays a Role

The financial psychology studies mentioned above were conducted in the United States with primarily White and middle to high-income individuals and are limited in generalizability. However, the concepts of financial psychology are increasingly being recognised and adopted to bolster the financial well-being of BIPOC populations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; AEF-Brasil, 2021).

Additionally, several researchers have identified the role culture plays in financial decision-making.

The research focused on financial risk tolerance purports that individualistic cultures tend to be more risk-averse, likely due to a prioritization of self-interest (Fan & Xiao, 2006; Statman, 2008). However, collectivistic communities may be more willing to engage in financially risky behaviours as there is an expectation that extended family and community members will support each other (Statman, 2008). Moreover, there appear to be different culture-specific beliefs about money and its appropriate use. For example, Indigenous groups, such as Native Hawaiians and New Zealand's Māori community, prioritize sustainability, taking care of the land, and cultural preservation (Gilbreath & Williams, 2013; Royal, 2011). Another example is the Indigenous Chinese value of *guanxi*, which promotes interpersonal connection, harmony in relationships, and resource distribution (Leung et al., 2011; Li & Hu, 2022). These values inevitably impact Indigenous schemas of money and financial health.

The histories of, and in many ways ongoing experiences of, oppression, dispossession, slavery, colonization, cultural oppression, and violence that Black, Indigenous, and other persons of colour experience globally must be addressed in any discussion of their wellness, to include financial wellness. The World Bank (2015) acknowledges that the specific histories of Indigenous peoples have shaped their approach to governance, social engagement, and economic participation. When governments appreciate these unique histories, they engage in culturally appropriate

initiatives. Indeed, Godinho (2014) engaged in community-based research with Indigenous communities in Australia to better understand their views on money and financial well-being. One crucial theme identified is that money is seen as a continuation of colonization and foreign to Indigenous culture. As Indigenous communities continue to engage in the complex personal and community work of reclaiming their cultural identity, they are challenged with how to include money helpfully. Specifically, participants prioritized sharing money throughout multiple households and caring for numerous generations financially; however, they note that this practice is distinct from non-Indigenous teachings of financial health (Godinho, 2014). These conflicts render money management a stressful task, perpetuating financial exclusion for Indigenous groups.

## 9 Conclusion

Empowerment for women globally is a complex and vital endeavour. Financial empowerment has the potential to positively shape many facets of a woman's life, offering her more choices overall and critically benefiting economic growth and development. Efforts to lift individuals out of poverty are fundamental to improving financial well-being and empowerment. However, these efforts will continue to be insufficient if they do not address the psychological and cultural schemas that shape how women think, feel, and behave towards money. Worldwide, women increasingly manage households by themselves, engage in the informal and formal labour force, advocate for economic equality, and combat histories of discrimination and marginalization. To obtain the UN SDGs 1, 5, 8, and 10, women's financial well-being must include having personal wealth serve life goals, with informed decision-making and a healthy relationship with money via saving, investing, using credit wisely, and planning for the future. Governments, policymakers, and employers are encouraged to enact programmes that address all factors limiting women's financial empowerment, focusing on psychological and cultural components. Future research that explores the impact of and cultural nuances of financial psychology within the majority world is necessary. Specifically, translational research that examines the impact of culture-specific financial psychology initiatives within BIPOC populations in the majority world is necessary to move this field and women's empowerment further.

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# “Women Can’t Manage Farms”: Empowerment of Women in Agriculture



Judith L. Gibbons 

**Abstract** Although women produce, process, and market much of the world’s food, they are disempowered in agriculture. They are less likely than men to control land or manage farms. Their productivity in farming is less than that of men due to cultural restrictions and lack of resources such as knowledge about best practices and access to credit and technology, as well as the burden of domestic work and unpaid home care. This chapter provides a critical analysis of empowerment efforts by and for women engaged in agriculture in the majority world. Initiatives in agricultural education and women’s cooperatives have empowered women when they attend to the local context including culture and women’s time burden. Empowering women in agriculture has the potential to address many of the United Nations Strategic Development Goals, not only promoting gender equality but also reducing poverty and hunger.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Agriculture · Coffee production · Women’s time burden · Agricultural cooperatives

## 1 Introduction

Women’s contributions to producing the world’s food are vast and invaluable, although often invisible and unrecognized. In the majority world (also known as the global south or developing countries) women make up 43% of the agricultural labour force (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO, 2011). Yet their production lags that of men because of less access to resources, such as land ownership, information, technology, quality seeds and fertilizer, credit, and markets. They may also lack decision-making power in the household and suffer from the care penalty, the multiple household chores that fall on women’s shoulders. If women attained the resources that would enable them to achieve agricultural yields

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equal to men, food insecurity would be reduced by 12–17% (FAO, 2011). This chapter will address concepts of empowerment, the evidence for women's disadvantage in agriculture, the limitations and successes of interventions, as well as the potential outcomes of women's empowerment in agriculture. Examples are drawn from the majority world, especially from Latin America and Guatemala, where the author has lived for over 20 years. An ecological approach allows an emphasis on the context and cultural factors impacting efforts to empower women in agriculture.

## 2 The Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment has been conceptualized in various ways, as a process that occurs within an individual, or as an organizational or community transformation. Empowerment has been defined as, “the ability to exercise choice” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). According to Kabeer (1999), there are three critical components to empowerment: Resources, agency, and achievement. Kabeer's definition of empowerment can be applied to women working in agriculture. Do they have the resources to produce, process, and sell agricultural products? Do they have decision-making power over seed selection, fertilizer, harvesting methods and markets? And are they able to achieve their own goals with respect to producing income and feeding their families? An expanded perspective on empowerment is that of Zimmerman (2000); he argues that, in addition to the psychological empowerment of individuals, organizations and communities can become empowered. In the agricultural domain, a critical entity is that of the household. Decisions about land use, crops, and markets are often made at the household level and thus the household unit is central to empowerment efforts in agriculture (e.g., Galiè & Farnworth, 2019; Sarirahayu & Aprianingsih, 2018).

An index designed to measure women's empowerment in agriculture, The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) assesses women's agricultural empowerment in five domains, including, “(1) decisions about agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power about productive resources, (3) control of use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time allocation” (Alkire et al., 2013, p. 71). The WEAI was developed based on qualitative and quantitative studies that included farmers' voices. The definition includes the ability to make decisions about planting, harvesting, and the use of income. Leadership in the community, including belonging to an economic or social group and feeling comfortable speaking in public represents the fourth dimension of empowerment, a criterion that Lyon (2008) applied in evaluating agricultural collectives. The final dimension addresses quality-of-life issues for women. Women are considered to have worked excessively if they worked (including domestic tasks) more than ten-and one-half hours in the previous 24 h. Women in the majority world often work more than that; for example, women farmers in Malawi typically work 14 h per day (Davison, 1995). Worldwide, women have less leisure time than do men, primarily because of unpaid care work (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018).

### 3 Gender Inequality in Agriculture

Although women’s participation in agriculture varies by country, crop, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic condition, marital status, household composition, and other contextual factors, women are disadvantaged in many domains (FAO, 2011, 2018).

Land rights are considered essential for women’s empowerment with respect to food, shelter, and livelihood (World Bank, 2019). But less than 15% of landowners around the world are women (FAO, 2018). Of 20 majority world countries studied by the FAO, only in Ecuador and Malawi did women own (slightly) more land than men. Women may also farm land under various kinds of leasing or sharing agreements. In Guatemala, the system is known as *mediania*, implying half and half. In this system the owner provides the land and the farmer everything else—seeds, labour, fertilizer—and the crop is shared. However, the system is often abused, and the farmer suffers any losses (Menjívar, 2011). Women’s restricted access to resources such as fertilizer, seeds, and credit also impair their ability to farm effectively (Peterman et al., 2011).

Culture and stereotypes can also disadvantage women in agriculture. Galiè et al. (2017) identified cultural impediments for women farmers in Syria. The women pointed out that mechanization of farming reduced their participation in agriculture because it was culturally inappropriate for women to operate machinery. As reported by Quisumbing and Pandolfelli (2010) a bicycle-driven rice thresher was rejected by women rice farmers in Nigeria because its use exposed women’s thighs, and trousers were inappropriate for women. In Ethiopia, women’s participation in agriculture is limited by cultural prohibitions against their use of the plow (Peterman et al., 2011). Restrictions on women interacting with men or going out in public sometimes limit women’s ability to market their products or participate in collectives (e.g., Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010).

Biermayr-Jenzano (2016) has described a chain of inequality for women in agriculture. She described the case of maize production, along with corn tortilla preparation and sales by women in Guatemala. Maize is a staple in the country with almost all Guatemalans daily eating tortillas made from corn meal. Biermayr-Jenzano documented inequalities at all steps in the chain—from women’s excess hours spent in labour (household and farm), their less access to credit, land, and machinery, their low participation in training and education, and discrimination. However, she also documented their attainment of social goals at the end of the chain. The first link in the chain has to do with land ownership with women owning only about 15% of the farmland in the country. There is also a 20% gender gap in access to information, machinery, seeds, tractors, and water pumps; about twice as many men have access to credit as do women. Many women, especially those in rural areas and/or of Indigenous ethnicity, live in conditions of poverty. With respect to food production, many women grind corn to make tortillas for consumption by their own families or for local sales. Biermayr-Jenzano did a case study of women selling tortillas in a small indigenous town. If one cooked and sold 250 tortillas per

day, after paying for maize and firewood, she netted about 5.25 quetzales per day (less than \$1). The vendors reported that despite the low margin of earnings, it allowed them to buy maize to feed their families at a lower cost because they bought in quantity. Interacting with others in the marketplace also kept them informed and promoted solidarity, reciprocity, and trust that strengthened social relations in the local economy.

## 4 Gender and Agriculture: It's Complicated

Many of the issues related to gender and agriculture are complex and multifaceted. There is an ongoing debate about whether there are men's crops and women's crops. The distinction was laid out by Sachs (1996) in terms of the type of crop (for men, grain and trees; for women, vegetables and roots), product (men, non-food and luxury; women, food), use (men, market; women, subsistence) and market location (men, national or international; women, local). Those differences have been widely disputed. Using aggregate data from Ghana, Doss (2002) argued that there are no men's or women's crops. However, Carr (2008), also using data from Ghana, argued that the data must be disaggregated to understand the intersection of gender and other factors. In households where husbands made relatively more outside income, farming was devoted to market production with little gender differentiation in farming tasks; where husbands had less outside income, agriculture was differentiated by gender; women planted for the household's livelihood, men for outside markets.

Similarly, farm tasks traditionally allocated by gender evolve with changing circumstances (Guendel, 2009). For example, in Burkina Faso, picking shea nuts was a woman's task. But once the production of shea nuts became more profitable, men got involved. Men's outmigration usually increases women's farming tasks, but may also have benefits, such as increasing women's decision-making and the families' economic security through remittances (FAO, 2017). The specific consequences of men's outmigration appear to differ by country, however. In Guatemala households with a male partner who had migrated had the highest levels of food diversity and food security, possibly due to two factors—women focusing their spending on food and education, and the increased income due to remittances (World Bank, 2015). In Nepal, both women's empowerment and food security were linked to the increased income through remittances (World Bank, 2018). In Senegal, there was no evidence for women's empowerment with male outmigration and women who did not receive remittances were disempowered in many domains.

The attribution of tasks to household members may also differ depending on whom one asks. In a qualitative study in Syria, one older woman attributed the farm management to her sons when they were in the room, but when they were absent, she admitted that she was the most knowledgeable about the farm and it was she who was in charge (Galiè et al., 2017). In another study done in rural Tanzania, husbands and wives were asked separately who had more decision-making authority in different domains (Anderson et al., 2017). Women attributed more power to

themselves than their husbands attributed to them with respect to what food to feed the family. In many other domains, the husbands attributed more power to wives than they did to themselves, including cash spending on crops and livestock, the purchase of new equipment, and overall farm and household decisions.

## 5 Ineffective or Unsuitable Interventions

In attempting to achieve gender equity, many interventions have been designed to be “gender blind,” using the same criteria to allot resources (e.g., credit, new seed varieties, extension training) to women as to men. Unfortunately, many such programs do not increase, and may even decrease, gender equality. One example is offered above, where in Syria providing machinery to farmers increased gender disparity because operating machinery was deemed to be men’s work (Galiè et al., 2017). Gender blind interventions may fail for other reasons. Women around the world already assume a double burden; they are responsible for household and care work as well as farm labour. Their additional involvement in organizational work, such as is required in collectives, represents a triple burden (Lyon et al., 2017). An example described by Lyon among coffee producers in Mexico showed increases in women’s participation and decision-making with the formation of women’s coffee organizations, but also a significant increase in the time burden for members (Lyon et al., 2017).

In general, agrarian reform in multiple countries failed to improve gender equality with respect to land ownership. Instead, redistributed land most often went to men in countries such as Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Deere, 1987; Deere & León, 2001). Collective action has been the backbone of efforts to empower women in agriculture, but those efforts as well depend on cultural factors. In Malawi, women farmers were accustomed to relative independence and resisted efforts to form cooperatives and work together (Davison, 1995). The agency and independence of women in Malawi may stem from their greater land ownership (FAO, 2018).

## 6 What Empowers Women Farmers and Under What Conditions?

Efforts to intervene to empower women in agriculture are widespread and diverse. A google scholar search of the three words, “empower, women, agriculture” yielded approximately 56,000 results. Two features critical to interventions that aim to empower women in agriculture are (1) listening to the women themselves (e.g., FAO et al., 2022; Thaker & Dutta, 2018) and evaluating the program’s impact (Rubio-Jovel, 2021).



Women are the best source of determining their own needs; they have the situated knowledge essential for their own empowerment (Sachs, 1996). In a report about women farmers' response to the COVID pandemic, a woman from the Asian Farmers Association said, "if you do not have enough resources, you become creative," (FAO et al., 2022, para 4). The women farmers recommended greater use of technology, especially online trading and training, intercropping, increased use of barter systems, money-saving strategies, food processing to prevent wastage, and diversifying sources of income. Support for rural women should be based on their expressed needs. Women farmers in India had also employed creative ways of dealing with unpredictable rainfall due to climate change (Thaker & Dutta, 2018). Their main strategy was planting a variety of crops, some that required more water, and others that required less. That way, they were assured of at least one successful product. They also added that planting a variety of crops ensured a diversity of food for their families.

The fundamental key to empowerment for women is knowledge, gained through training or education (Gibbons et al., 2022; Seeberg et al., 2020; Tembon & Fort, 2008). In fact, education has often been used as a proxy for women's empowerment (Alkire et al., 2013). In agriculture, education and training are most often delivered through extension services, advice and assistance delivered through workshops or farm visits and tailored to local crops, climate, and culture (Oakley & Garforth, 1985). There is substantial evidence that extension courses can significantly empower women in agriculture when those services directly address the local conditions and the constraints on women's participation, such as time poverty and cultural sexism (Lecoutere & Van Campenhout, 2019; Peterman et al., 2014; Stern & Jones, 2015; Quisumbing et al., 2022) One large-scale study among more than 7000 Ethiopian farmers, however, reveals the nuances in the effectiveness of extension services. Women farmers were less likely than their male counterparts to receive quality services, but both male and female farmers who received services were more likely to adopt new seed varieties and fertilizers; the quality of extension services received and access to the radio were the strongest predictors of agricultural productivity (Ragasa et al., 2013).

A mainstay of interventions designed to empower women in agriculture is the formation of women's collectives (Anand et al., 2020; Bolin, 2020). Bolin (2020) presents examples of women's agricultural collectives in the Philippines, Ghana, and Kenya, and concludes that when women contribute significantly to the household income, they also become more empowered within the household. They have more decision-making power with respect to expenditures and men assume more household responsibilities. They also experience increased self-efficacy in meeting the family's needs. The report advocates for a gender-transformative approach that empowers men as well as women.



## 7 The Complicated Case of Women and Coffee in Guatemala

Worldwide 70% of the labour in coffee is provided by women, but less than 30% of coffee farms are managed by women (International Coffee Organization, 2018). Guatemala, which produces some of the world’s finest coffee, is no exception. Coffee harvesting is difficult work. Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan activist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, described the care with which coffee beans must be picked. “Picking coffee is like caring for a wounded person. . . . [it] taught me to treat things very gently (Menchú, 1984, p. 35).” Those who pick coffee are paid by weight of the harvested beans, so earning a livelihood is often grueling. According to Guatemalan coffee producers, workers are paid by the hundred-pound bag (*quintal*) and the current pay is between 40 and 100 quetzales per *quintal* (about \$5.20 to \$13.00). Workers can pick between one and three quintals per day, earning from \$5.20 to \$39.00. Women and men are paid equivalently. See Fig. 1 for a photograph of women picking coffee on a Guatemalan *finca* (plantation or farm). Photo credit: Carlotta Boettcher.

Gender segregation of tasks is prominent in coffee harvesting and processing. Although both women and men pick coffee, men cut the shade trees and spray pesticides and herbicides. The processing of coffee is typically a man’s job, including pulping, fermenting, and drying coffee beans. Internationally, studies have shown that gender segregation leads to gender stereotyping, devaluation of women’s work, and a gender pay gap (Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Herrera et al., 2019).



**Fig. 1** Women picking coffee on a Guatemala farm. Photograph is by Carlotta Boettcher

Children often accompany their parents to the coffee fincas, especially because school vacations in Guatemala often coincide with the coffee harvest. For many mothers, there are no other options to taking their children with them. This practice has led to condemnation by many organizations striving to eliminate child labour (e.g., Rainforest Alliance, as described by Medrano, 2022). Although excessive and onerous work by children is certainly to be condemned, prohibiting children's "helping" contravenes a traditional Mayan practice of child socialization, that of learning by observing and pitching in, termed LOPI by Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (Rogoff et al., 2015). So once more, the situation is complicated—a potential clash between traditional cultural practices and well-meaning efforts to protect children.

As noted above, the formation of cooperatives has been touted as an effective way to empower women in agriculture. The fairtrade movement is one among many efforts to empower women in the coffee chain, setting economic, social, and environmental standards to ensure justice and sustainability for small farmers and processors (Fairtrade America, 2022). Gender equality is a central goal of the fairtrade movement. Lyon (2007, 2008) has described a cooperative at the side of Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, founded in 1979 to produce fair trade coffee. She reported in 2007 that of the 116 cooperative members, only seven were female and no women had ever served on the board of directors. She attributed the lack of leadership by women to two factors: patriarchal attitudes among the men and women's household responsibilities that left them time poor. Women in the cooperative expressed a desire for more control over the money they earned (mostly through weaving) so that they could feed the family and contribute to their children's education. Recently, more women are being designated as farm operators by Fair Trade Labeling Organisations International, the fairtrade association, and that may bolster their property rights, bring higher prices for their coffee, and increase their authority over farm and household management (Lyon et al., 2010).

This exemplar of coffee production in Guatemala illustrates many of the factors influencing women's empowerment and disempowerment in agriculture. Gender segregation and stratification lead to women's disempowerment. Cultural factors are central. In the case of Guatemala, those include patriarchal attitudes, familism, and cultural child-rearing practices. Cooperatives have the potential to empower women, but must consciously attend to gender inequities and women's time burden.

## **8 Impact of Women's Empowerment in Agriculture**

Why empower women in agriculture? There are many certain and some possible outcomes of women's empowerment in agriculture, including greater attention to the environment and progress toward attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

According to the ecofeminism perspective women and nature are closely intertwined, as in the image of mother earth, so that women are inherently protective

of nature and the environment (Cifuentes-Espinosa et al., 2021). In agriculture, ecofeminism postulates that women would be inclined to use agroecological or sustainable methods. Overall, women do show slightly more concern about environmental issues, but like other generalizations, women’s adoption of sustainable methods in agriculture depends on the crop, culture, and other contextual factors (Doss et al., 2018). For example, among small farmers in Kenya, there were no gender differences in adopting sustainable practices such as soil and water conservation, maize-legume intercropping, or use of improved seed varieties. Women were less likely than their male counterparts to use manure for fertilizer or to reduce the amount of tillage (Ndiritu et al., 2014). Those results demonstrate not only the complexity of gender differences, but that the small gender differences were in favour of men’s greater use of sustainable methods.

Women’s empowerment in agriculture has the potential to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (Agarwal, 2018). It directly addresses SDG5, gender equality. Empowering women in agriculture can also reduce hunger (SDG2) and promote good health and wellbeing (SDG3). Studies have shown that women’s empowerment in agriculture increases food security and leads to better nutrition for women and their families through improved quality and quantity of food as well as increased dietary diversity (Malapit et al., 2015; Malapit & Quisumbing, 2016; Murugani & Thamaga-Chitja, 2019; Ogunnaike et al., 2019). Better nutrition and food diversity lead to improved growth in children, as measured by increased height for age scores (Malapit et al., 2015). In addition, women’s empowerment in agriculture can impel a shift from subsistence farming to commercialization (Uwineza et al., 2021), leading to reduced poverty (SDG1). The result is a virtuous cycle of gender equality, improved economic circumstances, hunger and poverty reduction, and thriving (Malapit et al., 2020).

## 9 Future Directions

Future research should focus on women as change agents. With the threat of climate change and global warming, women in agriculture will be the first to be impacted (Denton, 2002). Solutions to the empowerment of women in agriculture and in combating the climate crisis can only be effective if culture, local conditions, and women’s time burdens are considered. In addition, the diverse voices of indigenous women and gender non-binary persons can contribute to the development of effective actions and policies to provide food for the world.

## 10 Conclusion

In sum, empowering women in agriculture has the potential to feed the world. However, interventions to promote women's empowerment should begin with honouring women's voices and considering their time burdens. Efforts should attend to the local context including cultural conditions, both constraints and strengths. The two types of initiatives that have yielded the most benefits are the establishment of women's agricultural cooperatives, (Anand et al., 2020; Bolin, 2020; Pastran, 2017), and education, both through extension courses and higher education in agriculture aimed at women participants (Díaz & Najjar, 2019; Gibbons et al., 2022).

The quote in the title of this chapter, "Women can't manage farms" came from a father in a family engaged in coffee production in Guatemala. The daughter went on to manage the family farms. Literature reviewed in this chapter, as well as the daughter's experience, demonstrate that women can manage farms, and that their empowerment can benefit the world's citizens in many ways.

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# Indian Women and Empowerment: A Kleinian Approach



Grace Maria Jochan  and Trina Banerjee 

**Abstract** The idea of women empowerment is often understood through the varied social contexts of individuals. There have been many attempts in understanding this notion among Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) women. A similar exploratory trajectory is seldom found in non-WEIRD samples of women especially those from South East Asian collectivistic cultures. The present study attempts to explore the concept of empowerment among middle-aged women from collectivistic cultures, who are often subjected to benevolent sexism from a social constructivist position. The paper would emphasize notions about the empowerment of ordinary women, particularly with regard to their occupational status. The discussion would be positioned in the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent where gender roles, norms and expectations define the concept of empowerment among women. A psychodynamic Kleinian approach involving object relations is adopted to elaborate on the occupational position of the participants where their interpersonal dynamics are explored.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Non-WEIRD women · Collectivistic culture · Kleinian object relations · South-Asian women

## 1 Introduction

The topic of gender studies and empowerment of women has been around as a prominent topic in research for most of the last century. However, most of the scholarship in this area is derived from educated and financially independent women of developed nations, with little representation from collectivistic cultures

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where patriarchal hierarchy holds a predominant stature in defining gender roles and expectations (Amin, 2018; Klein et al., 2021).

Kleinian object relations theory is rooted in the unconscious phantasies with material objects and object-relations with the body during infancy and beyond which consequently affect the relationships one forms with significant others (Clarke, 2019; Klein, 1998; Sayers, 1987). The framework explores two different positions of psychic functioning, the paranoid-schizoid position where the infant introjects the good experiences and annihilates the bad experiences assuming that the object, here the mother's breast, is multiple and fragmented into good and bad. As the infant gains more insight through experiences, it realizes the intertwined relationship between the good and bad objects and identifies that both are singular leading to a depressive position. This leads to an experience of guilt and anxiety for attacking the good breast in lieu of rage for the bad breast (Mintchev, 2018; Scott, 1990). Although object relations theory reflects androcentric biases, looking at object relations through feminist lens provides an opportunity to explain the male-defined scholarship in family where feminine qualities of mothering, self-sacrificing, caring, nurturing female is juxtaposed with the detached, emotionally unavailable, rule-bound male. It helps to validate the experiences of gender especially for females from collectivistic cultures where family is considered the center of a woman's life in a heterosexual stereotypical family (Clarke, 2019; Hockmeyer, 1988; Mintchev, 2018). In this paper these notions about projective identification are looked upon from the perspective of one's mothering process. Kleinian object relations is used to explore the centrality of family and children in a woman's life and how she engages in the projective identification and splitting of her ego into her family through the various positions of psychic functioning she maintains in her professional and familial relationships.

Sexism is typically considered as prejudices towards women, where one gender is considered inferior to the other based on traditional gender roles prevalent in a society and reaffirms heterosexual intimacy and interdependence. These prejudices are often expressed on two dimensions, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism is a negative derogatory attitude towards women whereas benevolent sexism projects a positive affective tone where on one hand there is an idealization of traditional gender roles particularly of women and on the other also implicitly expresses their weakness and need for protection through male counterparts (Durán et al., 2011; Fernández et al., 2004). Therefore benevolent sexism is a bidimensional construct that encompasses the sexist attitudes of benevolence and hostility. The ambivalence in embracing binary gender roles and liberal values that societies have evolved to makes benevolent sexism a powerful paradigm that impasses the subordinate position of women in the society.

Gender differences are widely observed in developing economies particularly with reference to the position of women. Women empowerment is often correlated with their opportunities for education, health, housing services, independence in decision making and work, ownership of assets (Khalid et al., 2020). Although in urban settings people have accustomed to the dual earner reality and public discourse of gender equality, qualitative findings suggest that the patriarchal cultural norms

contribute to the increased perception of family responsibilities among women (Yeon, 2005; Evans et al., 2014). These perceptions are further reiterated through expressions of benevolent sexism, a subtle form of sexism where women are idealized for their extraordinary talent in managing both work and family spheres and are therefore forced to continue in their struggle to uphold expectations set for them (Durán et al., 2011). These increased perceptions of daily responsibilities intertwined with social expectations to perform ideally are likely to contribute to various stressors for professionally engaged women and may even contribute to their disengagement from professional space. Mosseri (2021) proposed that one of the key factors contributing to work-family strategies were culturally rooted and based primarily on the family landscape which makes it important for us to explore the cultural expectations particularly of collectivistic cultures which emphasize on the blending in of individuals with the socially expected roles. Kim (2020) also found that women are more likely to have turnover when they perceive their work-family roles to be incongruent even when they are dominant financial providers for the family.

## ***1.1 Research Problem***

The present study attempts to explore the concept of empowerment among urban based middle-aged women from India, particularly with respect to their professional engagement. It is a common practice in Indian society for married women to have career disruptions to take family responsibilities and therefore their struggles are co-existing in a vastly different socio-cultural climate in comparison with women from western countries (Barhate et al., 2021). The perception of gender differences and work-to-family conflicts and how that contributes to their idea of engaging in work outside home and the notion of women empowerment is explored through the theoretical lens of Kleinian object relations from a social constructivist paradigm. A Kleinian approach aids at exploring the true nature of attachment with their family and children and how these interactions contribute to their understanding of women empowerment particularly in reference with their occupational engagement.

## **2 Method**

### ***2.1 Qualitative Approach and Research Paradigm***

The study followed a qualitative context-bound inductive approach using a case-study method (Creswell, 2003). The researchers assumed a social constructionist approach with a subjective and relativistic ontological assumption. The rhetoric is, therefore, personal and informal most of the time. The standards of reporting

qualitative research (SRQR) were followed in reporting the findings (O'Brien et al., 2014).

## **2.2 Context**

The study explored the concept of empowerment among middle-aged women from collectivistic cultures, who are often subjected to benevolent sexism. Evidence suggests that women from Indian context undergo career disruptions following marriage and this study attempts to understand their idea of women empowerment in their context of disengagement from professional life to tend to familial responsibilities.

## **2.3 Sample Strategy**

The participants were middle aged women who had previously been employed outside home and had experienced at least one instance of career disruption for familial responsibilities. Participants were residents of India belonging to sub-urban families with at least postgraduate level of education. A convenient sampling method was used, and participants were approached through a snowballing technique. A pragmatic case study approach is attempted and participants are assumed to be prototypical representation of the population (Creswell, 2003). The study consisted of two participants who were chosen through intensity sampling strategy. Two participants who were recruited for participation were aged between 35 and 45 years of age, married with children and living with an extended family in India. They were involved in a full-time professional engagement for more than 10 years but have recently retired for 1–2 years.

Participants who had long standing chronic physical or psychological ailments and those who have been divorced or separated from their spouse were excluded from the study.

## **2.4 Data Collection Methods**

A brief description about the purpose of the study and inclusion criteria was circulated by the authors using a snowballing technique and those consented to participate were provided with detailed information regarding their rights to be a research participant, confidentiality and right to withdraw from the study. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled with those participants who affirmed their interest for participation at their convenient time. Informed consent was obtained in the beginning of the interview and the interview was audio-recorded for further

analysis. Participants were allowed to influence the direction and flow of the conversations and were encouraged to seek clarifications to avoid interviewer-induced bias.

### 2.5 Ethical Issues

The consent for participation was obtained from all the participants. They were briefed about the objectives of the study and possible implications before the interview and were asked for affirmation of consent. Pseudo names corresponding to their gender and age were used in the analysis to quote relevant themes. They were assured confidentiality of the information shared, and the personally identifiable data (mail address) collected was stored anonymously in the local storage of the author and would be deleted 1 year after the publication of results. This process of data storage was briefed to the participants at the beginning of the interview. The research work received a clearance certificate from the institutional ethics review board.

### 2.6 Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was prepared by both the authors and was sent for face validation to three academicians from the field of psychology and unrelated to the research. They reverted back with their comments which were then incorporated into the interview schedule.

### 2.7 Research Objective

Research objective	Theme	Sample question
What is the concept of empowerment?	Attributions to motherhood, maternal instincts	How do you think you contribute to your empowerment as a woman?
What is the social position in the family?	Involvement in household chores, functional leadership vs nominal leadership	What do you think are your responsibilities to your family?
What is the role of family in empowerment of women?	Benevolent sexism, self-masochism, sacrifices for the family	What do you think are your responsibilities to your family? How did your social circles (friends, family) respond to this decision?
What is the concept of an idea/empowered woman?	Balance home and occupation, managing familial responsibilities	What is your idea about an ideal woman?

## 2.8 *Data Synthesis*

The primary thematic analysis was performed manually by the first author and was further re-checked by the second author for investigator triangulation. The common codes were clustered to form common themes and then corroborated with overarching themes. Organizing and global themes were derived, and the patterns within the data are represented in a conceptual framework. Inter-coder reliability was achieved through the cross-case comparisons of themes and sub-themes generated from both the data.

## 3 *Synthesis and Interpretation*

This work attempted to understand the notion of empowerment among women who engaged themselves in professional activities earlier but has ceased to continue them due to work-family struggles. Two prototypical cases of women from different walks of life, who decided to disengage themselves from professional forums to give time for their familial responsibilities are discussed here.

### 3.1 *Case Presentation*

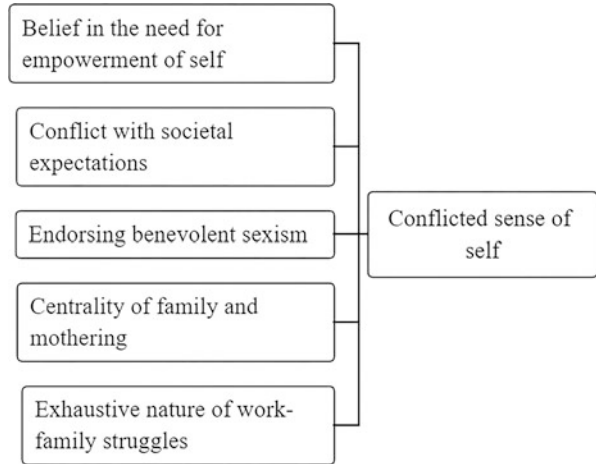
Gowri, is a 40-year-old married woman who is currently residing with her husband and her daughter who is 10 years old. She is currently unemployed but worked at a prestigious institution in a teaching role for 17 years. She resigned from her professional position 2 years ago and is currently an active home-maker. She is also engaged with taking care of her elderly parents who also stay in the same city along with her brother.

Latha, is a 43-year-old married woman who is currently residing with her husband, children and in-laws in an extended, Indian urban, upper middle-class family. She is currently unemployed and took voluntary early retirement from a teaching career of over 18 years. She resigned from her role about a year ago and is managing her household. She is economically dependent on her husband and taking care of husband and two children who are 17 years and 12 years of age, her elderly in-laws and her ailing father.

These interviews for both the participants mentioned above were transcribed and coded independently for emergent themes and sub-themes using a Kleinian theoretical lens and were then corroborated to form the conceptual framework as in Fig. 1.

The idea of empowerment of women has evolved historically from suffrage rights to equitable opportunity at all spheres of life. However, in the current cosmopolitan cultural positions, women tend to make their own meaning of the word empowerment with reference to their socio-cultural position. Figure 1 represents the five key

**Fig. 1** Pictorial representation of major themes that emerged from the analysis of these prototypical cases



themes of belief in need for empowerment, conflicts with societal expectations, endorsement of benevolent sexism, centrality of family and mothering, and exhaustive nature of work-family struggles that were identified in the analysis which significantly contributed to the theme related to conflicted nature of one’s self.

**3.1.1 Belief in the Need for Empowerment of Self**

The cases discussed showed strong affiliation towards the tenants of empowerment and significantly expressed their opinions on the need for empowering women. Gowri proposed that financial security and independent decision making can be achieved only through empowerment, as in the excerpt *“I think empowerment to me is financial independence and, you know, education and you know the strength to make their own decisions and not be kind of bogged down by social stigma and what people generally thought was a woman’s role in society”*. Latha on the other hand emphasizes on the drive for achievement when engaging in activities traditionally outside the realm of a woman’s role as a crucial factor in empowerment when she remarks *“if we don’t have the drive of moving forward, we cannot be empowered”*. At a different juncture, *“i took a lot of ownership in my hand, if i hadn’t i would not be empowered”*, the same participant also views empowerment as an organic consequence of taking agency in activities of self and engaging in some providence to the society at large. This need to contribute through engaging outside traditional boundaries of home becomes a need rather than a necessity most times to stand up to the societal expectation of a modern woman who balances work and family perfectly well. This leads to a schizoid concept of ideality linked to a woman who can or has to achieve it all in order to be empowered. The empowerment here is a good breast experience which upon achieving, she becomes that one person who is only loved as opposed to the one (not empowered) who is only hated. (Clarke, 2019; Klein, 1998;

Mintchev, 2018). This need for empowerment often originating from outside the individual can also be linked to the concept of benevolent sexism where women are encouraged to fulfill their traditional roles as well as contribute to the economic needs of the family and this becomes a necessary condition to be an ideal modern woman who balances family and work effortlessly (Durán et al., 2011).

### 3.1.2 Conflict with Societal Expectations

As the new millennium embraced ideologies of feminism as a mark of modernity and traditionally collectivistic cultures opened up to the ideas of globalization, there was growing acceptance for women being engaged professionally outside of their homes (Mosseri, 2021). Though this new paradigmatic shift could have contributed to blending of gender specific roles in families, it contributed to the notion of benevolent sexism, the patronization of women as superhumans capable of balance between work and family (Fernández et al., 2004). This idealization contributed to immense pressure for those who chose to explore their professional roles outside families as Latha calls out “*ideal woman is not advertisement concept-that I work outside the house, take care of everyone, plus i achieve a lot of things in work... Ideal woman is unreal*”. The societal pressure to be an ideal woman who manages home, work and becomes an ideal role-model for her children was constantly promoted through media and social exchanges contributing to feelings of inadequacy that women feel about their contribution to their families and to the society. Although this idealistic image prima facie promotes equal opportunities, it seems oblivious to the already existing gendered expectations on women to have family and children at the central position of their life. These androcentric responsibilities of being responsible for children and spouse often become overwhelming and psychologically taxing for women who make choices outside of their homes (Barhate et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2014). Participants reported feeling angry and irritated at judgements made on them for their grooming, family engagement as well as professional disengagement. Paradoxically, the same societal expectations of women being family oriented was reversed and often ridiculed when they choose to disengage from professional forums. This leads to women having to hide their non-existing professional status for continued social status like Latha who confesses that she “*haven't told anyone I have quit except my husband, they don't believe I have quit, they feel I'm on a break*”. These contradictory expectations from social circles, which can be understood as an offshoot of benevolent sexism therefore contributes to the subjugation of women and maintenance of the patriarchal stature. This also brings in a certain element of denial of the self and its needs suggesting a paranoid-schizoid position in the participant. The truth that's shown to the society about the nature of professional engagement does not change the real employment status. However, the central belief becomes as if what's unknown to them is also unknown to me, suggesting a schizoid thought process or a phantasy thinking (Sayers, 1987; Klein, 1998). This nature of feeling guilty about not being able to manage family-work spheres efficiently can also be linked to Kristeva's concept of

abjection where the subject identifies with a concept that's external to them, something that they cannot possibly find within (Kristeva, 1982). In this context, the participant is attempting to abject parts of her own self in order to adhere to the societal concept of the ideal woman who balances the pressure of family and work effortlessly. This is also suggestive of the low autonomy and power for agency women experience for their career-related decisions as stated by Barhate et al. (2021) and how socio-familial expectations influence their interests both inside and outside of their homes. This theme juxtaposes the belief systems women hold for themselves with societal expectations and the consequent conflictual positions of self with respect to empowerment.

### 3.1.3 Endorsing Benevolent Sexism

Traditional gender beliefs, stereotypes, cultural meanings and practices in relationships are influencing factors in the internalization of stereotypical gender roles assigned. The positive expression of men's role in providing and protecting women makes it less condescending and thereby women also engage in endorsing benevolent sexism on themselves and others. This can be seen in the comment "*I think I learned a lot about women from a man which is very, very, what do you say surprising, but yes, I mean, I learned what strength is. And I learned how important a woman is and how she should be protected from my spouse*" (Gowri). The Kleinian concept of projective identification can be used here to interpret the context, where the woman identifies with the ideas imparted by her spouse as her own as she engages in splitting of her own self and introjecting it onto her object relations, here the spouse (Hockmeyer, 1988). The similar instance of internalizing benevolent sexism can be also observed in relation to the financial providence to the family. Participants reiterated their dependence on male counterparts for financial security since their professional engagement was not financially adequate for the family. This unravels the problem of gender pay issues at work as well as societal norms related to men being expected to provide for the family (Barhate et al., 2021). As Latha mentions "*for me money wasn't a criteria, ...what i earn, how much i earn wasn't a thing. . . i wanted to just mentally engage myself somewhere*" professional engagement outside home was satisfying personal and social needs of self and was little related to being able to provide for the family. In other contexts, this financial dependency emerged as a contributory factor in feelings of inferiority for self and one's worth outside home pointing to the function it plays in inculcating benevolent sexism and thereby patriarchy. Participants also reported that financial independence was crucial to empowerment of women and her ability to make choices for herself as in the excerpt "*I'm a strong believer that I think once a woman is financially independent, I don't think many people buy that choice. They just say that she can do stuff on her own.*" but at the same time downplaying the financial contribution they made while they were engaged in their profession.



### 3.1.4 Centrality of Family and Mothering

The idea of family being the central focal point of a woman's life is often culturally learned in collectivist societies like India. Mothering from a social constructionist lens can be considered as a sacred act which is the normative status of a woman and her worth (Barhate et al., 2021). Participants, although were conscious about the non-possibility of an ideal mother, perceived that their primary responsibilities pertained to the family, the health and care of their children and spouse. They believed that their responsibility for the organization of the house, child-rearing and health of the family was crucial and should be prioritized over their own needs. This has also been a contributing factor in the decision to leave the profession when work pressure increased significantly. This can be seen in the excerpt of Gowri, *"I think my daughter and my husband, my topmost priority in for me as a responsible homemaker right now. I think I would love to kind of run a very, very organized house. It's not imposed on me but I would love to cook for my family and feed them healthy food instead of you know, having someone come in or you constantly eating out I would think, as a woman, I would definitely want it take health into consideration and I would love love to cook for them, even though it's not imposed"*. There is an internalized need to embrace motherhood and the domesticity of home which is assumed to have developed from the guilt of not being an ideal mother or an ideal woman. This can be seen as an attempt to resolve the depressive position of psychic functioning, through projective identification with the child and spouse when observed through a Kleinian lens (Clarke, 2019; Mintchev, 2018).

### 3.1.5 Exhaustive Nature of Work-Family Struggles

Being professionally engaged outside traditional duties lead to active contribution to society and therefore an occupational social status which unlike other status systems was not derived based on the social positioning of men in the family. Gowri feels enthusiastic sharing her opinion about her social status and how she is known for the title even when she has disengaged from employment. In her words, *"my job status gave me very, very, what do you say a very solid identity and status because the society considers it a very noble profession"*. However, exhaustive workload, pandemic related financial depreciation coupled with expectations of motherhood and family care created ambivalent feelings towards work. The constant stress of managing work and family and problems from either spheres spilling onto each other eventually lead to the decision of leaving the job for child care and family responsibilities. Comparing and contrasting her experience during her working years and now, Gowri remarks as follows *"I was always pressed for time. I was a bit stressed because I had too many things to do at home. But now, I've never felt so happy or never felt so much stress free. In a long long time. I'm not pressed for time anymore. I don't have to rush somewhere"*. This is representative of the constant juggling between work and familial responsibilities for working women and societal

expectations to perform best in all spheres of life (Evans et al., 2014; Kim, 2020). Workplaces often lack women friendly policies and superiors are likely to hold a negative perception towards working women (Amin, 2018; Barhate et al., 2021). Thus, it becomes easier for women to conform to the benevolent sexism inflicted, where they accept their inferiority in status quo rather than fight against gender discrimination. This further accentuates the cycle of career disruptions justified by financial stability of the spouse or family and sociocultural expectations to tend for the needs of their husband and children, again confirming their lack of agency in career related choices.

### **3.1.6 Conflicted Sense of Self**

The constant pressure to internalize this normative stature for self and perform in the idealized manner towards the offspring and towards family can be explored through the Kleinian positions of psychic functioning where on one end the person positions in the paranoid-schizoid position whereas occasionally oscillating towards the depressive position of psychic functioning (Klein, 1998; Sayers, 1987). In the paranoid-schizoid position there are ambivalent feelings towards idealized expectations, social status of work and financial independence whereas on the depressive position, they recognize their inability to perform in idealized manner and the guilt from underperforming at family and work coupled with endorsement of benevolent sexism on themselves and others causes projective identification, a state of conflicted self. This state of conflict leads to them identifying with the cultural norms of idealized womanhood and endorsing benevolent sexism.

## **3.2 Summary and Conclusion**

The chapter attempted to understand the notion of empowerment among Indian women belonging to a Non-WEIRD, collectivistic culture who have retired voluntarily from their professional positions to cater to the needs of their family. The practice of choosing family over career is not uncommon in a collectivistic culture like India. Women who get into caregiving roles by stepping aside from professional endeavors are often held in high esteem which also abides by the benevolent sexist culture that dominates the concept of empowerment of Indian women. India has a predominantly androcentric society and the patriarchal concept of women taking care of the family, even in place of their own comfort and choices is often internalized by women themselves. The concept of empowerment comes from a space of being an “ideal” woman who balances both profession as well as the home front. However, the choice of profession at the cost of family is often degraded and held in very low esteem. The chapter has enunciated the conflictual feelings of women who have stepped aside from their prestigious professional positions to prioritize caregiving roles. The conflict arises from internalization of the patriarchal society and its

demands versus one's own thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon of early voluntary retirement from work. The findings clearly reflect that an unrealistic confusion persists about the role and concept of empowerment experienced by the participants post their decision to quit from the workforce. This confusion is rationalized by normalizing the patriarchal norms of the society and truly believing in the ideality of an empowered woman as denoted by the collectivistic culture.

### 3.3 *Limitations and Future Directions*

The data recommended a few future directions that need to be probed and inquired in order to understand the concept of empowerment among women belonging to Non-WEIRD, collectivistic Indian culture. The chapter focused on women who had resigned from a full-time career of more than a decade to prioritize caregiving responsibilities. However, it did not emphasize on women who are currently involved in a professional full-time engagement and their concept of empowerment. The concept of internalization of patriarchal norms to justify the decisions of resignation from work has been explored, but the origin of such process or evolution of the concept of empowerment across ages has not been explored. The intergenerational transfer of concepts related to empowerment of women also requires further exploration.

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# Ubuntu: A Strategy for Empowering Rural Women and Transforming Lives Through Food Security Projects



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**Abstract** Human development and empowerment are vital for sustainable development in communities. The empowerment of women is one of the important aspects towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5). Women are good leaders if they get the necessary support and are treated as equal partners and beneficiaries of development. Good leaders have the commitment to serve others with integrity and humility and are characterised by their ability to influence others to bring about the necessary change in an organisation or community. Therefore, a value-based leadership has the potential to facilitate change and encourage teamwork to the benefit of the whole rather than the individual. The concept of Ubuntu was used to outline the different roles played by the rural women and their leadership attributes that can be aligned to the four core values of Ubuntu. These core values are: (1) Survival; (2) Solidarity; (3) Compassion; and (4) Respect and dignity. This chapter explores a case study of rural women in Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province of South Africa, who participated in different community projects with the aim of generating income and ensuring household food security. The community projects included food production (such as crop and vegetable production), baking, sewing, dairy, brick making and chicken rearing. The women used other ways of ensuring household food security, such as food gathering, processing, and preservation, which they acquired through the process of socialisation from the elderly women in their families and community. The chapter ends with recommendations on how to continuously empower rural women as leaders in a changing world.

**Keywords** Sustainable development · Ubuntu · Women · Food security · Poverty · Empowerment · Community

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## 1 Introduction and Background

The role of women in ensuring household food security has been widely documented (Aziz et al., 2020; Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2011; Nhemachena & Hassan, 2007; Pandya, 2008) however, gender disparities still exist (UNDP, 2016) despite their invaluable contribution in ensuring household food security. According to FAO (2011), women comprise half of the world's population and make about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries than men, but they experience food insecurity due to gender disparities. Sinclair et al. (2019) and Alarcão (2020) report that women in developing countries have a higher probability of experiencing food insecurity because of disparities that are preventable. There are many reasons behind food insecurity among women but, according to Laar and Aryeetey (2015), the main reason is women's substandard level of empowerment and disparity in intra-household distribution of food. Therefore, it is important to address these disparities so that women's roles and contributions to food security in societies is recognised and their leadership is harnessed so that they continue to bring the necessary changes in the areas where they function. Women are disempowered from the economic and social perspectives in society despite their involvement in ensuring household food security (Pandya, 2008). In Sekhukhune District, culturally, the ownership of property, land and livestock are men's prerogatives. Therefore, only men can make decisions regarding the sale of property, land use and management of livestock in terms of when to slaughter or sell such animals (Masekoameng & Molotja, 2019). This agrees with Johnson et al. (2018) who report that women are less likely than men to own land or livestock, adopt new technologies, use credit or other financial services, or receive education or agricultural extension services. Similarly, women in Sekhukhune District reported that they played a limited role in household decision making and have little say in how household income is used (Head et al., 2014).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore a case study of rural women in Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province of South Africa (SA), who participated in different community projects with the aim of generating income and ensuring household food security. The women who participated in this study have different educational levels ranging from primary (23%) to secondary education (17% below matric level and 33% matriculated). Few women had post matric qualifications, such as national diplomas and degrees (10%), while the remaining 17% did not indicate their educational levels. With a lack of employment opportunities in the rural areas, most men migrate to the cities in different parts of the country to work for their families, leaving women as heads of households. Most households in these villages are involved in subsistence farming, with women mainly involved in food production activities. They produce food (i.e., crops and vegetables) from their backyard gardens and communal land allocated to each household by the traditional leaders. All food produced is used for consumption at household level and surpluses are sold within the villages. This is in agreement with Quin's study of the food and feeding habits of the Pedi (tribal group) in Sekhukhune, which reported that the efforts of the

Pedi were previously focused primarily on the production and acquisition of food, but these efforts are now offered in exchange for money (Quin, 1959, p. 275).

The community projects in this study included food production (i.e. mainly crop and vegetable production), baking (bread that is sold to the local hospital and to community members), sewing (machines used for sewing clothes such as school uniforms, casual clothes and pillows), brick making (sold in their village and nearby villages), dairy (milking cows), window fitting and chicken rearing (funded by the Department of Social Development to build an advanced poultry house). The women used other ways of ensuring household food security, such as food gathering, processing and preservation, which they acquired through the process of socialisation from elderly women in their families. The chapter uses the concept of Ubuntu to outline the different roles played by the rural women and their leadership attributes that can be aligned to the four values of Ubuntu: (1) survival; (2) solidarity; (3) compassion; and (4) respect and dignity. Ubuntu is an old African term for humanness; it is a way of life that stresses the importance of community, solidarity, sharing and caring (Nzimakwe, 2014). The Ubuntu philosophy and way of life has held the African societies, including South Africa, together due to its beliefs and practices, which have consequently put the person at the centre of all things (Nzimakwe, 2014). *Ubuntu* is an acknowledgment that leadership is a collective activity in which different people at different times, depending on their strengths, come forward to move the group in the direction it needs to go. The primary question of this research was: To what extent can the core values of Ubuntu influence good leadership and contribute to the implementation of successful community projects? To answer this question, the following sub-questions were explored:

- How does Ubuntu leadership style influence the success of community projects as implemented by the rural women in Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province of SA?
- What are the factors that contribute to the empowerment of the women?

A great deal has been recorded on community projects, however, there is a dearth of research on whether the Ubuntu philosophy can influence good leadership and contribute to the success of community projects, hence this chapter. To address the gap in research, this chapter reports on a case study that focused on the influence of the Ubuntu philosophy on good leadership and its contribution to the successful implementation of community food security projects led by rural women in South Africa. Related literature was reviewed to provide a theoretical response to the issue under investigation. The chapter ends with recommendations to continuously empower rural women as leaders in the changing world.

## 2 Sustainable Development in Communities

Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Goniadis, 2015). It rests on four inter-related pillars: (1) Economic development which focuses on the ability of

an economy to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely. It includes decisions that are made in the most prudent way possible with respect to the other aspects of development, such as (2) social development, which needs to be incorporated in the economic development and relies on decisions and development projects that promote the general improvement of society. Johnson et al. (2018) opine that the sole purpose of development projects is to benefit and empower women. Social development is closely linked to (3) environmental development which seeks to minimise the impact of human activities on the environment and encourages the restoration and preservation of the natural habitat to achieve sustainable development. Environment and social development initiatives aim to contribute to a more environmentally sustainable world, in which all people have equitable and optimal opportunities to live full, healthy, and productive lives. This chapter asserts that the social aspect of development needs to empower and benefit future generations so that they can live high quality lives. This is supported by Goniadis (2015) who indicates that the social aspect of development supports the concept of intra-generational justice, which means that future generations are entitled to the same or greater quality of life as current generations within (4) a cultural context.

Nhamo et al. (2018) assert that eliminating gender imbalance in sustainable development and equal access to opportunities involves redirecting resources and priorities by: removing all types of discrimination involving women and girls; providing opportunities that include, among others, empowering women leaders through training and development; and affording them the necessary skills and resources to enable them to lead rural communities successfully.

### **3 Women Empowerment and Food Security**

Empowerment is defined as a “multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important” (Page & Czuba, 1999). Empowerment can increase women’s sovereign rights to control assets and land and also their self-confidence (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). According to Kabeer (1999, p. 437), empowerment is “an expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices, in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”. When women are empowered by having access to productive and financial resources, they can produce half of the world’s food and lead to food security by expanding agricultural productivity from 2.4% to 4% (FAO, 2011). The empowerment of women therefore promotes food security, economic growth and sustainable development. Empowerment, in this context, means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. For example, when women can decide what to do with the income from the food they produce they are empowered as they can make decisions in terms of the income they generate.

Food security “exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary



needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2001). Therefore, a household is considered food secure when all four aspects of food security (i.e., food availability, access, utilisation and stability) are achieved. It is evident from the above definition that food security contributes to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) of ending hunger. While women contribute to ensuring household food security, they remain the most vulnerable to food insecurity (Alarcão, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019) due to disparities that have existed for a long time that disadvantaged them from accessing resources and developing to their full potential. The main reason, amongst the many reasons behind food insecurity among women, is their substandard level of empowerment and disparity in intra-household distribution of food (Laar & Aryeetey, 2015). Women often serve others first (men and children), while they get little or no food at all. A study in Pakistan revealed that women are an asset of the rural economy however, they remain “invisible” and unaccounted for (Aziz et al., 2020). For food security projects to have a positive impact in communities, they should be sustainable, and communities should be self-reliant and be able to cater for current and future generations. Food security will not be achieved in communities if women are not empowered to address this issue. According to the Care Policy Report (2020), women lack the access, information, and inputs they need to fight food insecurity and malnutrition in their communities. Women and girls produce most of the food for their households, but their contributions are frequently unnoticed. This social injustice was exacerbated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic at global level (Headey et al., 2020). Empowering women in the area of food security will not only respond to issues of poverty but boost productivity, minimise malnutrition and enhance women’s creativity in the area of food security.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

A community project can be highly effective if members of the community are involved and work together as a team. Adversely, if members of the community are not sharing the same vision as that of the project leader and are unwilling to cooperate, the project is deemed to fail (Msila, 2015). By following an Ubuntu philosophy in leading community projects, project members are expected to cooperate for the success of the projects because the Ubuntu philosophy promotes cooperation among individuals, cultures and nations (Nzimakwe, 2014). The Ubuntu philosophy was chosen for this chapter on account of its appropriateness and strength to respond to the research questions. Furthermore, this theory applies in the chapter because it empowers and sustains communities who are hard at work to ensure household food security. It will also realise the influence and determine the impact of Ubuntu in leading community projects using Sekhukhune District as a case study. It emphasises collectivism and relationships over material things, including ownership of opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019). In this chapter, the focus is on the value of Ubuntu and the role it

can play in promoting good leadership and contributing to the successful implementation of community projects.

Literature reveals that Africans are social beings that are in constant communion with one another in an environment where a human being exists only through his/her relationship to other human beings (Khomba, 2018). In an African community, there is nothing like “I am on my own” (individualism), as collectivism dominates because of the Ubuntu philosophy (Khoza, 2005; Shonhiwa, 2006). This is encompassed by the saying: “A person is a person through others”. The principle of collectivism and relationships in African societies involves wealth distribution among the members of a society (Prinsloo, 2000, p. 283–284). This distribution of wealth is closely linked to the ownership of opportunities. According to Khomba (2018), the survival of a human being is dependent on other people—the community and society—therefore, I achieve because of others’ contributions and others can achieve because of my efforts. The implications of Ubuntu philosophy call for women to work together as a collective, share skills, resources and knowledge, and empathise and care for one another to succeed. This collaborative approach to leadership applies to all areas of individual, community and business development. Ubuntu recognises that food security could be achieved if women came together and combined their resources. The goal of Ubuntu is to strengthen the unity of communities and fight the scourge of food insecurity.

## 5 Methodology

The chapter is based on a study that followed a qualitative research approach and used a case study research design to gain insight by carrying out an in-depth analysis of rural women’s implementation of food security projects. The aim was to understand and describe the extent to which the core values of Ubuntu influenced good leadership and contributed to the successful implementation of food security projects in the seven villages (i.e., Elandskraal, Mabitsi, Mmakgatle, Mogaladi, Mohlalotoane, Tsimanyane and Vaalbank) of Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select women who were involved in different community projects with the aim of generating income and ensuring household food security. The selection of the participants was done in consultation with key informants, such as agricultural extension officers and community leaders in the area. A total of 92 women from 20 different community projects voluntarily participated in this study. Qualitative research does not involve large numbers of participants but is concerned with collecting data until reaching saturation (Yin, 2011).

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) methods and tools were used to collect data for this study. Participatory rural appraisal is an approach that learns about rural life and conditions from rural people’s perspectives (Cavestro, 2003). Rapid rural appraisal involves learning rapidly and directly from villagers and obtaining information for the purposes of analysing it (Cavestro, 2003).

These methods were used as they are regarded as complementary when undertaking agricultural research in collaboration with farmers and residents. The PRA and RRA tools used to collect and record information were face-to-face focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and direct observations. The research team spent 1 week in each of the seven villages, to understand and observe how community project members carried out their day-to-day activities. The discussions and interviews were conducted in Sepedi, which is the language of the participants, and they were recorded using an audio recorder, with the permission of the participants. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim and translated into English before being analysed. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study involved a researcher and two research assistants who were trained before data collection. Different observers or interviewers were used to minimise bias. Notes were taken and discussions were recorded for listening and transcribing at a later stage. A checklist was used to guide the discussions and to probe further.

The data obtained from different sources were analysed using thematic content analysis (Anderson, 2007) that involves repeated reading of field notes and listening to, transcribing and translating recorded data from focus group discussions and individual interviews. The translated data were typed, organised, sorted and coded into meaningful units. An inductive approach was followed and the codes or labels assigned to the pieces of data were generated by working from the text during the data analysis process. Recurring issues that commonly emerged from the interviews and focus groups were identified and grouped together into meaningful groups called themes. The data organised under different themes were then interpreted and presented in the discussions.

## 6 Results and Discussions

The results were based on in-depth knowledge that was collected through observations, focus group discussions and individual interviews with women who participated in the different community projects. Furthermore, the results were linked to the four core values of Ubuntu to answer the research questions. There were between seven and 20 women in each project. These women organised themselves into groups and initiated various community projects with the aim of generating income to contribute to household food security. Therefore, the community projects formed part of their livelihood strategies. All community projects were allocated land by the local “chiefs”, from which they run the day-to-day activities of their various projects. This shift of the *Bapedi* cultural norms (where land ownership is a prerogative of men) that prevented women from owning land is a step in the right direction to tackle the issue of women empowerment for the benefit of all household members and the communities at large. The availability of assets, such as land, empowers women to ensure that they can take care of their families. In this study, all the women indicated that the income they generated from selling the products of their community projects was allocated to ensure household food security, to cater for other household needs

and to share with relatives and friends. This aligns with the results of other studies that affirm that, when women are given rights, especially the right to own assets such as land, their bargaining power increases and that this results in improved food security (Kieran et al., 2015; Porter, 2016) not just for themselves but also for other household members. Similarly, Mishra and Sam (2016) mentioned that the right to own land can help rural women to access economic, social and political power, which can lead to food security for the whole household.

These community projects, affiliated to a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) called Rural Women Movement which empowered project members with leadership skills and offered free workshops on group dynamics and capacity building. The NGO facilitated the funding of these community projects by linking them to funding organisations such as Eskom and different government departments. Additionally, the women received training and guidance on marketing their products from agricultural extension officers as well as lecturers from the Tompi Seleka College of Agriculture. Some projects received financial support, equipment and machines that could be used in the projects. In some instances, provincial government departments and companies, such as Eskom, sponsored buildings and materials used in their projects, for example, some received sheets of glass for their window fitting project and were also trained on how to fit the windows.

These rural women applied the Ubuntu philosophy in implementing the activities of the different community projects. For example, they were able to select their leadership structures and abide by the decisions taken by their leaders. This led to the survival of the projects. This is evident from their efforts to survive, pull together to achieve a common goal, help each other in times of need and treat each other and others with respect and dignity as outlined in the scenarios below. The women in these rural communities changed the food insecurity status of their households, despite the challenges they faced. This is closely aligned to the value of *survival* (in this case, survival of families and communities), which is at the heart of Ubuntu. Survival is the ability to live and exist despite difficulties (Nzimakwe, 2014). The rural women of Sekhukhune District learnt how to survive despite the difficulties of unemployment and household food insecurity they were facing. They organised themselves and collectively started various community projects to ensure food security for their households and communities. In the spirit of *survival*, some of the community projects were started with a little money that the women put together without any form of financial support from external stakeholders. Therefore, they worked collectively and collaboratively and developed a shared will to survive, despite the challenges. This signifies a teamwork approach to leadership which focuses on empowering others (Nel, 2018). With the money that they received from selling the produce from their projects, women contributed to economic development. The women accessed food through the food gardens and bought certain types of food, but they also relied on the natural environment to gather wild fruits and vegetables. Vegetables were processed through sun-drying and stored for use during periods of food scarcity. The following extracts depict their quest for survival:

There are no economic opportunities available in the village therefore we had to do something to ensure that we support our families.

We are unemployed; most households depend on government social grants; the little we get from this community project helps to feed our families.

We gather wild vegetables, such as ‘lerotho’ and ‘theepe’, which are used as a relish.

We gather edible wild fruits and vegetables from the veld. We eat wild fruits as snacks whereas vegetables form part of meals and are used as relish eaten with porridge.

According to Nzimakwe (2014), a spirit of solidarity, which is closely related to survival, develops through the combined efforts of individuals in the service of their community. Nzimakwe (2014) states that, from early childhood, Africans are socialised to understand that difficult goals and tasks can only be accomplished collectively. The rural women showed solidarity through their combined efforts to initiate, implement and participate in community projects even though they did not get any training on how to run community projects but learnt the skills from each other. The spirit of solidarity extended beyond the community project activities since they also supported other community members, who were not project members, during cultural events and celebrations. Their efforts are often seen when they collectively prepare and share food during these gatherings or events, where all are treated as guests. The extracts below are examples of solidarity from the women:

We do not get enough money from our husbands who work in the cities; therefore, we started this bakery project with little money we put together to help feed our children

I did not know anything about growing exotic vegetables, but I learned from other project members and was able to help where I could (for example, watering the vegetables, removing weeds around the vegetables). I was determined to learn and was hopeful that working as team will help us achieve our goals.

If one of us is hosting an event in her family, we show our support by lending our utensils and we also help with the cooking and serving of guests. We do all of these voluntarily, it is humanness to do so.

We help each other with food production activities in big communal lands such as weeding, harvesting and threshing of crops (e.g., sorghum and beans).

I am good in brewing traditional beer. I always work with other women to brew traditional beer for most weddings in the village and we do it for free. It is not easy to brew traditional beer; it requires some skills and I already know how to make the best traditional beer.

Closely related to the spirit of solidarity is the ability to show *compassion*, which is another way of depicting the Ubuntu philosophy. Compassion is one’s ability to understand the dilemmas of others and want to help them (Nzimakwe, 2014). In this way, one establishes and maintains relationships. Although not limited to project members, the women indicated that they help each other (including other community members who are not project members) in times of need, whether good or bad. Building social support networks enhances women’s quality of life and provides them with a buffer against adverse life events. According to Aziz et al. (2020), women with social support have a lower possibility of experiencing food insecurity. This is because they can get food or any other form of help from others in their social

support structures in times of need. These excerpts are examples of compassion shown by others towards the project members and by the women to each other and other community members:

When our food garden failed because of water problems in the village, we borrowed two sewing machines from projects in neighbouring villages to start a dress-making project (Tsimanyane women).

When we harvest enough food from our backyard gardens as well as from the communal land, we share with friends and relatives who might not have enough food.

We barter food to ensure variety in our diet (e.g., if I produced surpluses of sorghum, I exchange some with other project and/or community members for maize so that I can have sorghum and maize meal. Legumes, such as beans, are also bartered (e.g. mung beans bartered for njugo beans).

We offer social support to each other (including other community members) during weddings, funerals and other cultural events by helping to gather firewood, collect water, cooking, serving guests and washing dishes.

The women indicated that, at times, they have problems between each other however, their respect for each other and recognising each other's strengths and weaknesses help them to maintain good relations for the success of the projects. Nzimakwe (2014) defines *respect* as an objective, unbiased consideration and regard for rights, values, beliefs and property while *dignity* is seen as a quality that earns or deserves respect. From childhood, Africans learn that those in authority (such as the chief/king, the elders and other members of the community) should always be treated with respect and that these members of society become dignified through respect (Nzimakwe, 2014). Respect and dignity are observed when project members respect the leadership structures they have selected and the leadership of the Rural Women Movement. These women acknowledge those in authority within and outside their communities and learn from them for the sake of their empowerment and to ensure the sustainability of the projects.

If there is a funeral in the village, we halt project activities and offer our support to the bereaved family. This is part of our culture and is a way of showing respect.

At household level, bigger and better portions of food, especially meat, are served to the husband as a way of showing respect to the head of the household.

If we are unable to report to the project for whatever reasons, we notify the project leader. This is a way of acknowledging and respecting the leadership structures in our projects.

Although the women had challenges, such as a lack of funding, proper machinery and equipment, they were able to use the African philosophy of Ubuntu to run their community projects. They were able to develop in all areas of sustainable development through working together as a team and empowering each other to achieve together. They had an informal way of doing things and acknowledged those who were more knowledgeable and skilled in their respective areas. Certain project members were interviewed individually because of the recognition and respect from other project members who chose them to participate in the individual interviews. Such project members may have initiated the project(s) or contributed to them

in one way or another. The involvement of other stakeholders is a clear example of empowerment for the rural women that run community projects, because they also benefited from partnering with these stakeholders. This is aligned to the notion that “a person is a person through others.” It is also closely linked to social development as one of the pillars for sustainable development. Aziz et al. (2020) mention that the women in rural areas face fewer opportunities and a dearth of information however, in this case, the information brought by the stakeholders bridge that gap and empower women by imparting new information, gaining knowledge and skills. Applying the core values of Ubuntu does not necessarily mean that there are no problems however the project members were better equipped to handle such challenges.

## 7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the ways in which women, who participated in different community projects, depicted the concept of Ubuntu through their day-to-day activities and the information they shared about their projects that was gathered through various data collection methods. All the women who were involved in different community projects mentioned that the projects formed part of their livelihood strategies since they started the community projects with the aim of selling the products to generate income to ensure household food security. Through their interactions with each other as project members and the interaction with external stakeholders, they acquired resources, learned new things, and gained new knowledge and skills. This was women empowerment however the concept of women empowerment is broad and empowering women in one dimension does not necessarily lead to empowerment in another. Some dimensions of empowerment can help rural women to have better access to food or to run projects successfully. When women have access to rights and assets, such as owning land, they can make invaluable contributions to their own lives and those of others within their households and communities. Women with access to assets and other important resources (e.g., money, relevant knowledge, skills, etc.) are empowered and can contribute to the development of rural communities.

## 8 Recommendations

- Women empowerment ensures household food security and transforms the lives of many people in the rural areas. Therefore, continuous capacity building for rural women brings about the necessary changes in addressing SDG1 (ending poverty), SDG2 (zero hunger), SDG3 (to ensure good health and wellbeing) and SDG5 (empowerment of women). Governments are looking for sustainable ways of decreasing poverty and hunger and ensuring good health and wellbeing. One of



the strategies to address these challenges could be the promotion and support of community projects which align to the Ubuntu philosophy to benefit rural communities.

- Good leadership is required for community projects to prosper therefore aligning the projects with the core values of Ubuntu will sustain community projects.
- The lack of food security in rural areas is a major problem. Therefore, to ensure food security, rural women should form partnerships, community projects and cooperatives taking into consideration the core values of Ubuntu leading to the survival of the projects.

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**Part II**  
**Women's Empowerment Through**  
**Education**

# “Challenge Accepted and Mastered”: Empowerment of Women Through Formal Education



Elisabeth Vanderheiden 

**Abstract** Educational opportunities for girls and women are a decisive criterion for creating social participation, personal, professional, economic, and political self-realisation, self-determination, experiences of self-efficacy, well-being, meaning in life, and happiness. Education is also a critical prerequisite for sustained women’s empowerment. This chapter presents the results of an ongoing online study in Germany. One of the aspects of the study is an investigation of which formal educational opportunities prove relevant to women in terms of creating the aforementioned outcomes. It also examines the reasons for and the effects of these educational opportunities which the women observe. To date, 64 women between the ages of 16 and 84 have participated in the study. They answered a standardised online questionnaire and 24 subsequently agreed to participate in an in-depth interview via video. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these 24 women. The study uses a narrative approach, which is particularly suited to providing a basis for understanding, comprehending, and interpreting the research questions from the interviewees’ perspectives through their respective narratives. The chapter places the findings in the context of Naila Kabeer’s empowerment theory and positive psychology.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Adult education · Self-realisation · Self-determination · Self-efficacy · Well-being · Meaning in life · Narratives

Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world.  
Nelson Mandela

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## 1 Introduction

Formal education plays a central role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015). The UNESCO World Education Report (UNESCO, 2022), for example, clearly shows that education is essential for the success of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This chapter focusses on formal education events. According to UNESCO (2011) those are defined as:

Education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies and, in their totality, make up the formal education system of a country. Formal education programmes are thus recognized as such by the relevant national educational authorities or equivalent, e.g. any other institution in co-operation with the national or sub-national educational authorities. Formal education consists mostly of initial education. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognized as being part of the formal education system.

At the same time, formal education is a highly relevant resource for self-efficacy and autonomy, for participation in all areas of life, for material security and well-being. However, women in particular are exposed to a variety of structural disadvantages, even regarding equitable access to formal educational institutions. This chapter presents an online study from Germany that investigates how formal educational events contribute to women's empowerment. Special attention is paid to the question of how women receive, control, and strategically shape these events, interpret them in narratives, and use them throughout their lives for self-empowerment. The study and its results are presented and discussed in the context of Naila Kabeer's empowerment approach. Future research areas are also identified.

You have to make the conditions dance.

Bärbel Bohley,  
artist and civil rights activist in East Germany

## 2 Empowerment

Even though the concept of empowerment is primarily rooted in the American civil rights movement, it has been highly significant, especially in educational contexts, since at least the 1970s (Lager, 2019, 83). Empowerment in social or educational contexts is synonymous with "self-empowerment and self-empowerment, strengthening of self-power, autonomy and self-disposal" (Herriger, 2014, 20). In this context, it aims at "(re)establishing self-determination over the circumstances of one's everyday life" (Herriger, 2014, 20). Depending on the context, definitions of empowerment vary and different aspects are highlighted.

For example, Freire's understanding of empowerment is based less on external support in empowerment processes than on the assumption that people have the ability to recognise themselves and also to understand themselves as acting subjects with the potential for change (Freire, 1970, 1985). In particular, Freire's emphasis on consciousness-raising is considered particularly relevant to women's empowerment

(Stromquist, 2006, 2014). This connects with the realisation that, as an individual, one may find oneself in a position of limitation, and possibly also of inferiority (Herriger, 2014, 14–19), but at the same time one needs to understand that this situation is changeable and to have the ability to learn to shape one’s life according to one’s own needs, values and goals (Stark, 1996, 107). In this context, educational processes—especially in Freire’s terms—are of great importance.

The economist Naila Kabeer (1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2021) adds and emphasises the power dimension of the discourse on women’s empowerment. Kabeer starts from the notion that women’s empowerment involves a process by which people who have been deprived of the ability to make strategic life decisions, acquire that ability. “Empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the capacity to make choices gain this capacity” (Kabeer, 2021, 2).

Kabeer assigns three interrelated, complementary, and interdependent dimensions to this capacity to make choices:

- Resources (a broad definition that includes not only access but also future entitlements to material, human, and social resources),
- Agency (in the sense of processes of decision-making as well as manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception, and manipulation), and
- Achievements (Kabeer, 1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2021).

Characteristic of Kabeer’s approach, in addition to these three dimensions, is equating “power” with “choice” (Kabeer, 1999, 2021). According to Kabeer, the possibility of making an essential choice or decision for one’s own life and well-being, and overcoming resistance, is to be regarded as a positive form of power. She distinguishes different dimensions of power: on the one hand, is “power to” and “power over”; on the other hand is “power within”. The latter is indispensable for the empowerment of women, because it enables them to improve “their ability to control resources, to determine agency and make decisions” (Kabeer, 1994, 229).

Kabeer’s concept of empowerment takes into account an additional analytical level of choice under specific individual or social conditions. Depending on the choices, an analytical framework with different criteria is created, on the basis of which the moments of oppression are analysed and the identification points for empowerment are revealed (Kabeer, 1999; Täubert, 2022). Here, the criterion to be considered is that there is actually a choice and, at the same time, that it is of significant relevance to the person’s life, referred to by Kabeer as “strategic life choices”. Kabeer delineates between agency in the everyday, trivial sense of the word, and more consequential forms of agency that reflect strategic life choices, as well as between forms of agency that reinforce the status quo and those that seek to question, challenge, and perhaps change the status quo. Kabeer (2008a) therefore understands empowerment as both changes in consciousness and as an expansion of agency. This includes an increase in self-esteem and the development of social identity as well as the ability to exercise strategic control over one’s life and to renegotiate relationships with others. It also includes the ability to participate equally with men in shaping the transformation of society and accordingly contribute to a

more equitable distribution of power and opportunity (Kabeer, 2008b, 27). In her understanding, consciousness, voice, and action are equally expressions of agency and encompass not only individual but also collective perceptions of agency.

At the same time, Kabeer's approach is characterised by the fact that it succeeds in combining the actor perspective with the structural perspective by emphasising both the subject's capacity to act and the structural framework of action.

### **3 Research Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting***

This chapter is based on the results of an ongoing study on the topic of educational histories of adult women. The study is qualitative research with two types of data collection. First, data were collected via an online questionnaire which was available on the Internet (Vanderheiden, 2021), and second, participants agreed to participate in an in-depth video interview. In the online questionnaire in which 64 women participated, the first eight questions referred to biographical data. The remaining 16 questions asked what significance formal educational events had had in the lives of the participating women, what had proven to be conducive to their learning, which framework conditions were relevant and why, and what effects they associated with their formal educational experiences. In addition, they were asked to describe their educational history. Data collection was conducted between August and December 2021.

Participants also had the opportunity to volunteer for an in-depth interview via video. Individual appointments were then made with these subjects and individual semi-structured video interviews were conducted (Schiek, 2022). These were supported by an interview guide designed specifically for the study. Henry (1998) characterises this research method as a conversation between two friends in the context of a research setting. It is assumed that narrative description of experiences may be understood as key to qualitative understanding, which is echoed in subjective stories and narratives (Giorgi, 2014a, 2014b; Lyotard, 1984). The interviews were documented, and the content analysed, coded, and interpreted. Ethical aspects come also into play according to Sanjari et al. (2014).

According to Sanjari et al. (2014), special consideration is given to the ethical aspects of qualitative research because "qualitative research deals with sensitive topics in depth [which] can pose emotional and other risks to both participants and researchers".

Twenty-four women agreed to participate in video interviews. The video interviews were implemented in November and December 2021 as zoom video calls which lasted between 25 and 70 min. In the in-depth video interviews, the women were first asked to describe their educational histories, and then to define and explain key events in those histories. This was done to enable the interviewees to identify and individually assess relevant events, and to gather insights regarding their

strategic use. Each interviewee was also asked to imagine that her educational story was a book, to give a title to this book, and to describe the characteristics for her role as a central figure, as a heroine of her own story (Schmieling-Burow & Burow, 2021, 60). In particular, this approach offered the opportunity to tap into the empowerment dimensions that emerged, developed, or were actively shaped by the women themselves in terms of their educational histories. This is closely related to the empowerment approach of Freire, in that it shows where and how the women interviewed used the capacity for self-knowledge and perceived themselves as acting subjects with the potential for change, and how they acted accordingly (Freire, 1970, 1985). It also relates to Kabeer’s approach (1999, 2008a, 2008b, 2021), in opening up choices, making strategic decisions and using power consciously.

### 3.2 Sample

Participants were found based on purposive sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017). At the time of writing this chapter, 64 people had responded to the questionnaire (64 of whom responded in German, and one in English).

The age range of participants varies from 16 to 84 years. The participants are mainly from Germany (59 persons), five of whom have an immigrant background: two come from Poland, one from the Netherlands, one from Italy, and one from Georgia. They all currently live in Germany, except for one person who comes from Germany but lives in South Africa (Fig. 1).

As far as educational background is concerned, 59 participants graduated from school with high school certificates, and five with intermediate school leaving certificates. Nine had bachelor degrees, 13 master’s degrees, 21 diploma degrees, five doctoral degrees and one habilitation (postdoctoral), while three people were not yet in education or training, and one was still attending university.

Twelve participants worked as trainers or educators, six as managing directors, five as social educators, three were employed as administrative staff, and three

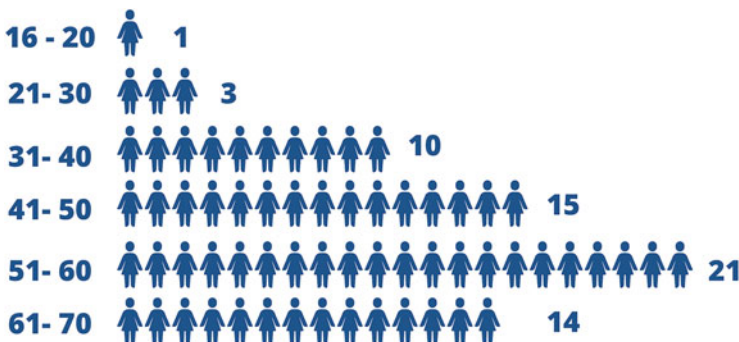


Fig. 1 Age range of participants



described themselves as pensioners. Two were tax consultants by profession, three were in consulting, one each was a doctor, nurse, professor, clinical linguist, theologian, accountant, orthopaedic technician, business economist, coordinator, lawyer, saleswoman, and headmaster. One respondent was a mother by profession, one a volunteer, and one a student. Seventeen participants were employed full-time, 26 part-time, 11 were retired, four were self-employed, two were students, one respondent was unemployed and two people did not indicate their employment status. A corresponding tabular overview with the biographical data of the participants can be found in Table 1 of the appendix.

### 3.3 *Limitations*

This study has some limitations. The questionnaire was available in German and English, but was only completed by people living in Germany or coming from Germany. This limits the study's transferability to other cultural or national contexts. However, this study could be used as a basis for further research in other cultural or global contexts. With 64 questionnaire responses received, only a relatively narrow database is currently available, so that generalisability or representativeness is not assured.

According to Mayring (2010, 23; 2016), however, this survey could serve as a pilot study for further research. Szolnoki and Hoffmann (2013) also point out that in online surveys, similar to telephone surveys, people with higher formal education tend to be overrepresented. Since participants were obtained in particular via snowball sampling, the study cannot claim to be representative. Bouncken (n.d.) points out that the use of snowball methods can easily lead to an overrepresentation of particular groups.

## 4 Findings

Love for learning is the most important passion . . .  
 therein lies our happiness. It is a sure remedy against what  
 what torments us, an infinite source of joy.  
 Émilie du Châtelet

In her framework for women's empowerment, Kabeer (1999) identifies three dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. The data of this study were analysed according to these three categories.

## 4.1 Resources

The findings suggest that formal education is a critical resource for women’s empowerment and is perceived and shaped by them as such.

The participants consider education to be important for very different reasons. For seven participants, education is something that gives meaning to their lives (P1, P7, P33, P37, P42, P55, P62), and for five participants, it is even an expression of happiness (P1, P7, P31, P44, P55). As two participants (P1, P42) explained, education gives them access to internal and external resources. Three people see it as a prerequisite for being able to contribute to better living conditions and a better world (P1, P32, P49). For 14 participants, it represents access to material security (P1, P8, P10, P22, P23, P27, P35, P36, P37, P45, P47, P51, P56), and 16 individuals associate education with freedom and independence (P2, P8, P16, P19, P23, P25, P35, P36, P37, P46, P52, P53, P57, P58, P59, P63).

For most of the respondents, education is the prerequisite for either professional development (26 respondents: P2, P3, P4, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P21, P23, P25, P28, P34, P36, P37, P41, P42, P45, P46, P47, P56, P58, P60, P62, P64) and/or personal development (29 respondents: P1, P5, P8, P14, P15, P17, P21, P28, P30, P37, P38, P39, P41, P47, P49, P50, P58, P60, P62, P64). Fourteen individuals associate education with enjoyment of knowledge and cognition and see it as a prerequisite for understanding the world (P6, P12, P15, P24, P37, P39, P41, P42, P43, P44, P46, P48, P50, P64).

The participants experience education as an important prerequisite for self-determination and autonomy (18 participants: P8, P11, P16, P17, P19, P26, P31, P35, P36, P37, P40, P43, P46, P47, P53, P57, P58, P59) or self-awareness and self-efficacy (19 participants: P8, P11, P17, P18, P19, P20, P26, P31, P35, P36, P37, P40, P43, P45, P46, P57, P58, P59, P64). Fifteen individuals consider education to be significant in gaining access to the world and participation (15 participants: P9, P12, P15, P18, P24, P29, P35, P37, P39, P41, P42, P48, P50, P54, P61). Figure 2 summarises these results.

Whether and in what form formal education becomes an empowerment resource for women is influenced by a wide variety of framework conditions. Participants were asked whether these were experienced as hindering or supporting factors. For the evaluation of the question about the conducive and obstructive framework conditions for one’s own educational history, three categories each were developed and the answers were assigned accordingly.

### 4.1.1 Use of Conducive Factors as Resources

Table 2 in the appendix provides a complete overview of the factors that the women perceived as conducive. The answers of the interviewed women were assigned to three different categories: personal, structural, and economic factors (total number of mentions of conducive factors: 138).

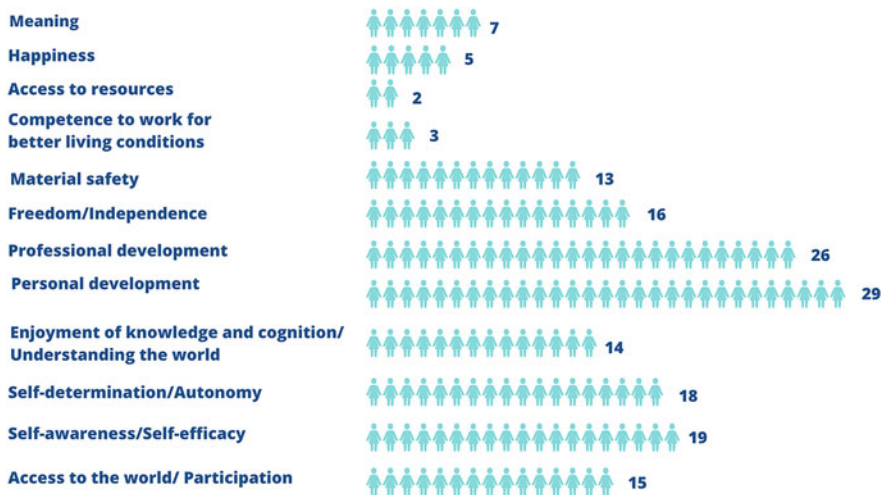


Fig. 2 Relevance of educational offers for the participants

*Personal* factors are aspects that vary at the level of the individual, such as specific family contexts, personal performance and orientation. For the respondents, most resources were located here (78 mentions). In particular, they considered family support to be important (18 mentions), in addition to extra-familial promoters such as teachers, supervisors, professors, friends (15 mentions).

Personal attitudes, preferences and strengths were frequently identified as relevant personal resources, such as the enjoyment of and the will to learn (nine mentions), curiosity (three mentions), and intelligence (two mentions). Courage, good health, emotional balance, and the competence to cope with failure, were each mentioned once). Needs and desires were also frequently named as a resource for empowerment through formal education, such as the desire for knowledge (two mentions), the desire to overcome poverty, the desire for self-determination, or the wish for independence, which were each mentioned once.

At the same time, particular personal resources were identified that relate to broader, systemic aspects. Cultural diversity experiences (five mentions: P4, P8, P21, P43, P64) and living in an open-minded climate (four mentions) were named, as well as the factor of being an only child (one mention), time (five mentions), the right of free choice (four mentions) and accessibility (mentioned three times), the latter relating to location in urban or rural areas, owning a car, and knowledge of how to reach educational services. On the one hand, support and encouragement by other people is considered particularly relevant, but on the other hand, these women have succeeded in recognising, expanding or transforming intrapersonal resources.

*Structural* factors were the next most frequently mentioned positive resources. These are the result of social structures, various phenomena, and mechanisms that cannot be directly changed by the individual. Examples of these are access to free or

low-cost educational institutions and/or educational opportunities. Structural factors were mentioned 33 times by participants.

*Economic* factors in this context include access to financial resources through family support or government institutions or the like, in the form of student loans and scholarships (27 mentions). Respondents most frequently mentioned financial family support from parents or partners (16 mentions). Access to free schooling/low tuition fees was mentioned seven times and government student loans six times. Four times each, respondents highlighted the relevance of the following factors: international/intercultural experiences, involvement in youth organisation and extra-curricular educational activities, and the possibility of a second educational path as a chance to correct school and career decisions. Five factors were formulated three times each as conducive framework conditions. These were professional development opportunities, access to a wide range of university courses, distance learning opportunities, the possibility of combining learning with family or job, and access to a wide range of university courses. Accessibility of the educational institutions was mentioned twice, as was access to scholarships and state-subsidised training or retraining. The following aspects were mentioned once each: reduced admission requirements to the study programmes, other state support (e.g. orphan's pension or support services) and the accessibility of educational services.

The results suggest that women's educational stories can succeed, especially when access to education and study is financially supported by the state or social environment, or it is free or low cost. It also seems to be crucial that access to educational institutions is ensured, for example through online offers or lifelong access, even if women living in rural areas are already burdened by family or professional restrictions.

The openness of the system also seems to be important through a wide range of disciplines, flexible learning times, permeability with regard to existing formal educational connections, and openness to all age groups.

Overall, therefore, the women in this study considered personal factors to be particularly beneficial, while structural factors were named as beneficial in second place, and economic factors in third place.

#### **4.1.2 Overcoming and Transforming Hindering Factors as Resources**

Here, too, the women's evaluations differentiated between personal, economic and structural factors (total number of mentions of limiting factors: 113). Table 3 in the appendix presents a complete overview of the factors which the women perceived as limiting.

On the level of *personal factors*, the women named lack of support 22 times, with individual health restrictions (three mentions) and limited time resources (five mentions). With regard to *economic factors*, limited financial resources were mentioned 16 times as a serious constraint. However, *structural conditions* proved to be particularly obstructive. Examples of these included gender-specific role assignments (10 mentions), or coming from a working class family or a family with little

appreciation for education (nine mentions). Having a lack of structural options to combine care work and education/study was cited nine times, and the lack of knowledge about potential training or study opportunities was mentioned as a limiting factor six times. Four women mentioned a lack of employer support, while two spoke of the reproach of being overqualified, and one mentioned political biases.

## ***4.2 Empowerment Through Agency***

Kabeer (1999, 438) introduces agency as another significant empowerment category besides resources:

Agency is the ability to identify goals or make choices and then act upon them. Women can exercise agency in many different ways: as individuals and collectively within the family, and through their participation in markets, politics, and other formal and informal networks. Agency can take a number of forms; for example, bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis.

In her empowerment approach, Kabeer assigns an essential role to the option of being able to make a choice regarding one's own life and well-being, and to analysing oppressive elements and identifying points for empowerment by establishing the ability to act (Kabeer, 1999, 2008a, 2008b). In this sense, empowerment is to be seen on the one hand as changes in consciousness and at the same time as an expansion of the capacity to act. In order to tap into these dimensions, this study invited respondents to provide narratives regarding their educational histories. Respondents highlighted how formal educational events expanded their ability to act in a variety of ways. For example, P39 explains how education enabled her to "freely choose and take advantage of all the opportunities that mattered to me".

P25 also emphasises the fundamental importance of formal education,

which changes my view of the world and also influences the perception of my surroundings. Education makes it possible for me to orientate myself to my goals and hold onto my dreams.

Participant P8 states:

Education has made everything in my life possible and is an enormously important part of my life treasures.

Furthermore, P46 points out that in her case, education "laid the foundation for freedom and free choices."

### **4.2.1 Supporting Empowerment Through Narratives**

In the in-depth video interviews, respondents were explicitly invited to integrate metaphors into their educational narratives. Metaphors can support narratives

because they “cognitively pre-structure an area of knowledge for perception and information processing” (Niehr & Böke, 2004, 365) and accordingly enable a reality constitution in addition to a different perception of what is experienced (Johnson & Lakoff, 2003, 3).

For this purpose, respondents were asked to imagine their educational history as a book and to formulate a title or subtitle for their book. All of the respondents succeeded in creating an appropriate book title and therefore a summary of their educational history. Some of the interviewees found it important to concretize or expand on this title with a subtitle, or to name possible chapters of this book more precisely (see Table 4 in the appendix). Without exception, all of the women composed a book title that was explicitly positive.

Some participants aggressively integrated experiences of failure or obstacles and limitations into their narratives, in the sense that they had overcome them or used them as opportunities for transformation, either of themselves or of external circumstances. For example, P27 (39 years, German, unemployed) titled her book “The great failure. And the attempt to make the best of it.” P37 (31 years, German, trainer) came up with the title “Working-class child makes untraditional climb up education ladder.” These and other responses show that the women perceive themselves as active stewards of their educational and life histories. In Kabeer’s (2021) terms, they establish agency. Through this conceptualization of agency, empowerment emerges as the result of confronting structural constraints. This is also reflected in the book title of P57 (47 years, migrated from Poland to Germany; student): “Go your own way. It is never too late. How I found myself again, or how I really found myself.” She explains that she started studying in 2014, not least because she separated from her husband during that time.

The women succeeded in giving meaning to their experiences and decisions through the formulation of the book titles and in perceiving and describing themselves as shapers in this context. The titles make it clear that the interviewees are very much aware of the hurdles and moments of failure, but they also explicitly emphasise the positive and transformative elements and take into account the need for diverse strategies in actively shaping the circumstances of their lives, consequently creating the ability to act.

This is also reflected in the answers to an in-depth question aimed at finding out which of their individual characteristics, skills or competencies had brought them successfully to the current goal point in their educational history, which will be explained in the next section.

### ***4.3 Relevant Capabilities and Strategic Choices of Women that Enable Empowerment Through Education***

Kabeer (2021, 1) assumes that capabilities

reflect the interaction between the resources at [people's] disposal and their ability to translate these resources into valued goals. Capabilities are a way of talking about the capacity for purposive agency that goes beyond a focus on the actual choices people make to an assessment of the range of alternatives available to them.

The question of which capabilities enabled the participants to successfully shape and develop their own lives and their contexts through education was raised in the in-depth interviews. The survey shows that all 24 women succeeded in developing capabilities that enabled them to make choices through education, to identify existing resources and develop new ones, to acquire the ability to act, to establish self-efficacy, to establish economic security, and to acquire freedom.

Various dimensions become apparent here as explained below.

Many women shape their educational history by developing personal skills such as cultivating curiosity (P4, P20, P39, P43, P57) or taking initiative (P4, P9). Others influence it positively through diligence, willingness to learn, and discipline (P5, P7, P9, P39, P42, P50, P55). Some women attribute their educational success to their perseverance, tenacity, and developing persistence (P7, P18, P27, P37, P50, P59, P62).

Openness (P7, P9, P36) is mentioned as relevant by three Participants. P37 comments that always confronting new things can also be an elixir of life. P39 attributes her educational successes to the fact that she doesn't look back, but always looks forward and asks herself what else is there, and what else is possible. Some participants stress the importance of structured work, self-organisation, and focus (P9, P18, P36, P50), while others emphasise the particular importance of developing courage (P10, P19, P20, P37, P43, P45), combativeness and assertiveness (P10, P64), or willingness to take risks (P19, P64) and to leave home and set out alone (P43). P64 broadens the perspective and includes the dimension of struggle as a required element: "Perseverance is important, to get up again and again. And yes, to take up the fight with the world and all who stand in the way like that."

Some respondents further optimised their ability to build on existing resources, such as personal creative potential (P9) or their own resourcefulness (P10, P64). They also developed new competencies such as intuition, empathy, identifying boundaries (P9, P58), self-reliance (P43), reliability (P9), confidence in their own abilities (P37) or developed a stronger sense of self (P20). One participant (P4) points out the relevance of using and further developing existing psychological resources, such as the ability to "set goals and achieve them through one's own efforts". For another participant, humour (P50) is her most valued quality, and for another, her particularly high energy levels (P64).

Some women note that having succeeded in transforming emotions with negative connotations, such as shame (P18) and anger (P63), has had a positive effect on their educational history. P63 elaborates how "people have met me in a benevolent and appreciative way despite my heaviness or anger. It was always with individual people that I felt well taken care of."

For other participants, it has proven crucial to deal constructively with experiences of failure and to keep looking for opportunities for a new beginning. P4, for example, finds that it is important to "always set out again and learn something new".

P19 was another to confirm the necessity of “getting up again and again after a failure—in this case to find a permanent job again after being unemployed twice”.

Similarly, P64 argues that “perseverance is important, to get up again and again. And yes, to take up the fight with the world and all who stand in the way like that.” P27, on the other hand, points out that change can be extremely painful.

P36 highlights the special dimension of self-reflection in this context: “Winners get up where losers stay down. When you fall down, it’s important to take a moment to think about why that happened, not jump right up and move on. Reflect first. Taking that as an occasion to pause for thought, to reflect and then move on or do something else.”

P42 argues in a similar way that “it’s important to deal with failure. Just not giving up, no matter what the hurdle, bravely keep going. That fits with the recognition that learning can also be exhausting and painful.”

Some respondents see a close connection between self-confidence and dealing constructively with experiences of failure. For example, P37 stresses the importance of “having confidence in one’s own abilities, knowing that one will always land on one’s feet again; even a wrong decision is not the end, but a motivator to go new ways”.

P62 underlines the necessity of “not giving up, believing in your dreams and believing in yourself and always finding a way to make things happen.”

Some women emphasise the decision to establish agency over their own lives by defining what they want and pursuing that goal with focus. For example, P4 confirms how important it is to really want something. P10 affirms the importance of having a “strong will, iron will” in order to “advance professionally, to have a career, and to pursue that consistently.” P43 expresses herself similarly when she refers to her stubbornness and strong will, describing herself as “selfish”.

In addition to “strong will, my willpower”, P50 considers it important “to be able to persevere and to have staying power”. P55 experiences the value of having a “strong will” and states that “if the will is missing, then the motivation is missing, but then it is often the wrong thing”. P63 emphasises her tenacity and perseverance when she expresses her “grudge mentality: I bite down and don’t let go”. Similarly, P64 states that “[I take on] the fight with the world and everyone who gets in the way like that”.

The need for self-knowledge, self-realisation, and meaning in life motivated the educational stories of the women in several cases. For example, P5 speaks of the “search for myself”, while P36 states: “Often I get the feedback I’m doing so much and again something completely different. But I have to have a reason to get up in the morning. This is also related to my value orientation.” P64, on the other hand, is interested in “moving calmly and at the same time dynamically from one educational field to another and trying to connect the individual educational fields [in which she is qualified and committed] with each other or at least to gain insights in order to then create synergies”.



## 5 Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to show that women succeed in creating empowerment through decision-making. The women who were interviewed made use of their opportunities to identify and engage in promising, effective, and wise options to make strategically far-reaching decisions for their own lives and those of their families. Through their decisions, they expanded their scope of action and ensured the security of their existence and that of their families. In this way, they created freedom of decision and action, as well as independence, while securing their material, physical, and psychological well-being. In doing so, they took advantage of opportunities that arose, overcame resistance, negotiated and expanded room to manoeuvre, continuously used spaces for reflection, and usually worked on personal development and growth throughout their lives.

Kabeer (1994, 229) considers as very critical. The interviewees in this study used the three dimensions of power in Kabeer's sense. For example, through educational activities, they used their *power to* when compensating for and correcting structural disadvantages such as difficult access to educational institutions due to gender, social background, or living in a rural structurally weaker region. They made use of their *power to* by developing new skills and so ensuring the realisation of their goals.

Furthermore, the women who were interviewed used their *power over* their experiences and emotions in order to develop positive, strengthening resources and to eliminate or transform weakening factors. They develop strategies to learn from mistakes, endure mistakes and failures, and into positive experiences.

Finally, these women used their *power within*, for example in the family context, to ensure that their children had the best possible educational opportunities, and took advantage of them accordingly. In organisations, they used their *power within* to make contributions to gender equality, not only for themselves but also for other women, for example by pushing for improved childcare structures during working hours or for more flexible working hours at the workplace, or for inclusive educational opportunities for people with disabilities.

Through their narratives, the study participants actively and constructively engaged with “myths, with worldviews, motives, action orientations, and cultural values by configuring events, objects, actors, actions through narrative structures” (Viehöver, 2006, 184). In this way, they succeeded in generating larger “knowledge- and meaning-structuring interpretive schemes” (Lakoff & Wehling, 2009, 73). With the help of their educational narratives, they tapped into “explanatory models of thought” (Jäkel 2003, 32), which enabled them to access a wide variety of abstract or complex facts and made certain events and experiences accessible for cognition and communication in the first place (Johnson & Lakoff, 2003, 3, 57; Jäkel 2003, 32; Kretschmar, 2016). In their narratives, these women took advantage of the special opportunity to provide a coherent account of incidents, coincidences, and unforeseen events (Schulze, 2006,) in contexts of action, and to use the opportunity to subjectively (re)construct what they experienced (Lechner, 2014, 39), which goes beyond mere representation.

## 6 Conclusion

The study presented here was able to show that the interviewed women do not accept their living conditions as unchangeable. Rather, they see themselves as actively shaping their own lives and their specific circumstances. As their narratives show, formal education plays a central role in this perception. The study demonstrates how the interviewed participants succeed in recognising what is true and meaningful to them and in discovering connections (McAdams, 1993, 7). In this way, they succeed in understanding and classifying what has happened, is happening, and will possibly happen in the future. At the same time, these narratives reflect an orientation towards meaning, credibility, and coherence (McAdams, 1993, 26). Accordingly, the narratives make a significant contribution to reconciliation, self-healing, and empowerment.

Through these narratives, women succeed in giving a framework to what they have experienced and in making the actually inexplicable (absurd) understandable. As observed by Smorti (2018):

Narrating is an extraordinary human property precisely because its variability and flexibility are extraordinary . . . the narrative can give meaning, if it wants, to any type of absurdity . . . This is because narrative is able to construct a frame that makes all of these “absurdities” plausible within a certain type of world (Smorti, 2018, 2–3).

Moreover, the narratives enable women to define their individual position in the field of tension between their own autonomy, social contexts (Kraus, 2021, 13), and structural framework conditions by constructing so-called “nested” narratives, which make their own narratives classifiable in a larger historical or social context.

Consequently, the results reflect Stark’s findings regarding the explicit connection between empowerment and the related meaning of narratives, according to which the empowerment process can be seen quite explicitly as “stories of people and associations who have succeeded in recognizing their own resources and strengths and translating them into social action” (Stark, 1996, 107).

## 7 Need for Future Research

Against the background of the results presented here, there is a need for further research. Certainly, the expansion of the object of research to other cultural contexts suggests itself. A worthwhile research topic could also be women’s generational differences and commonalities.

Some interviewees highlighted in their educational histories that it was crucial to have distance learning or digital offerings available to them, because this made it possible to combine studying with family and/or work. In this respect, a research topic for future studies could be the positive effects on women’s educational histories of virtual distance learning opportunities, which have been greatly expanded through digitization and during the course of the pandemic.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank all the participants of the survey for their willingness to support this project and for their openness! Hopefully their narratives encourage and strengthen the efforts to initiate and support women's empowerment through education activities.

## Appendix

**Table 1** Overview of the biographical details of participants

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Highest school degree	Highest level of education or degree	Profession	Professional status
P1	60	Netherlands	High school certificate	Diploma	Managing Director	Full-time employed
P2	54	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Managing Director	Full-time employed
P3	64	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Headmaster	Full-time employed
P4	58	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Head of an educational institution	Part-time employed
P5	62	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Human Resources Developer	Retired
P6	44	Poland (living in Germany meanwhile)	High school certificate	PhD	Business Mediator	Part-time employed
P7	61	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Educator	Full-time employed
P8	51	Germany	High school certificate	PhD	Physician	Self-employed
P9	67	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Social education worker	Retired
P10	70	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	Bachelor	Administrative employee	Retired
P11	70	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	Vocational training	Saleswoman	Retired
P12	58	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Social education worker	Retired
P13	58	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Trainer	Part-time employed
P14	53	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Managing Director	Full-time employed

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Highest school degree	Highest level of education or degree	Profession	Professional status
P15	55	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Managing Director	Part-time employed
P16	36	Italy (living in Germany meanwhile)	High school certificate	PhD	Research Assistant	Full-time employed
P17	50	Germany	High school certificate	Master’s degree	Integration Officer	Part-time employed
P18	64	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Social education worker	Part-time employed
P19	65	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	Vocational training	Pensioner	Retired
P20	46	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Theologian	Part-time employed
P21	58	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Lawyer	Self-employed
P22	57	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Teacher	Full-time employed
P23	40	Germany	High school certificate	PhD	Tax consultant	Part-time employed
P24	70	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Teacher	Retired
P25	21	Germany	High school certificate	None	Volunteer	Self-employed
P26	58	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Trainer	Full-time employed
P27	39	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Other	Unemployed
P28	52	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Trainer	Part-time employed
P29	58	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	Diploma	Trainer	Full-time employed
P30	46	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Organisational developer	Part-time employed
P31	62	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Designer	Full-time employed
P32	16	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	None	Other	Student
P33	70	Germany	Intermediate school leaving certificate	Vocational training	Pensioner	Retired

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Highest school degree	Highest level of education or degree	Profession	Professional status
P34	59	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Administrative employee	Full-time employed
P35	56	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Pensioner	Retired
P36	46	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Trainer	Part-time employed
P37	31	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Managing Director	Full-time employed
P38	60	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Managing Director	Full-time employed
P39	37	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Trainer	Part-time employed
P40	61	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Tax consultant	Full-time employed
P41	44	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Trainer	Part-time employed
P42	59	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Accountant	Part-time employed
P43	34	Georgia (living in Germany meanwhile)	High school certificate	Master's degree	Trainer	Part-time employed
P44	61	Germany	High school certificate	PhD	Trainer	Full-time employed
P45	45	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Mother	Student
P46	56	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Clinical linguist	Part-time employed
P47	40	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Student/educator	Student
P48	38	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Key Account Manager	Part-time employed
P49	38	Germany	High school certificate	Student	Social education worker	Part-time employed
P50	46	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Social education worker	Retired
P51	50	Germany	High school certificate	Bachelor	Business economist	Part-time employed
P52	39	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Administrative employee	Other
P53	47	Germany	High school certificate	Master's degree	Trainer	Part-time employed
P54	49	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Educator	Part-time employed

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Highest school degree	Highest level of education or degree	Profession	Professional status
P55	27	Germany	High school certificate	None	Student/administrative employee	Other
P56	26	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Orthopaedic technician	Full-time employed
P57	47	Poland (living in Germany meanwhile)	High school certificate	Vocational training	Student/nurse	Part-time employed
P58	52	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Trainer	Part-time employed
P59	59	Germany	High school certificate	Vocational training	Other	Self-employed
P60	50	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Research assistant	Part-time employed
P61	61	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Consultant	Retired
P62	55	Germany	High school certificate	Diploma	Coordinator	Part-time employed
P63	70	Germany	High school certificate	Master’s degree	Trainer	Part-time employed
P64	46	Germany (living in South Africa meanwhile)	High school certificate	Habilitation	Professor	Full-time employed

**Table 2** Categories describing the framework conditions conducive to own educational history

Category 1	Personal factors	Factors that vary at the level of the individual, such as specific family contexts, personal performance and orientation, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiar promoters (18 mentions: P4, P12, P15, P16, P23, P28, P30, P32, P34, P37, P40, P41, P44, P48, P53, P54, P58, P64)</li> <li>• Extra-familial promoters (teachers, supervisors, professors, friends) (15 mentions: P2, P3, P6, P16, P18, P20, P22, P26, P32, P40, P44, P46, P53, P54, P64)</li> <li>• Fun and the will to learn (9 mentions: P10, P14, P19, P25, P58, P59, P61, P62, P64)</li> <li>• Cultural diversity experiences (5 mentions: P4, P8, P21, P43, P64)</li> </ul>	78 mentions
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(continued)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time (5 mentions: P24, P45, P52, P55, P56)</li> <li>• Right of free choice (4 mentions: P11, P23, P34, P5)</li> <li>• Accessibility (e.g. urban area; the rural area, owning a car, knowledge to reach the services (3 mentions: P24, P39, P56)</li> <li>• Curiosity (3 mentions: P6, P11, P19)</li> <li>• Open-minded climate (4 mentions: P4, P30, P32, P43)</li> <li>• Desire for knowledge (2 mentions: P1, P11)</li> <li>• Intelligence (2 mentions: P45, P64)</li> <li>• Courage (1 mention: P45)</li> <li>• Need to overcome poverty (1 mention: P1)</li> <li>• Need for self-determination (1 mention: P11)</li> <li>• Independence (1 mention: P18)</li> <li>• Good health (1 mention: P42)</li> <li>• Emotional balance (1 mention: P55)</li> <li>• Being an only child (1 mention: P7)</li> <li>• Competence to cope with failure (1 mention: P14)</li> </ul>	
Category 2	Economic factors	Factors such as access to financial resources through family support or government institutions or the like in the form of student loans, scholarships, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial family support from parents or partners (16 mentions: P13, P15, P24, P26, P27, P29, P33, P34, P36, P38, P39, P41, P42, P45, P56, P57)</li> <li>• Government student loan (6 mentions: P1, P9, P17, P31, P46, P47)</li> <li>• Access to scholarship (2 mentions: P47, P64)</li> <li>• State-subsidised training or retraining (2 mentions: P9, P47)</li> <li>• Other state support, e.g. orphan's pension (1 mentions: P47)</li> </ul>	27 mentions

(continued)

<p>Category 3</p>	<p>Structural factors</p>	<p>Factors, in the nature of social structures/phenomena/mechanisms that cannot be directly changed by the individual, such as access to free or low-cost educational institutions and/or educational opportunities, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to free schooling/ low tuition fees (7 mentions: P5, P9, P48, P25, P35, P36, P60)</li> <li>• International/ intercultural experiences (4 mentions: P4, P6, P8, P43)</li> <li>• Engagement in youth organisation and extracurricular educational activities (4 mentions: P1, P13, P37, P42)</li> <li>• Possibility of a second educational path/chance to correct school and career decisions (4 mentions: P1, P42, P49, P62)</li> <li>• Professional development opportunities (3 mentions: P5, P20, P28)</li> <li>• Access to a wide range of university courses (3 mentions: P20, P28, P36)</li> <li>• Distance learning access (3 mentions: P5, P47, P49)</li> <li>• Possibility to combine learning and family or job (3 mentions: P8, P41, P50)</li> <li>• Access to a wide range of university courses (3 mentions: P20, P28, P36)</li> <li>• Accessibility of the educational institutions (2 mentions: P9, P33)</li> <li>• Reduced admission requirements to the study programme (1 mention: P31)</li> <li>• Support services (1 mention: P32)</li> <li>• Accessibility of educational services (1 mention: P51)</li> </ul>	<p>33 mentions</p>
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Total number of mentions of conducive factors: 138



**Table 3** Categories describing the framework conditions obstructing own educational history

Category 1	Personal factors	Factors that vary at the level of the individual, such as specific family contexts, personal performance, health status, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too limited support (21 mentions: P2, P3, P5, P9, P11, P14, P18, P19, P28, P29, P35, P36, P41, P50, P55, P58, P59, P61, P62, P63, P64)</li> <li>• Health limitations (3 mentions: P44, P47, P50, P58)</li> <li>• Lack of time resources (5 mentions: P21, P38, P53, P55, P57)</li> </ul>	29 mentions
Category 2	Economic factors	Factors such as limited access to financial resources through family support or government institutions or the like in the form of student loans, scholarships, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited financial resources (16 mentions: P1, P3, P5, P11, P13, P17, P22, P33, P41, P43, P45, P47, P56, P57, P63, P64)</li> </ul>	16 mentions
Category 3	Structural factors	Factors in the form of social structures/phenomena/mechanisms that cannot be directly changed by the individual, such as inequalities in educational opportunities based on social and ethnic origin, gender and region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coming from a working class family or family that had little appreciation for education (9 mentions: P1, P6, P7, P20, P41, P50, P58, P6, P63)</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about potential training or study opportunities (6 mentions: P2, P5, P14, P15, P29, P56).</li> <li>• Gender-specific role assignments (10 responses: P5, P6, P10, P12, P27, P35, P40, P41, P49, P59)</li> <li>• Reproach of being over-qualified (2 mentions: P9, P35)</li> <li>• Problems due to lack of structural options to combine care work and education/study (9 mentions: P8, P10, P18, P21, P27, P47, P49, P57, P61)</li> <li>• Lack of employer support (4 responses: P9, P10, P35, P38)</li> <li>• Political biases (1 citation: P10)</li> <li>• Difficulty in accessing educational offers/institutions (6 mentions: P15, P33, P39, P47, P49, P57)</li> </ul>	63 mentions

(continued)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration (2 mentions: P16, P43)</li> <li>• Inadequate equipment of the educational institution or “black pedagogy” (11 mentions: P16, P25, P27, P30, P34, P37, P40, P42, P48, P53, P58) pressure of competition (2 mentions: P31, P61)</li> <li>• Thinking without the box without support (5 mentions: P34, P40, P42, P58, P64)</li> </ul>	
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Total number of mentions of limiting factors: 112

**Table 4** Titles of the books of participants’ educational stories

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Profession	Title of the book of my educational story	Additional explanations on the part of the participants <sup>a</sup>
P4	58	Germany	Head of an educational institution	In the end, everything falls into place. Nothing was in vain.	I have learnt many different, completely unrelated things, but there always came a point in my life when I needed all of them; sometimes I needed the whole abundance. Not 1 h in which I learned something was in vain.
P5	62	Germany	Human Resources Developer	Doing what you burn for—the joy of lifelong learning	/
P7	61	Germany	Educator	Life is so interesting and can be so different. Life is beautiful. Life is so fragile.	Today, you can learn almost anything and you can do it for life.
P9	67	Germany	Social education worker	From the small town into the wide world.	There are several chapters. Chapter 1: I am grateful to my parents Chapter 2: I am glad I studied in the seventies Chapter 3:

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Profession	Title of the book of my educational story	Additional explanations on the part of the participants <sup>a</sup>
					Working with my hands and learning how things work in a factory Chapter 4: Everything flows together
P10	70	Germany	Administrative employee	Target achieved.	/
P15	55	Germany	Managing Director	Still curious. How I learned to walk and stumble.	/
P18	64	Germany	Social education worker	Growing up/finding a career with obstacles.	Make sure you take the direct route to your university entrance qualification.
P19	65	Germany	Pensioner	From zero to one hundred	But I haven't reached a hundred. I'm only halfway there. But my maxim was: the job I do has to be fun, and I was able to do that until I retired.
P20	46	Germany	Theologian	My path into the great expanse.	My way into the great expanse.
P27	39	Germany	Unemployed	The great failure. And the attempt to make the best of it.	
P37	31	Germany	Trainer	Working-class child makes untraditional climb up education ladder.	My advancement was unconventional because advancement in education is traditionally associated with an increase in prestige and a financial career, and I decided against that after my first job. Nevertheless, for me it is the exit, because I have decided on the basis of my

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Profession	Title of the book of my educational story	Additional explanations on the part of the participants <sup>a</sup>
					values and educational needs, and therefore it is indeed an advancement for me.
P39	37	Germany	Tax consultant	Taking two steps with every step	/
P42	59	Germany	Accountant	On the way into the world. Don't let up, stay curious. Allow yourself to be gifted.	/
P43	34	Georgia (living in Germany meanwhile)	Trainer	Me on my own into the wide world. My way to Germany.	/
P45	45	Germany	Mother	My history of education: challenge accepted and mastered.	It is about overcoming hurdles.
P47	40	Germany	Student/educator	Just do it. The day may contain traces of having to.	I noticed the following, especially about my disease: There is a saying that goes "if you find the pace too fast, take it half-way." For me, this means making sure that the work-life balance is not lost sight of. It is important not only to chase after what is defined as success in society or in the parental home, but to think about how you define success yourself and then simply to do something and also to endure failure.

(continued)

Participant	Age	Country of birth	Profession	Title of the book of my educational story	Additional explanations on the part of the participants <sup>a</sup>
P50	46	Germany	Social education worker	Better late than never.	/
P55	27	Germany	Student/administrative employee	My path. My path of education.	/
P57	47	Poland (living in Germany meanwhile)	Student/nurse	Go your own way. It is never too late. How I found myself again, or how I really found myself	I started studying in 2014 not least because I separated from my husband during that time, so I would choose as my title: How I found myself again, or how I really found myself.
P58	52	Germany	Trainer	My story	
P59	59	Germany	Other	New beginnings.	Those who stop starting, start stopping.
P62	55	Germany	Coordinator	Many paths lead to the goal. Never give up.	/
P63	70	Germany	Trainer	Never give up or there's always more to come.	/
P64	46	Germany (living in South Africa meanwhile)	Professor	Life. In the focus of holistic personality development	/

<sup>a</sup>In some cases, the respondents added explanations. Subtitles were actively requested by the interviewer, but in some cases the interviewees considered the title to be sufficient

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# Empowering Female Offenders: A Model and Framework for Practice



Gila Chen 

**Abstract** Research has shown that a large proportion of female offenders were victims of multiple abuse and neglect as children and adults. This history is assumed to be a major contributor to their mental health problems, substance use disorders, and crime. Having grown up in dysfunctional families, in which one or more members used substances and/or engaged in criminal activities or family violence, women offenders typically possess inadequate coping strategies, and this is often complicated by poor socialization skills and chaotic personal relationships. However, despite the rich evidence of the traumatic background of women offenders and their poor coping strategies, neither the community nor the correctional system provide them with adequate, comprehensive treatment to address their needs. As a result, they often return to the same environment they came from without the coping skills necessary to succeed, and this results in a high rate of recidivism. The aim of this narrative review was to outline a practical framework for implementing an empowerment model for women offenders guided by a positive psychology approach. The cornerstones of the comprehensive empowerment practice model presented here are aimed at developing gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of female offenders. Addressing these needs while the women are still in prison and after their release can promote sense of wellbeing and facilitate successful reintegration into society.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment female offenders · Trauma · Positive psychology · Rehabilitation

## 1 Introduction

Female offenders are more likely to be undereducated, have limited resources, have severe mental health problems, substance use disorders (SUDs), and trauma histories (Chen & Gueta, 2016a; Fujiwara et al., 2010). Having grown up in dysfunctional

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families, in which one or more members use substances, engage in criminal activities, or are involved in family violence, female offenders typically have poor coping strategies, often complicated by poor socialization skills and chaotic personal relationships (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Chen & Gueta, 2016b). The dysfunctional families in which most of them grew up ensured that they began to feel powerless at an early age, and this is exacerbated by their histories of trauma and mental health disorders (Covington, 2003; Wolff, 2008). However, despite the rich evidence regarding the traumatic background and poor coping strategies of female offenders, they often do not receive treatment, neither in the community nor in the correctional system, that adequately addresses their comprehensive needs. As a result, upon release, they return to the same environment without the coping skills needed, leading to a high rate of recidivism (Kubiak, 2004).

Given this absence of personal resources and treatment, the purpose of the present narrative review was to (a) outline a practical framework for implementing an empowerment model for female offenders guided by a positive psychology approach, and (b) present a conceptual model of gender-responsive interventions for female offenders.

The article is divided into three sections. The first surveys the literature on characteristics of female offenders, including child abuse and neglect, SUDs, and mental health disorders. The second presents the conceptual model of empowerment of female offenders, and the final section presents the clinical implications and conclusions regarding the importance of gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of female offenders.

## 2 Characteristics of Female Offenders

According to research, from 1990 to 2010, the female inmate population increased by 14%, with 198,600 women incarcerated in US prisons or jails, in addition to over one million being supervised by the correctional system in the community (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2010). The population of female inmates in Israel, for example, increased by 34% from 1995 to 2006 (Israel Prison Authority [IPS], 2006).

Researchers have presented evidence that incarcerated women frequently come from risky families in which one or more family members were also substance users and engaged in criminal activities (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Westermeyer & Boedicker, 2000), families that suffered mental health problems (Holsinger, 2000), which is a risk factor for parental maltreatment and CAN (Cuellar et al., 2007), and families that were prone to conflict, violence, and incest (Hanlon et al., 2005). Furthermore, there is a wealth of information that indicates that family history of mental health problems, substance use (SU), and crime are associated with multiple forms of child abuse and neglect (CAN) during childhood (Kim-Cohen et al., 2006). These findings provide empirical support for the risky family model (Repetti et al., 2010), according to which children from risky families (families with mental health problems or parental SU and crime) are vulnerable to a wide array of mental and

physical health disorders, experience disruptions in their functioning, especially in response to stress, and suffer a deficit of social competence (Chen & Gueta, 2015, 2016b).

Moreover, female offenders who grew up in abusive families that were prone to conflict, violence, and incest are more likely to have been involved in problematic behaviors, including SU and crime (Hanlon et al., 2005; Kim-Cohen et al., 2006). According to relational theory (Miller, 1976), relationships in general, and especially family relationships, are a very fundamental part of women's psychological development. Specifically, "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships. Eventually, for many women the threat of and/or disruption of connections is perceived not as just a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (p. 83). When that connection is damaged by trauma and abuse, a prevalent characteristic among female offenders, some women enter a downward spiral marked by SU and criminal deviance (Chen & Gueta, 2015). Furthermore, according to relational theory, women's dysfunctional relationships with significant others may lead to feelings of hopelessness and guilt, which, in turn, could result in SU (Miller, 1988). Correspondingly, in her theory of gender development, Gilligan (1982) argued that women rely more on parental input and closeness than men do and are therefore more prone to negative influence of the family environment and problematic family relationships.

Women involved in the justice system are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and have a history of victimization, and they tend to have severe mental health and physical health deficits (Lewis, 2006). Nearly two-thirds of incarcerated females are reported as undereducated, unskilled, and have major responsibilities to children less than 18 years of age (Morash & Schram, 2002).

## ***2.1 Child Abuse and Neglect***

There is extensive evidence that incarcerated women have experienced more extensive histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse during their lives than the general population of women (Chen & Gueta, 2016a, 2016b; Wolff & Shi, 2009). Previous research has indicated that up to 78% of incarcerated women reported being physically or sexually abused prior to their incarceration (McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008). In a study conducted with 40 substance-dependent incarcerated women, Peltan and Cellucci (2011) found that most of the women also reported some type of childhood abuse. In another study, 78% of the 105 female inmates studied reported childhood physical/emotional abuse, 59% reported sexual abuse, and 38% reported neglect (Chapman et al., 2005). Furthermore, Green et al. (2005) found childhood trauma and other interpersonal traumas in a sample of female inmates, with 62% reporting exposure to childhood trauma and 90% reporting an experience of at least one interpersonal trauma.

A history of trauma is a strong predictor of both criminal involvement and SU (Messina & Grella, 2006); high rates (80%) of sexual abuse have been reported by women who suffer SUDs (Finkelhor et al., 2008). Many women who experience trauma “self-medicate” in an effort to cope with these experiences (Chen, 2019; Grella et al., 2005). The pathways framework recognizes that unique life circumstances lead women to crime (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). Daly (1992, 1994) described five unique pathways of women who engage in crime: (a) street women (left home at an early age, substance-dependence, prostitution); (b) battered women (commit violent crimes); (c) harmed and harming women (a past of abuse and neglect); (d) drug-connected women (substance-related crimes); and (e) “other” (financial) crimes, which resemble male offending patterns more than gendered pathways (Reisig et al., 2006). According to the pathways perspective, women’s paths to criminal behavior can be understood only after acknowledging the prevalence of unique, gender-specific needs, including extensive traumatic and abusive histories, mental disorders, dysfunctional relationships, and SU, often as result of self-medicating behaviors used to numb various emotional pains (Foy et al., 2012).

Moreover, women are more influenced than men by family adversities such as parental psychopathology, maltreatment, and exposure to parental partner violence (Chen & Gueta, 2015; Foy et al., 2012). Chen (2020) examined gender differences in risk factors related to violent crime among 290 female and male inmates in Israel. No significant gender differences were found in the different types of CAN, except for sexual abuse and the total score of abuse. However, women who experienced sexual abuse were more vulnerable than men to different forms of psychopathology, such as PTSD. Furthermore, although male inmates also experienced childhood adversity, female inmates were affected by these same risk factors differently. This is consistent with Daly’s (1992) findings of the unique life circumstances and the distribution of experiences of abuse, SU, poverty, and dysfunctional families among women. The increasing evidence of significant gender differences in the influences of adverse childhood experiences on rehabilitative needs necessitates special attention to the development of gender-specific interventions and services for female offenders. Previous studies of female offenders showed that they have different psychological needs compared with male offenders (Chen, 2020; Sherman, 2001). According to Salisbury and Van Voorhis (2009), gender-specific risk factors of female offenders include: (a) abuse and traumatic experience, (b) substance using behaviors, (c) mental health problems, and (d) dysfunctional and abusive intimate relationships.

## ***2.2 Substance Use Disorders***

Several studies have indicated that incarcerated women used substances more than their male counterparts did (Chen & Gueta, 2016b; Fazel & Grann, 2006), and the number of women imprisoned for substance-involved crimes is increasing at a higher rate than that of men (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Researchers have shown that child maltreatment is a salient risk factor that begets a wide range of

psychological disorders, especially those related to SUDs (Wolff et al., 2012). Incest and rape are commonly cited as precipitating events for SU among women, and rates of sexual abuse reported by these women run as high as 75–80% (Finkelhor et al., 2008). According to the general strain theory (Broidy & Agnew, 1997) men and women react differently in general stress situations, such as CAN and exposure to interparental violence. Men become angry, resulting in criminal behavior; women become sad and depressed, resulting in self-destructive behavior, such as SU. Women use substances as a primary coping mechanism for dealing with trauma and negative emotions—a kind of “self-medication” and a maladaptive coping strategy of escaping from trauma caused by CAN (Chen, 2009; Haseltine, 2000). Moreover, substances only provide temporary relief and over time, the pathological effects of the SU worsen and become the primary problem. Abstinence exposes victims of sexual abuse to recurring traumatic memories. Inability to cope with these traumatic events could cause a relapse (Wilke, 2004). In this context, Covington (2002) argued that it is important in treatment to acknowledge that many women have grown up in environments in which drug dealing and addiction are ways of life. When addiction has been a core part of multiple aspects of a woman’s life, the treatment process requires a holistic, multidimensional approach (p. 55).

Gender-responsive scholars have argued that substance abusing behaviors of female offenders are directly related to their mental health impairments and their exposure to traumatic experiences (Bloom et al., 2003). Thus, previous studies have found a significant correlation of SUDs with mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, mood disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Morash & Schram, 2002). Salgado et al. (2007) reported that 89.6% of incarcerated females met criteria for both substance dependence and PTSD, with nearly 50% reporting lifetime polysubstance dependence.

### **2.3 *Mental Health Disorders***

A large proportion of female offenders have been victims of multiple abuse as children and adults, and this history of abuse is assumed to be a major contributor to their mental health problems, SUDs, and crimes (Girshick, 2003). The BJS (2006) reported that over 73% of female inmates had mental health concerns, and 75% of these women also met the criteria for SU or dependence. In Israel, for example, according to the IPS, women in prison have been identified as suffering from higher levels of psychiatric morbidity (23.9%) than their male counterparts (6.5%) (IPS, 2013). Several studies have provided evidence that individuals with a history of multiple forms of abuse in childhood are much more likely than their peers to suffer from severe psychiatric problems (Andrews et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2001), such as anxiety disorders (Kendler et al., 2000), PTSD (Wolff et al., 2011), suicidal ideation (O’Leary & Gould, 2009), and depression (Molnar et al., 2001). Tripodi and Pettus-Davis (2013) conducted a study of childhood victimization and its association with adult mental health problems and SUDs among 125 women

prisoners. Their findings indicated that female prisoners who had been both physically and sexually abused were likely to be hospitalized as adults for psychological or emotional problems, to attempt suicide, and to have SUDs. In another study, Wolff and Shi (2009) noted that rates of trauma among incarcerated women were highest among those with mental health problems. An estimated 74.3% of incarcerated women with mental health problems were found to have experienced a traumatic event prior to age 18, and 60.5% of these also reported a traumatic event after age 17 (Wolff et al., 2012).

Furthermore, many women in prison have suffered significant mental health problems, such as major depression, PTSD, borderline personality disorder (BPD), and SUDs prior to their incarceration (Chen & Gueta, 2016a). For example, PTSD is highly prevalent among female offenders, with rates as high as 90% (Messina & Grella, 2006), and comorbid PTSD and SUDs prevalence reaching near 90%, as well (Salgado et al., 2007). According to the DSM-IV TR, the lifetime prevalence rate for PTSD in the general population is 8% (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, lifetime rates of PTSD among incarcerated females are 33% with over 22% of females reporting a current PTSD diagnosis. Furthermore, women with PTSD are at greater risk for SUDs, leading to a poorer prognosis, exacerbating both disorders in the correctional system (Battle et al., 2003). PTSD has been found to be strongly associated with CAN (Rowan & Foy, 1993), and with SUDs (McClellan et al., 1997), and numerous studies have demonstrated that the prevalence of SU of incarcerated women is much higher among those who were victims of CAN (Brems et al., 2004; Langan & Pelissier, 2001).

Traumatic experiences are associated with low self-esteem and self-blame, and suicidal behavior (Chen & Gueta, 2017; Messina & Grella, 2006). Women who have been involved in abusive relationships experience a “depressive spiral” that includes disempowerment, confusion, diminished self-worth, and detachment from relationships, which are fertile ground for crime (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009) and SU (Chen & Gueta, 2016b). In her book, *Trauma and recovery*, Herman (1992) described trauma’s pervasive psychic injury: “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationship;” and “destroy victims’ fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation” (p. 51). Moreover, the core of traumatic experiences are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Many abuse survivors consistently report a sense of helplessness (p. 98). Powerless persons blame themselves for their circumstances, have a sense of distrust and hopelessness in the sociopolitical environment, feel alienated from resources for social influence, and are disenfranchised and economically vulnerable. Recovery, therefore, must be based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of “healthy connections” (p. 133). In other words, empowerment models are relational and psychological recovery from trauma is more likely to occur when abusive relationships are repaired or healthy ones are created. Many of the strengths identified by positive psychologists have been studied in the literature on resilience as means by which individuals can overcome traumatic incidents in their lives (McIntosh et al., 1993). Character strengths have been linked to outcomes such as

improvement in coping ability and cognitive flexibility (Isen, 2003) and longevity and the reduction of stress (Berscheid, 2003). The aim is to emphasize and build on strengths and virtues as means to enhance mental health and engender a good life. The use of positive psychology interventions such as empathy building, optimism training, and the like has been shown to increase longevity, overall life satisfaction, and happiness (Seligman, 2005). Mak et al. (2018) studied 19 female inmates who participated in an intensive training program that combined cognitive-behavioral and positive-psychology concepts. Findings showed significant reduction in the participants' depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, and in the tendency to pay attention to negative information. Furthermore, their sense of hope, gratitude, and tendency to pay attention to positive information increased remarkably.

Trauma has a broad and pervasive effect on three levels—personal, social, and spiritual—that increases the likelihood of the onset and persistence of offending (Kewley et al., 2020; Ronel & Elisha, 2011). Evidence for this lies in the myriad documented and complex pathways, either direct or indirect, from trauma to the onset and persistence of offending (Craig et al., 2017; Vitopoulos et al., 2019). The high prevalence of mental health problems among female inmates can exacerbate recidivism rates. The failure to treat these problems is an obvious recipe for high rates of recidivism, as suggested by findings regarding the relationship between mental health problems and recidivism (Forsythe & Adams, 2009). Thus, mental health care might be considered as a recidivism-reduction measure especially for female offenders, due to the high prevalence of mental problems among them (Chen & Gueta, 2016a).

However, most correctional facilities provide only limited mental health and SU treatment, and therefore send female inmates back to the same environment and community ill-equipped to succeed (van Wormer, 2010). In addition, female offenders also face significant barriers to mental health and SU treatment in the community; as many as 40% of offenders do not receive services such as mental health care. The need for integrated, trauma-informed services for female offenders could facilitate recovery, rehabilitation, and provide the treatment necessary for these women to succeed in the community.

### **3 A Conceptual Model of Empowerment for Female Offenders**

Most female offenders have been subjected to a myriad of traumatic incidences over the course of their lives, including experiencing multiple types of CAN, witnessing assaults and other violence, coping with their dysfunctional family history, engaging in self-harm and suicidality behaviors, developing mental health problems, becoming involved in SU, and engaging in crime. The conceptual model presented in this article is based on the premise that due to gender-specific needs of female offenders, it is critical to develop gender-responsive interventions that address these unique

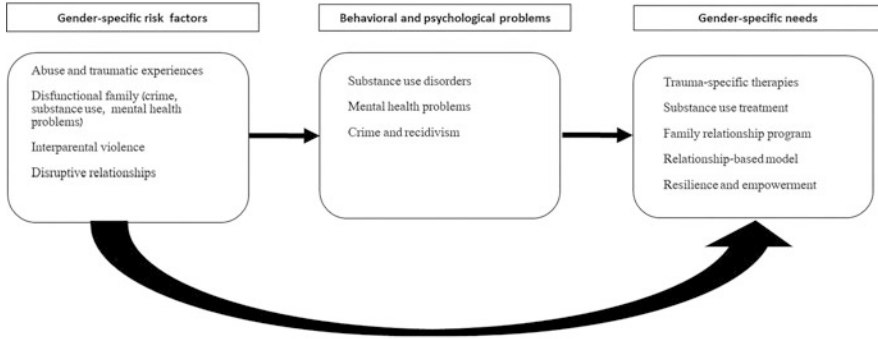


Fig. 1 Gender-responsive interventions for female offenders

needs (see Fig. 1). According to the model, interventions of a two-leveled nature, addressing intra-personal and inter-personal aspects, are required.

My underlying assumptions in developing this model were grounded in four theoretical approaches. The first was the *pathways approach*, which is based on the notion that unique life circumstances, including extensive traumatic and abusive histories, mental disorders, dysfunctional relationships, and SU, often as result of self-medicating behaviors used to numb various emotional pains, lead women to crime. Thus, gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of female offenders is required. The second was *relational theory*, according to which relationships in general, and especially family’s relationships, are a very fundamental part of women’s psychological development. Women are more influenced than men by family adversities such as parental psychopathology. Therefore, they are more likely to decline in reaction to destructive, painful, disappointing, and violating family relationships.

The third guiding theory was *positive psychology*, which posits that thriving and disengagement from distress, SU, mental problems, crime, or deviance can be fostered most effectively by enhancing positive emotions and experiences. Individuals who solve problems with an optimistic outlook are likely to experience positive emotions, which will, in turn, lead to a greater ability to cope with future difficulties. Coping with such problems can promote new coping skills and the development of personal and social resources, in other words, recovery capital that enables an individual to initiate and sustain long-term addiction recovery (Chen, 2018). According to Hobfoll’s (1988, 1989) conservation of resources (COR) model, resources can be lost as the result of psychological stress, as well as psychological outcomes of traumatic or disaster situations, such as SUDs. In the context of actual or potential loss of resources, individuals strive to maintain, protect, and build them. Positive psychology focuses on developing human strengths and increasing self-efficacy, optimism, and hope, which can enhance desistance and reduce negative behaviors. This is relevant to female offenders who were involved in abusive relationships, experience disempowerment, hopelessness, diminished self-worth, and detachment from relationships.



Finally, the fourth approach applied was that of *trauma theory*, which holds that trauma is a salient risk factor that begets a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems, especially those related to SUDs and delinquency. Most members of the female offender population have experienced high rates of trauma. If issues surrounding early trauma and victimization are not addressed, these women may never fully recover from their SUDs, mental health problems, and, in turn, involvement in crime. Research on the effectiveness of trauma interventions has demonstrated that they are associated with positive outcomes of reduced PTSD symptoms (Wolff et al., 2011), SUDs (Chen & Gueta, 2016a), and recidivism (Chen, 2009) among male and female prisoners.

Guided by these theories, the basic tenets of the current model are:

1. *On the intrapersonal level*, long-term trauma experiences have robbed female offenders of the opportunity to learn proper coping skills, cut off their interpersonal connections, and caused them to feel powerless and unable to assert themselves. Given the prevalence of trauma in the female offender population, it is understandable that “trauma-informed” programming and integrated treatment that combines interventions addressing trauma and SU concurrently is essential to meet the comprehensive needs of women. These group interventions must focus on empowerment, psychoeducation, coping skills, and trauma recovery, which can help facilitate rehabilitation for female offenders. In addition, incorporation of positive psychology interventions in traditional psychotherapies have been found effective in significantly reducing distress and promoting wellbeing, hope, strengths, and gratitude (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Moreover, the positive psychology approach of focusing on an individual’s strengths rather than pathogenic characteristics promotes positive psychological well-being. Antonovsky’s (1979) salutogenic theory also advocates the identification of health-promoting factors in individuals and society and promotion of optimal wellbeing rather than treating and remediating pathology. This fits in well with the World Health Organization’s definition of health as not just the absence of pathology but “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” (2001, p. 1).
2. *On the interpersonal level*, according to relational theory, a woman’s sense of self-worth can be severely undermined when relationships that are important to her (e.g., with a parent or a partner) are a source of physical and psychological harm. Psychological recovery from such trauma is more likely to occur when those relationships are repaired or healthy ones are created. It follows, then, that strategies encouraging female offenders to reform should consider this. For example, a family relationship program for women could help them avoid or terminate relationships with an abusive male partner (Holtfreter & Morash, 2003), or a “women in transition” (WIT), program founded on a relationship-based model and sharing of experiences might lead to empathy, mutuality, and empowerment.



## 4 Clinical Implications

Extensive empirical evidence has highlighted the intersection of CAN and interparental violence with self-destructive behaviors, including SU, crime, suicidal behavior, and mental health problems among female offenders. Cumulatively, these risk factors play a role in the development of pathways to crime and SU, and they require both simultaneous treatment interventions and gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of female offenders. The conceptual model presented in this article suggests that interventions should incorporate components aimed at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels to halt spiraling loss of personal and social resources and promote the building of recovery capital. Accordingly, effective intervention must address the complex needs of female offenders. To this end, it should include: (1) assessment of the individual's trauma severity level using the Thorax Trauma Severity Score (TTSS), which includes both anatomical and functional parameters (Pape et al., 2000), in order to provide appropriate trauma-focused intervention; (2) screening of individual loss of resources, perhaps using Hobfoll's (1988) framework; (3) assessment of the individual's recovery capital (see Groshkova et al., 2013); (4) targeting those who are at the low-bottom level and lack access to recovery capital; (5) adapting the individual's collective coping resources to promote the desistence and recovery process; and (6) strengthening the individual's personal and social resources by encouraging participation in an AA or NA program. Addressing these needs while offenders are in prison and after release can facilitate successful reintegration into society. The cornerstones of the comprehensive empowerment practice model presented here is to promote a process of increasing personal and interpersonal power so that female offenders can develop sense of wellbeing and healthy, growth-producing lives.

## 5 Conclusions and Future Directions

This narrative review shows that female offenders who were victims of various types of abuse have multiple and complex problems including SU, crime, suicidal behavior, and mental health problems. In light of the coexisting problems among female offenders, multimodal interventions are required in order to prevent a decline of their psychiatric state and to reduce the chances of recidivism. If the issues that stem from early trauma and victimization are not addressed, these women may never fully recover from their SUDs, mental health problems, and delinquency.

However, despite the rich evidence of the traumatic background of women offenders and their poor coping strategies, neither the community nor the correctional system provide them with adequate, comprehensive treatment to address their complex needs. Thus, the conceptual model presented in this article is a first step in developing comprehensive gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of female offenders. Addressing these needs could promote a sense of

wellbeing and facilitate successful reintegration of female offenders into society. It is recommended that future researchers conduct ongoing assessments and screenings of trauma background based on a life-course perspective of female offenders. This could inform the essential development of evidence-based trauma interventions and various other recovery pathways that target all four issues of CAN, SUDs, mental health problems, and delinquency of female offenders. Specifically, the role of trauma in the process of recovery and rehabilitation of female offenders highlights the need for more research and intervention development.

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# The Quest for Women's Empowerment Through Collaboration and a Humanising Pedagogy: A Perspective from the Global South



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and Helena Oosthuizen 

**Abstract** Traditionally leadership implies a relationship of power—the power to guide others. Recently the emphasis on power has fallen into disfavour with a shift from power to empowerment and where leaders place power in their followers through collaboration. Empowerment can be defined as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. There has been an increased focus on women's empowerment as it focuses on gaining equal access to resources for women and ensuring that it increases their control over their own lives and to make a difference in their communities. Emerging models of leadership have shifted from authoritarian to more collaborative leadership styles. This shift in leadership styles has coincided with more women taking up senior leadership and management positions in institutions, including universities. Women who take up senior leadership positions not only have to cope with and compete in patriarchal systems but also have the responsibility to change patriarchal hegemony and shift the management discourse and culture of an institution to a collaborative leadership culture that will support transformation.

In this chapter the authors (the Dean and five Heads of Departments), who all hold leadership positions in the Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela University reflect on how collaboration assists them to empower each other as well as their respective teams. This research resides in an interpretivist paradigm and a humanising pedagogy is used to frame the study. This allows the authors to draw on their lived experiences and to engage in dialogue to make sense of the process of empowerment. In this qualitative study the authors engage in collaborative self-study and use narrative free writing to gather data. The data is reduced through a process of poetic inquiry that will assist to identify common themes. This research aims to influence the thoughts and practices regarding women empowerment.

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## 1 Introduction and the Theoretical Framework

The Nelson Mandela University is situated in Gqeberha, South Africa. According to its vision statement it is a dynamic African university recognised for its leadership in generating cutting edge knowledge for a sustainable future (<https://www.mandela.ac.za>). The university values include: diversity, excellence, ubuntu, social justice and equality, integrity and environmental stewardship. These values guide what we do at the university. The university has come through a process of re-curriculation where the focus was on decolonising the curriculum. Our teaching and learning is underpinned by a humanising pedagogy. Del Carmen Salazar (2013) describe humanising pedagogy as teaching practices that intentionally utilise the histories, knowledges and realities of students as an integral part of educational practice and cast students as critically engaged, active participants in the co-construction of knowledge. Humanising pedagogy is a way of living—“it’s humanising interest is linked to focusing on both structural and psycho-social dimensions of human suffering and human liberation” (Keet et al., 2009, p. 113).

The characteristics of a humanising pedagogy also influence the way we lead our institution, as we recognise the importance of a critical and open-ended stance to capture critical consciousness and notions of humility; and reflecting contextual relevance and a reliance on indigenous knowledge (Sathorar, 2018). Furthermore, Sathorar (2018) explicates that a humanising pedagogy is hopeful and liberatory; it is dependent on the establishment of relationships that emphasises the sharing of feelings of connection, caring, self-reflection and mutual vulnerabilities. Humanising pedagogy has also influenced how we embrace women empowerment at our institution. Both our chancellor and vice-chancellor are females and two of the deputy vice-chancellors are also female. The Faculty of Education is led by a female dean and she is supported by five female Heads of Departments. Despite diverse backgrounds and experiences, these female leaders in the Faculty of Education collaborate and work well together. Collaboration in the Faculty is facilitated by a humanising pedagogy and we are guided by the following critical questions:

Who—who are the people in our teams;

What—what are the experiences that team members bring to the work space;

Why—always providing a reason for something that needs to be done, so that the team can take ownership of what needs to be done;

How—how we engage in the team—the development of a trust relationship;

Where—where an engagement takes place—ensuring that the workplace is a safe space.

Humanising pedagogy allows us to draw on the lived experiences of staff members and to engage them in collective decision making in our respective departments and the Faculty. Humanisation is closely linked to collaboration and Freire (1970)



suggested that dialogue that takes place under conditions of deep love for the world and mankind, humbleness towards each other, reciprocated trust amongst dialoguers and the ability to think critically will assist in changing the world into a humanised place. Thus, leading in a humanised way requires collaboration through dialogue. Collaboration, dialogue, collective decision-making, and the establishment of trust relationships inform our women empowerment efforts.

In this chapter we reflect briefly on our experience of women empowerment in the Faculty. We employed narrative freewriting to reflect on our experiences and reduced the data that was gathered through poetic inquiry—by constructing palindrome poems. We conclude by discussing the common themes that were extracted from these poems. We hope that through sharing our experiences we will be able to influence the thoughts and practices regarding women empowerment.

## 2 Women Empowerment in the Global South

The construct *women empowerment* is multi-dimensional and as such has many definitions, that are approached from different points of view, and linked to particular narratives in time and space. Over the years studies conducted in the global South have focussed to a large extent on the narratives of, amongst others, illiteracy, poverty, psychological abuse, physical abuse, and non-engagement in decision making (Danjuma et al., 2011). Most definitions, as such, focus on “*economic empowerment* (eradication of gender barriers in employment), *social empowerment* (social relations), *educational empowerment* (education of women), *political empowerment* (participation of women in democracy) and *legal empowerment* (property rights and family law)” (Siddaraju, 2019 p. 39). For the purpose of this chapter, we will focus on developing women's voice through, social, educational and political empowerment.

According to Mandal (2013) social empowerment supports women's social relations and their positions in social structures. It enables women to oppose inequalities and discrimination against ideas and creations put forward by women. Education is the most important means to empower women with knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully as an equal partner in the workplace and society (Siddaraju, 2019). Through educational empowerment, women who can be referred to as the disempowered, can claim control of their lives as they can reason and speak for themselves. Political empowerment refers to the deliberate inclusion of women in decision and policy-making bodies and allows for them to influence societal change (Mandal, 2013). Without political empowerment it will be very difficult for women to change patriarchal practices and challenges in existing power structures.

In this modern era, women's empowerment is a major issue across the globe, but it is particularly so in the global South (with South Africa forming part of the global South), especially with women in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)—who were previously deprived from an education. Maclean (2020) mentions that women involved in HEIs in the South are faced with four plagues. Firstly, the wicked

advantage and profit seeking interest of the privileged, who are interested in the preservation of advantages and benefits they enjoy. This prevents the transformative influences of education in the workplace for the underprivileged. There is thus, continuous and endless tension between public HEIs and the obligation and assurance to privatisation. The second issue is exploitation, which creates enduring ethical and moral predicaments. This is evident in workload distribution amongst Faculty where traditionally women would be allocated heavy teaching loads that compromised their professional development and progress in academia. The third is industrialism within the institutions, which has a valid spectrum, to defend the necessary transformation processes within Higher Education to serve in the public good of society. This promoted a technocratic approach as opposed to a more humanising approach which favoured an elite few—mostly males. Lastly, unequal access to government funding to do research at university also impacted women's progress in research.

The above four plagues within the Higher Education context is known for increasing stresses and anxieties that challenges women empowerment processes. In these settings, women must find alternative ways to empower (themselves and others), which is not encapsulated by a Western perspective of empowerment that focuses on the individual and is more competitive in nature. Byrne-Jiménez and Yoon (2019) ask the question: What is required to remove the instincts, desires and sentiments of a competitive, Western hegemonic marketplace approach to knowledge production and the role of women in this production? They advocate for the acknowledgement of women's contribution to knowledge production and suggest that women's empowerment, which requires energy and resilience from the heart, in communion with others, is needed. Women empowerment in the South focuses on inclusivity, and it takes courage and heart, active participation, collaboration and learning from each other through dialogue and sharing (Verma, 2009). Similarly, Darder (1998) alluded that women empowerment in the South, advocates for social justice and equality. Furthermore, Rowland (1997) suggests three dimensions of empowerment. These dimensions assist with the practical implementation of women empowerment; the *personal*—develops a sense of self and encourages the undoing of internalised oppression, due to the stereotypical view of women; the *rational*—impacts the development of relationships and decision making; and the *collective*—focuses on collaboration as opposed to competition. Even though the purpose of women empowerment is the same across the globe, we believe that the approach in the South takes on a more collaborative and inclusive character.

### **3 Women Empowerment in the Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela University**

In the Faculty of Education, we embrace the collaborative nature of a humanising pedagogy. This allows us to empower our teams and in particular, to encourage women empowerment through our interaction with each other as female leaders. It

further allows us to create opportunities for other female staff members to participate in decision making and to take control of their professional development.

Mahbub (2021) describes women empowerment as a social action that promotes participation of people, organisations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger societies. He further postulates that women empowerment involves a three-step process; the first step refers to an individual woman developing feelings of personal power, command and self-sufficiency over material and inherent choices she has to make (Mahbub, 2021). In our Faculty each of us exhibited personal power through our commitment to the academic project. This was acknowledged by appointing us as leaders of respective Departments in the Faculty. The second step takes place on an interpersonal level. Here a woman influences the decision-making power of another woman through their contact and working together. The six female leaders in our Faculty work together to lead the Faculty collaboratively.

In the third step, he emphasises the goals for social action and social change through community development programs and through a group effort. Community development programs can lead to individual empowerment and interpersonal empowerment. We collectively work towards women empowerment in our Faculty by providing opportunities for other females in the Faculty. The female voice is deliberately invited into discussions; they are provided and exposed to professional development initiatives such as the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS-SA) leadership programme and the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) Women in Leadership programme. Furthermore, they are exposed to leadership roles in the Faculty when they are asked to represent the Faculty at meetings. They are also given the time and space to focus on their studies or research projects. As a group of female leaders, we have also embarked on sharing our experiences of collaboratively and collective leading the Faculty by implementing a humanising pedagogy at conferences as well as writing about these for publication purposes—hoping to change the views about women empowerment and encouraging the application of a humanising pedagogy to enhance women empowerment.

## 4 A Collaborative Methodology

This qualitative research resides in the interpretivist paradigm as we seek to understand the phenomenon of women empowerment in Higher Education. Interpretivism is based on an understanding that suggests that all observations are both “theory and value-laden” and that researchers in the social sciences cannot pursue an objective truth as their own subjectivities cannot be disregarded (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p. 25). Similarly, Ponelis (2015) argues that the interpretivist paradigm is informed by a need to understand the world from a subjective point of view, and that it is more inclusive than positivism as it acknowledges diverse opinions of different individuals. Thanh and Thanh (2015) further explicate that researchers working in an interpretivist paradigm mainly use qualitative research methods as this approach

provides them with rich reports that are necessary for interpreting the context of a study. Qualitative methods are interpretative and work with non-numeric data like text, images or cultural artefacts, and attempt to give data a meaning that contributes to understanding some local phenomenon (Ponelis, 2015).

In the Higher Education environment where patriarchal hegemony is still rife, the collaboration between the authors as female leaders served as impetus for research on women empowerment. As we embarked on this research project the guiding methodology was a case study approach as we wanted to explore the complex phenomenon of women empowerment within in our context. However, as our research unfolded, and our stories emerged the research evolved into collaborative self-study. Collaborative self-study research builds on the necessity of a relationship between individuals and collective cognition of professional development and the power of dialogue in building a learning community of engaged scholarship (Samaras, 2011). According to Hogan and Daniell (2015) collaborative self-study has five characteristics:

- (i) A personal situation inquiry (inquiring into own leadership practices as female leaders);
- (ii) Critical collaborative inquiry (collaboratively leading the Faculty as female leaders—how we empower each other and encourage women empowerment);
- (iii) Improved learning (to improve our leadership practice and to enhance women empowerment);
- (iv) A transparent and systematic research process (responding to reflective questions through narrative free writing in journals, constructing palindrome poems and engaging in collegial discussion);
- (v) Knowledge generation and presentation (extending and sharing the learning experience through practice and journal articles).

We had a workshop to examine our own understanding and practices of women empowerment and reflected on the following questions using narrative free-writing:

- (i) What is your understanding of women empowerment?
- (ii) What is your experience of women empowerment?
- (iii) What do you see as benefits of women empowerment?
- (iv) How do you empower other women?

Free-writing is a process of writing down the thoughts that come to mind when thinking of the reflective question, without worrying about the order of the words or the structure and flow of your thoughts (Elbow, 1998). It enabled us to explore and take into account our understanding of women empowerment, the processes we follow to enhance women empowerment as well as the complexities, nuances and values that impact how we lead. Collaborative self-study is based on a relationship of trust and the narrative free writing allowed us to share without reservation our thoughts and feelings regarding the processes followed to lead our Faculty and how it impacts women empowerment. During our data generation workshop, we were given 15 min to respond to each of the reflective questions in our journals.

We used poetic inquiry to reduce the data that was generated through the free-writing exercise. Poetic inquiry, or the use of poetry in research, is an arts-based approach to (re)present data, to analyse and create understanding of human experience, to capture and portray the human condition in a more easily “consumable,” powerful, emotionally poignant, and open-ended, non-linear form (Yallop et al., 2014). It allows you to creatively combine the basic principles of qualitative research with the art of poetry. Van Rooyen and d’Abdon (2020, p. 2) postulate that poetic inquiry uses poetry “as a method of data reduction that re-represents data for the purposes of research” and create poems that are “less for expressive and literary means, and more for the purposes of generating or presenting data”.

We read through our free writing and highlighted the eight phrases that captured our most pertinent thoughts and feelings regarding the questions. We then wrote these phrases down on strips of paper that we scrambled before placing them down underneath each other to construct a palindrome poem. Palindrome poetry refers to mirrored poetry which required us to write our eight phrases down from the first to the last and then to repeat the process in reverse order writing down phrases from the last to the first. We had to give our poems a title and we then had to read our poems out loud to the group. Pictures were taken of the poems and projected for all to see (refer to Fig. 1 above for an illustration of the constructed palindrome poems). This was followed by a discussion where clarifying questions could be asked, or explanations could be given for specific phrases. The purpose of the discussion was to identify common themes that emerged from our five poems. Two of the more prominent themes that were identified were: a mutual understanding of women empowerment and how humanising pedagogy underpins our women empowerment practices in the Faculty.

## 5 Discussion of Findings

The literature and theory assisted us in crafting a mutual understanding of women empowerment. It also helped us to identify, women empowerment practices linked to a humanising pedagogy. We interpreted the data using direct quotes from the poems and looked at how the quotes linked to the literature that was reviewed for this study.

Two of the themes that were identified during the data analysis are discussed below:

### 5.1 *A Mutual Understanding of Women Empowerment*

The issue of women’s empowerment and gender equality is at the top of agendas across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures. Empowerment can be defined as a “multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control

<p><b>An Empowered Woman</b>          Acknowledging the value of women,          Respect and giving voice to women,          Striving for equality through confusion and critique,          Strength rather than power,          Different perspectives,          Enhanced diversity,          Role model the sharing of responsibility,          Changing the stereotypical view of women.</p> <p>Changing the stereotypical view of women.          Role model the sharing of responsibility,          Enhanced diversity,          Different perspectives,          Strength rather than power,          Striving for equality through confusion and critique,          Respect and giving voice to women,          Acknowledging the value of women.</p>	<p><b>Wind propelling my wings</b>          Openness and willingness to learn,          Building trust, be a mentor and share advice,          Open up opportunities,          Entrusting with responsibilities,          Believed in my ability to excel,          Exposed my strength,          Uplifting and giving honest feedback,          Felt through generations and across the community.</p> <p>Felt through generations and across the community.          Uplifting and giving honest feedback,          Exposed my strength,          Believed in my ability to excel,          Entrusting with responsibilities,          Open up opportunities,          Building trust, be a mentor and share advice,          Openness and willingness to learn.</p>
<p><b>Women empowerment on the dance floor</b>          Listen, follow and flow,          Advocate for equality,          Share your knowledge, skills and your practices,          Bring your voice and invite others,          Each one teach one,          It is about participation,          Nurture, love, and care for yourself,          An invitation to the self.</p> <p>An invitation to the self,          Nurture, love, and care for yourself,          It is about participation,          Each one teach one,          Bring your voice and invite others,          Share your knowledge, skills and your practices,          Advocate for equality,          Listen, follow and flow.</p>	<p><b>Breaking the chains</b>          Emancipation from past oppressive practices,          Changing perspectives, shifting paradigms,          Moving beyond the fear of being judged,          Confidence, upliftment, equality, recognition,          Breaking boundaries, setting trends,          Making contributions count,          Giving women a platform for their voices to be heard,          Education, Education, Education.</p> <p>Education, Education, Education.          Giving women a platform for their voices to be heard,          Making contributions count,          Breaking boundaries, setting trends,          Confidence, upliftment, equality, recognition,          Moving beyond the fear of being judged,          Changing perspectives, shifting paradigms,          Emancipation from past oppressive practices.</p>
<p><b>Let me be</b>          Women need equal opportunities,          Women are not seen as leaders but followers,          We are seen as leading with our hearts and not our minds,          Leading from the heart, showing compassion makes you a stronger leader,          World cannot be seen as successful if half are left out and left behind,          Women must be shown that they have value and are precious,          Only if women are seen as equals will we get somewhere in life,          We can and want to contribute to society.</p>	

Fig. 1 Self-constructed palindrome poems

We can and want to contribute to society,  
 Only if women are seen as equals will we get somewhere in life,  
 Women must be shown that they have value and are precious,  
 World cannot be seen as successful if half are left out and left behind,  
 Leading from the heart, showing compassion makes you a stronger leader,  
 We are seen as leading with our hearts and not our minds,  
 Women are not seen as leaders but followers,  
 Women need equal opportunities.

**Fig. 1** (continued)

over their own lives” (Debnath, 2018). Women’s empowerment is a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. It includes increasing a woman’s sense of self-worth, her decision-making power, her access to opportunities and resources, her power and control over her own life inside and outside the home, and her ability to effect change at work and in society (Debnath, 2018). Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want (of respect, equal rights and opportunities) and from fear (of oppression and unfair labour practices in the workplace). Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty.

From the poems written it became clear that all the participants have a similar understanding as to what women empowerment is. Despite different lived experiences, we all have similar thoughts regarding women empowerment. All of us highlighted education as key to eliminating gender inequality. The following extract from Tobeka’s poem confirms this: *Education, education, education!* Literature confirms the importance of educational empowerment as it allows women to gain skills, knowledge and confidence to be an equal partner in the workplace and society (Siddaraju, 2019). Furthermore, Debnath (2018) argued that the participation of women in Higher Education is seen as the ultimate personification of women empowerment. Thus, in the Faculty we place high value on supporting women to pursue further studies and engage in research in their specific areas of interest.

Through sharing our own stories, we realised that change is required regarding the status of women in the workplace. The authors concur with Siddaraju (2019) when he poses the question: How can we function, be effective and successful if half the workforce is ignored? Some of the phrases used by participants that indicated a need for change are: *Tobeka: changing perspectives, breaking boundaries; Muki: open up opportunities; Heloise: changing the stereotypical view of women; and Helena: equal opportunities for all, we can and want to contribute to society.*

Our critical consciousness sensitised us to the need for women empowerment and to create equal opportunities for all to enjoy. Thus, we deliberately encourage women to attend professional development programmes to grow professionally but also personally. This is supported by providing females with responsibilities in the Faculty where they can develop a voice within a safe space. The issue of developing a voice was also strongly emphasised in the poems, as can be seen in the following extracts: *Deidre: Bring your voice and invite others; Tobeka: Giving women a platform for their voices to be heard.*

It was slow progress at first, but more and more the female voice is being heard across the Faculty and the University. We see ourselves as agents of change (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013) as we strive to give all people a voice. We try to get all of our team members involved and we also give them shared responsibility, not excluding or disadvantaging the men in any way.

Women empowerment is promoted and enhanced by working together and developing collaborative relationships (Hogan & Daniell, 2015). As a management team we have succeeded in doing this, we function very well together whilst retaining our own individuality. We have faced challenges, but we managed to overcome these by relying on one another. We embody unselfish collaboration and are not in competition with one another. We serve as role models that inspire, challenge and strengthen each other and our teams. This is evident in the following phrase from Muki's poem: *Building trust, be a member and share advice*. We have realised the importance of modelling the behaviour we want to establish in others. There are no one-size-fits-all interventions that can produce in all women the effect of feeling more in control of their lives, but we are trying to empower women in our Faculty.

## **5.2 Women Empowerment Practices Linked to Humanising Pedagogy**

All the participants referred to women's voice as a sense of social justice being the fundamental point of departure of a humanising pedagogy. For Tobeka it is freedom from practices which enslaved us and being able to now enjoy equal opportunities. The following phrases from her poem support this idea: *Emancipation from past practices, breaking boundaries and setting trends*. As Faculty, we acknowledge the various responsibilities that women have and strive to support them in pursuing and completing their studies by providing them with the time and the space in the form of writing retreats. Muki states that being a woman herself, she understands the multiple identities' that women have to construct to fulfil their daily tasks. A little time to think can make the world's difference in a woman's personal and professional development.

Freire (1970, 1998) reminds us that purposeful, deliberate and planned women empowerment require that we locate women in the act of their study, together with their teachers, reflecting and re-creating knowledge to attain critical consciousness about their lived reality. Women are placed at the centre of their learning, supporting them in embracing the vocation of becoming human instead of being objects of their own learning. The Faculty exposes and invites women to participate in different women leadership programmes to develop their leadership skills and to enhance their confidence. The Faculty also embraces and promotes women empowerment through collaboratively (with HELM) offer the only Women in Leadership (WiL) Short Learning Programme (SLP) in South Africa. Several of the women in the



Faculty completed the SLP and it assisted them with social empowerment as it allowed them to develop trans-disciplinary networks. Exposure to these programmes increased the mobility of women in social structures and acknowledged their contribution to knowledge construction and research. The ideas that are generated during these leadership programmes are very energising with inclusivity, participation, and equity being foregrounded. Subsequently, these ideas are brought back into the Faculty and to the different Departments. Heloise offered the following statement regarding this: *Humanising women empowerment relies on the pedagogy of women leaders to influence, navigate, and coexist within the context and practices of learning environments and leadership practices.*

Collaboration supports democracy through collective decision-making. This encourages political empowerment as women are involved in decision and policy-making in the Faculty. Everyone in the Faculty is involved in strategic planning and women are deliberately asked for their opinion. Freire (1973) postulates that participation is to influence decision-making where it makes a difference. In support Muki says: *I like that people should have an opinion and contribute to matters that are discussed before a matter is decided upon.* Political empowerment is further encouraged by delegating decision making responsibilities to HODs—including decisions regarding appointments of staff members.

## 6 Recommendations and Possible Future Research

It is evident from the above themes that women empowerment is critically important for the future of Higher Education. For women empowerment to be implemented effectively the understanding of the concept and what it entails need to be promoted by leaders. The unpacking of the concept must be supported by providing training and opportunities to further educational qualifications for female staff. In addition, a supportive work environment where inclusive and participatory practices are used will strengthen the pursuit of women empowerment. The analysis of the data also highlights, the necessity of applying humanising pedagogy principles to encourage women empowerment. From the discussion it was clear how important it is to acknowledge the experiences that staff members bring to the work place and to recognise their lived realities to support their empowerment. Role modelling collaborative practices as opposed to endorsing individual competition also support empowerment processes. Furthermore, the data also revealed that raising critical consciousness about women empowerment encourages staff members to critically reflect on power relations in the work place especially the role that women can play in addressing patriarchal hegemony. It is not our intention and indeed it is not possible to propose a one size fits all model to enhance women empowerment. Instead, we propose the use of humanising pedagogy principles and advocate for leaders to apply these principles including: acknowledging lived realities, collaboration and raising critical consciousness to enhance women empowerment in their respective contexts.

In this chapter, five female leaders reflected on their own practice to investigate how leaders can apply humanising pedagogy principles to support women empowerment. During the data generation and analysis deliberations the following questions, that could serve as impetus for future research came to the fore: How does the female staff who are supported by leaders applying humanising pedagogy principles experience the empowerment process; How does male staff feel about women empowerment and how can their understanding and support of women empowerment be enhanced?

## 7 Conclusion

Women empowerment is a broad term used to describe the process by which women gain more control and power over their lives. This is achieved by removing barriers and perceptions that prevent them from having equal opportunities with men. The empowerment of women, specifically, in South Africa is about dealing with the legacy of the past and the transformation of society, particularly the transformation of power relations between women, men, institutions and laws. Unfortunately, it remains a fact that many women are still confined by both their circumstances and the prevailing patriarchy in society. Education is essential and so is ensuring that women have greater access to Higher Education. Within the Faculty we encourage female staff to pursue their studies and they are given the space and time to complete their studies. They are given assistance with their workloads and support as needed.

As a Faculty we have managed to challenge the status quo in a traditionally male dominated environment and has set trends for females, leading institutions by working together as a team. By leading with our hearts and not just our minds we have established a culture of a humanising pedagogy and have channelled our energies into the upliftment of our colleagues, shifting boundaries and supporting women empowerment. It is up to all of us to ensure that women empowerment becomes a lived reality. By working together and applying humanising pedagogy principles, we can ensure a societal shift so that women can take their rightful place in the workplace.

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# Trickle-Down Effect of Upbringing Conditions on Women Empowerment: A Study of Rural India



Sudatta Banerjee  and Swati Alok 

**Abstract** The empowerment of women is one of the important determinants for the development of the economy and society. It has extensive positive effects at the individual and the household level too. The objective of this study is to see the effects of the upbringing conditions of rural women on their future empowerment in an overpopulated developing country, India, and further design and conduct training and capacity-building workshop to increase awareness among rural women about social policies and their rights. The results of the survey indicate a trickle-down effect of childhood conditions on future empowerment, especially, mothers' education and good upbringing conditions which boost empowerment in the future. Also, the study indicates that a woman who perceives herself to be worthy enough encourages herself to take decisions in all spheres of life. Increasing education for women, creating employment opportunities for them, and making them aware of their legal and political rights create empowered women in the future. Education for men is also important for a gender-equitable society, where men can value the need for women's empowerment. The results also show the importance of government policies to create employment in rural areas for all genders to boost household income. The study conducted training in rural areas to create awareness about the issue.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Childhood conditions · Self-esteem · Education · Rights · Development · Sustainability

## 1 Introduction

According to the Sustainable Development Goals, achieving women's empowerment is essential for a sustainable and prosperous future for any society. In developing countries, women's empowerment and participation in the labor market have

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been low which has strong negative repercussions on the future development of countries; the condition is comparatively worse in rural areas where awareness of women about empowerment is almost absent due to the cultural setup (Kumar et al., 2021; GoI, 2020; Kishor & Gupta, 2004; Roy & Niranjana, 2005). In the second-most populous country of the world, India, almost two-thirds of people reside in rural areas. If women can be empowered here, it can clearly boost a sustainable future of the economy. So to find the determinants of women empowerment in rural areas of India, this study conducted a survey of 300 women in rural areas of Southern India.

Now, what constitutes women's empowerment? Duflo (2012) defines it as "*improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development—in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation*". It is related to social and financial independence, freedom of choice, freedom in decision-making, and equal rights (Banerjee et al., 2020). Major works measure women's empowerment through domestic decision-making, freedom of movement, and, access and control over resources (Malhotra et al., 2002; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007) and some also include social norms, violence against women, and sexual and reproductive rights (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016).

The study not only looks at present variables which lead to women's empowerment but also her upbringing conditions represented by her mother's education, property given to the women by parents along with self-esteem which is developed from childhood due to upbringing conditions. Also, the study was followed by a training program. This trickle-down effect from one generation to another, especially in a rural setup of India, and the design of the capacity-building training workshop conducted for rural women adds knowledge to the literature.

The next sections deal with literature review and objective, methodology, data analysis including limitations and future scope, details of training and capacity building training, discussion, and conclusion.

## 2 Literature Review and Objective

Measurement of women's empowerment has been done with various indicators in the literature. The most common proxy of women's empowerment as indicated in literature is domestic decision-making (Sen, 1999; Alsop et al., 2006; Miedema et al., 2018). Decision-making relates to various issues like finance, household, purchases, marriage, etc., and even reproductive and sexual decisions; other indicators include freedom of movement, freedom from violence, gendered roles, social norms, making, and so on (Kishor, 2000; Gupta & Yesudian, 2006; Karp et al., 2020).

Various studies have looked into the antecedents of women's empowerment as well. The determinants range from income, employment, age, education, knowledge of rights, household status, husband's age, education and income, ownership of property, access to media, self-esteem, self-efficacy, place of residence, social policies, etc. (Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Jejeebhoy, 1997; Gupta & Yesudian,

2006; Kabeer et al., 2013; Yount et al., 2016; Akram, 2018; Banerjee et al., 2019; Kazembe, 2020; Banerjee et al., 2022).

The objective of this study is to see the effects of the upbringing conditions of rural women on their future empowerment in an overpopulated developing country, India. Another objective of the study was to design and conduct training and capacity-building workshop to increase awareness among rural women about social policies and their rights.

The study becomes important because in India almost 69% of the women reside in rural areas where the progress of education has been slow, especially for women, and the society is governed by age-old norms in which people consider women to perform gendered roles only (Census, 2011). Being empowered increases the independence and well-being of women plus the labour market participation and productivity of the economy. Also, the future level of human capital is improved in terms of healthy and educated children. This study quantifies women's empowerment through domestic decision making, freedom of movement, access, and control of resources, and couple communication. Domestic decision making is related to household and finance; Freedom of movement means going out of the household for whatever reason without permission; Access and control over resources mean having control over finance and activities of the household; Couple communication means clear communication with the spouse regarding sexual issues, children's education, etc. To depict the upbringing conditions, variables like the women's education, knowledge of rights which come through education or the home environment in which one grows up, educational level of the women's mother to measure the inter-generational trickle-down effect of the presence of an educated woman in the household on their children, land in the name of the woman, self-esteem of the woman to show her confidence level in herself—again a result of upbringing conditions, her present employment and household status and also her husband's educational level.

The next objective of conducting trainings for women is very important. Most women are unaware of the existing government policies and so these types of workshops help in the percolation of knowledge and increase the well-being of the women.

### 3 Research Design

The study was conducted in two phases. The details are discussed below.

#### **Method: Phase I**

The area of focus was the rural areas of Southern India. Villages with at least 50% female population and further in those villages if at least 50% female illiteracy was present, then only the villages were chosen. A detailed literature review led to the design of a detailed questionnaire including indicators of women empowerment, antecedents, and socio-demographic variables. Further focus group interviews of

rural women led to the understanding of some variables which are important in a rural setup, for example, the lack of any power in decision-making is due to the absence of education or absence of awareness of their own rights and being dependent on husband or in-laws due lack of ownership of assets or employment. These variables were used not only in regression but also for designing the content of the training programme. After pilot testing and correcting problems with the questionnaire, final data collection was done randomly among 300 married rural women. Data pertaining to 285 women could be used for analysis after data cleaning. The cleaned data were coded. Since the analysis was to estimate women's empowerment through a number of independent variables, multiple linear regression was used to analyse the data. The variables used in the analysis have already been discussed in Sect. 2. The details of the measurement of the variables and their descriptive statistics in reported in Appendix Tables A1 and A2.

### **Method: Phase II**

After analysis of the data collected and further interpretation of the results led to the design of the training and capacity-building workshop. The details are presented in Sect. 5.

The participation of the women was voluntary. Informed consent was taken from them in the local language (Telugu) before participating in the survey or training. Since many were unable to read, the research team read the consent document, and after that, participating women gave their consent. For children, the permission of either of the parent was taken along with the principal of the school. School employees and ASHA workers were present during the survey and training. The survey and training were scheduled in comfort depending on the availability and work schedule of the women. All data from the participants were de-identified by the researchers and stored in secure, password-protected computers that only the study team have access to.

## **4 Data Analysis and Results**

Multiple regression analysis was done on data of 285 women, after testing for heteroscedasticity and multicollinearity. Both the problems were not present in the data. The results are shown in Table 1.

The results show that women's education and their knowledge of rights play a significant role in affecting empowerment levels. If the educational level and knowledge of legal and political rights increase, the empowerment of women increases. This points to a crucial factor how to bring up the girls in the household. Even in rural areas if a girl child gets the opportunity to be educated and they know about their rights, it can make them empowered.

It is also seen if the mother of the woman is educated, it increases the empowerment level by 0.91. The intergenerational trickle-down effect of women's education is observed here. The female child gets empowered due to this.



**Table 1** Determinants of women's empowerment

Explanatory variables	Coefficients (standard errors in parentheses)
Women's education	0.342* (0.199)
Women's knowledge of legal rights	0.303** (0.129)
Women's knowledge of political rights	0.800* (0.472)
Mother's education	0.907** (0.394)
Assets owned	0.408 (0.458)
Self-esteem	0.843*** (0.274)
Present household assets	0.0287* (0.0162)
Employment status of women	1.992*** (0.409)
Husband's education	0.340** (0.170)
Constant	12.94*** (1.245)
Observations	285
R-squared	0.283

Source: Authors' calculations

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Self-esteem is a variable that measures how confident woman is and how they feel about themselves. The results show that as the level of self-esteem increases, the women's empowerment index increases significantly. This shows that if women are treated equally and not shown to be worthless, they will grow up as confident ladies and this further affects their empowerment levels.

All the above factors discussed which significantly boost women's empowerment point out the upbringing conditions of women. If gendered norms are broken at the micro-level that is households and women get all opportunities equally and if they know from their childhood that they are not inferior to males, it will automatically raise empowered ladies. Parents should understand this and treat their girl children equally.

It is also seen that if a woman is employed it significantly increases empowerment by 1.992. Policies that give women opportunities to earn are actually boosting empowerment levels. An increase in husbands' education also boosts women's empowerment. With an increase in education, males might break the gendered norms and motivate the women in their household which boosts their empowerment levels. Also, the household status measured in terms of ownership of household assets boosts empowerment.

The results of the study are based on the survey and subsequent data analysis of 285 women and that too in Southern India and this is a great limitation to generalize the results. Future work might include samples from other regions of the country, and also the health and educational conditions of the children of the women can be surveyed to find the effects of women's empowerment on future human capital.

## 5 Training and Capacity Building Workshop

The result of empirical studies (phase-I) indicated the importance of women's education and the need to be aware of their political /legal rights. Further, it was decided to undergo focus group interviews among important stakeholders namely health workers, government registered social workers, the head of the village, and a few village women residents to validate the empirical result and to ensure whether there is a need for a training program. Thus the researchers planned to undergo a systematic way of undergoing training program following mainly three steps (i) undergoing training needs analysis through focus group interviews among key stakeholders (ii) designing the training program based on it, and (iii) conducting the training program.

### 5.1 Training Need Analysis

There are several central/ state government schemes and local bodies that are aimed at bettering the lives of rural Indian women and empowering them. While the expectation was that village women residents would have some information, the truth turned out to be harsher than anticipated with the majority of the women completely unaware of most of the areas talked about. The team understood that on the ground, there is a large leak in the efforts that these bodies take and the effect it has on the people it is aimed at. There is a huge loss of information which results in most *women being completely unaware of the schemes* and benefits in place for them. Even in a few cases, where they were aware of various schemes, being illiterate, *they were unable to read the various instructions* that were written down in application forms and were unable to apply for these schemes. A lot of these women were *unaware of equal property rights*. Most of the women were aware of the mid-day meal scheme (provision of lunch for children in schools), however, they were *completely unaware of the weekly menu to be served mandatory to the children*. They were unaware of the balanced diet that need to be served to their children. On further querying about the reason for the high dropout of girls in secondary education, one of the women stated, "*As my daughter reached puberty, my husband persuaded her to stop her from going to school as it is time to get her married*". Further digging on why she agreed to her husband's request, she said, "*what to do, even the school do not have a separate bathroom for girls and boys, so it is better that she be at home and help me in household work*". In order to lessen the burden of marriage, there are schemes for poor families to fund the costs of their wedding. Most families are *unaware of these financial schemes* and hence resort to taking loans in order to meet the expenses of big events like weddings since it is quintessentially Indian to have a large wedding, regardless of financial standing and it is embarrassing not to. The awareness of the schemes to ease weddings can save a lot of families from decisions like getting their daughters married to bad families as a last resort.

Thus, the exercise of need analysis and formative research made the authors conclude that a lot of the problems faced by these women are linked to one another, most of which stem from poverty and/or a lack of education and lack of empowerment. There is a need to design a training program dedicated to

- educating these women about various political /legal rights
- make them aware of various state/central government schemes that are available for them to avail.
- inform them about e-seva (online portal where application forms for various schemes are available, how to download, and take the help of e-seva employees to fill and submit the form) for ease of applying for the various schemes and benefits.
- focussing in particular on the various financial schemes that may help them to start their own small business and make them financially independent.
- understanding the importance of following up on the weekly menu provided to their children through the mid-day meal scheme, hence
  - to make them understand the concept of a balanced diet and the nutritional characteristics of the food they eat
  - health/ hygiene practices especially related to the adolescent girl child.

## ***5.2 Designing the Training Program***

The training program was designed to fulfil major objectives namely (i) making the women aware of various legal/political rights and state/central government schemes (ii) focusing on schemes that will empower or provide financial independence (iii) understanding the importance of nutritional and balanced diet for their children health and various health-hygiene practices.

Accordingly, the training program was divided into two modules: one catering to women and the other catering to children as well as the mothers of the children. Module 1 was designed for 2 h comprising 15 state-related social benefit schemes, 10 legal rights, and 5 financial rights. In order to make illiterate trainees understand each of the rights easily and in a lucid manner, the session was designed to be interactive. Mostly pictorial, videos, and PowerPoint presentations were designed in the local language (Telugu). It was decided that apart from focusing on legal /social schemes, maximum time of the training program will be dedicated to understanding their aspiration, presence of skills if any, and suggesting the right financial assistance schemes to match their skill with jobs so as to start their own business. Module 2 was planned to be conducted in a government school for 1 h of duration. This session was to inform the children about various types of nutrients that are present in vegetables, foods, and fruits, explaining the importance of balanced diets, health-hygiene practices, and sustainable environmental practices. In order to make children learn through fun and enhance their engagement level, drawing competition, and quizzes pertaining to nutrients topics were designed and discussion sessions to understand their dreams and aspirations were planned. Charts and videos using comic characters were designed to make them understand in a simple manner. A portable projector was carried for this purpose.

### 5.3 *Conducting the Training Program*

**Module 1** was conducted in the village community centres after taking necessary approval from the head of the village. It was ensured to conduct training on Sunday for maximum attendance. Also, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and day-care centres supervisor (called Aaganwadi: responsible for mid-day meals) were also called for the training program along with 65 trainees (village women residents from four nearby villages). The discussion was related to government schemes and women's rights.



Source: Pandey, Avishek (2019): Training Workshop as part of ICSSR Project 02/200/2017-18/RP/Minor

Source: Pandey, Avishek (2019): Training Workshop as part of ICSSR Project 02/200/2017-18/RP/Minor

**Module 2** was conducted on school premises with the prior permission of the school principal requesting to provide us their 1 h of teaching time and here mothers were also invited. The training with respect to health and hygiene revolved around educating the women about common deficiencies and diseases they are genetically and geographically more susceptible to. The team explained to them the various Vitamins and minerals essential to their healthy development and through what foods they could increase their intake of these Vitamins, especially Vitamin D, B12, and Iron since Indian women are prone to these deficiencies which often lead to Anaemia. The women and children were shown interactive videos and demonstrations about food hygiene habits like washing fruits, and, vegetables, properly cleaning hands before and after eating, and, maintaining clean utensils and storage areas. They were responding well and were active. The team distributed the detailed menu of one full meal provided under the government-sponsored mid-day meal scheme. Children were given tiffin boxes, crayons, stationery sets, and soaps to make them enthusiastic about education and maintaining health.



Source: Pandey, Avishek (2019): Training Workshop as part of ICSSR Project 02/200/2017-18/RP/Minor

Source: Pandey, Avishek (2019): Training Workshop as part of ICSSR Project 02/200/2017-18/RP/Minor

### ***5.4 Follow-up of the Training Workshop***

Module 1 helped us to identify approx. 4–5 women who seem to be interested in running their food catering business, especially indicating their culinary skill in making Hyderabad Biryani. The researchers informed them about the Annapurna scheme, where a loan of Rs 50,000/- is provided for the food catering business. Similarly, few ladies showing interest in the handicraft business were advised to display their artistic skills in “Mahila E Haat”. One of the women looking for financial assistance for her daughter’s marriage was made aware to apply for the “Shaadi-Mubarak” State scheme. Later on, the researchers followed up telephonically through ASHA workers, whether the concerned women initiated the procedure and whether they availed the schemes which were mentioned during the workshop. The researchers received positive feedback from them. It was also informed that mid-day meals to children were provided based on the compulsory assigned weekly menu prescribed by the government. For this, the team cross-checked with the principal of the school, along with feedback from a few parents of the school children confirming that module 2 was also successful to a certain extent.

## **6 Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of the survey indicate a trickle-down effect of childhood conditions on future empowerment, especially, mothers’ education and good upbringing conditions which boost empowerment in the future. Also, the study indicates not only the context and economic conditions impact women’s empowerment, but also their state of mind and mindset which is represented by the variable self-esteem. A woman who perceives herself to be worthy enough encourages herself to take decisions in all spheres of life. Boosting the education of girls and giving legal and political knowledge and further participation in the labour market creates empowered women in the future. Education for men is also important for a gender-equitable society, where men can value the need for women’s empowerment. The results also show the importance of government policies to create employment in rural areas for all genders to boost household income. The study conducted training in rural areas to create awareness about the issue.

Though some know the benefits, many are still ignorant of the benefits as their minds are still ruled by age-old norms and beliefs. Women are in clutches of gendered roles in both cases. Thus, some other problems should be considered first. Poverty, dowry, absence of social security for old ages to name a few. When a girl child is born, a poor household is then only burdened with the future dowry to be paid; and since according to most people (as taught by society for ages) marriage

is the ultimate aim in life, daughters are thought to be going away after marriage and thus not considered caretakers of old age for parents too. Thus considered burdens, either they are either killed before birth or if born, they are given unequal treatment in the household. But just increasing the income of the households won't automatically create educated and empowered women. And this is due to social norms and beliefs that women belong to the kitchen. This mind-set cannot be changed by increasing incomes only. Separate policies are really required to pull the women out of the dire situations women are living and for the success of these policies, solving other issues like poverty, giving social security, etc. becomes important. If we fail to do this, the tragedy of "missing women" will be amplified which will put a question mark on the sustainable future of the country.

While there is a lot of attention toward taking steps to empower India's rural women, it is in vain if the women it is meant for are unaware and have no access to these efforts. The benefits lose their purpose unless they are used by the women whom they were put in place for and it is extremely important to educate and make these women aware to ensure that they make the most of the initiatives taken by the government to help them. The researchers intended to delve into these women's awareness of their rights, basic hygiene practices, health, education, and government schemes placed in order to help them gain access to the necessities listed above.

The ability to read and understand scheme instructions and eligibility criteria would immensely increase the number of women that avail the benefits available to them. Rather than educate people in a symptom-wise manner, a much more effective manner that would carry through generations would be to eliminate the root of the symptoms and make the women literate and aware at a young age. The onus is on the government to make sure the schemes they put in place are known to the people they are aimed at and not just fake promises made in the name of votes. If a benefit has been promised, it must be pursued.

A lot of women are also wronged in the household behind closed doors and never speak out about it for the fear of harm to themselves or worse, their children. This fear-driven decision-making is strongly stemmed from their belief in dependence, a mind-set that leads women to believe that they are handicapped without the support and income from their husbands. It is then imperative for these women to know that there are several services in place to help them in case they decide to stand for themselves and that they are not alone without their abusive husbands and are supported by the government to lead a life without the money from their husbands.

The hope is that the information relayed to the group we trained is strongly retained, spread wide, and made common knowledge in order to begin a wave of empowerment of women through their own, self-reliant, independent, fearless means. In order to mark the end of a successful training session that hopes to direct the women to be louder, stronger, and more aware, the researchers gifted them with purses to signify a new start to their independence.

Further research in the area of women empowerment for rural women is highly required because this will lead to increased labour force participation and also increased human capital through good health and education of children. Children are highly influenced by what they face and experience in childhood. If boys see that women are inferior in the household, or girls see that they are not on par with the boys, they will grow up with this attitude and this has bad long-term effects. If the mother is physically or mentally abused or mistreated, this creates psychological stress among children which is not good for their health. A mother's attitude is transferred to children, positive or negative. Empowered mothers can boost both the physical and mental health of their children. It was seen during the training that women were dependent on ASHA workers even to read forms, and these workers are not forthcoming to help, and thus the situation becomes problematic. The reduction in the gender gap leads to the development of countries. Women should be aware of policies and interventions set up by the government. Until patriarchal thinking is removed, the success of policies is difficult.

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## Appendix

**Table A1** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Maximum	Minimum
Women's empowerment	285	20.90	3.42	12	32
Women's education	285	1.28	1.12	0	4
Women's knowledge of legal rights)	285	3.99	1.61	0	6
Women's knowledge of political rights	285	0.78	0.41	0	1
Mother's education	285	0.12	0.47	0	2
Assets owned	285	0.22	0.41	0	1
Self-esteem	285	3.33	0.66	1	4
Present household assets	285	48.82	11.29	28	104
Employment status of women	285	0.27	0.45	0	1
Husband's education	285	2.13	1.18	0	4

Source: Authors' calculations



**Table A2** Details of the variables

Variables	Measurement
Women' empowerment	Questions were asked pertaining to domestic decision-making, freedom of movement, access, and control of resources, and couple communication. The index formed on the basis of this ranges between 0 (no say in any matter) and 33 (have say in all questions asked)
Women's education	Illiterate—0, class V passed—1, class X passed—2, class XII passed—3, graduate and above—4
Women's knowledge of legal rights	It is an index based on seven indicators including seven indicators that include if they vote, vote without anyone's influence, the knowledge that all siblings have the right to property, the knowledge that dowry is prohibited, knowledge about government schemes on microcredit and female child, knowledge about laws on domestic violence. It can thus range from 0 (awareness about nothing) to 7 (awareness about all questions asked)
Women's knowledge of political rights	Awareness that females can fight elections: Yes—1 and No—0
Mother's education	Whether mother is educated or not: Yes—1 and No—0
Assets owned	Possess land in their name: Yes—1 and No—0
Self-esteem	Index based on their views on: whether they feel they are beautiful; if they feel they are role models as wife and mother; their views on whether their households can run without them. So it can range from 0 (no to all questions) and 4 (yes to all questions)
Present household assets	Household Asset Index as formed by Banerjee et al. (2020) (based on Kingdon (1996) has been used here. Ownership of 18 assets were asked and each asset was assigned a weight based on their current market price. The index ranges from 0 (possess none of the assets inquired) to 239 (possess all of the assets inquired).
Employment status of women	Employed outside or not: Yes—1 and No—0
Husband's education	Illiterate—0, class V passed—1, class X passed—2, class XII passed—3, graduate and above—4

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# The Voice of Women in Higher Education: Current Perspectives of Students in Germany, Japan and Taiwan. A Contrastive Analysis of Western and Eastern Perceptions of Women Empowerment and Gender Roles Among Students



Siao-cing (Michelle) Guo, Eriko Katsumata, Birgit Kraus, and Renate Link

**Abstract** In recent years, women empowerment has become a focus of attention, and the world is paying increased attention to women's education and its connection to power, status and equal opportunities. This chapter is a comparative study of women's education, influence and social standing in Germany, Taiwan, and Japan. In Asia, Taiwan has females playing an active role in society, while Japan is still facing some challenges. By comparing such contrasting Asian countries with Germany, a Western country, the research explores what young people—female and male university students—think of the status quo of women in student and working life. The study's method of research is to carry out a survey among undergraduate and graduate students from both genders at universities in Germany, Taiwan, and Japan with regard to the education, the status and empowerment of women in all areas of society. The survey questionnaire addresses aspects ranging from women's behaviour, expectations, requirements and challenges at university to 'female' roles, projections, needs and pitfalls on the job and within the family. Gender-specific analyses of the replies will be contrasted with the aim of identifying underlying

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similarities and differences in the mindsets of female and male students. Based on the results, further expert interviews are conducted to confirm the findings, to close potential research gaps and to compare the results among the three countries. The values and attitudes of the young generations as well as understanding these better will certainly be the key to future improvements in women empowerment.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Women in higher education · Gender-specific perceptions · Roles of women · East vs. West

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, women empowerment has become a focus of attention, and the world is paying augmented attention to women's education and its connection to power, status and equal opportunities. This chapter is a comparative study of women's education, influence and social standing in Germany, Taiwan, and Japan. As also reflected by the statistics below, in Asia, Taiwan has females playing a comparatively active role in society, while Japan is still facing some challenges.

Regarding gender equality, in 2021, Germany was ranked 11th with 0.796 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021a) and Taiwan 29th with 0.746 in 2020 (2021 Gender at a glance in R. O. C. (Taiwan), 2021). Among major Asian countries, Taiwan performed better than Singapore (0.724), China (0.676), the Republic of Korea (0.672), and Japan (0.652).

In spite of recent accomplishments regarding women's rights, gender equality and continued initiatives to increase the number of female researchers and professors, the actual numbers of female professors have been stagnating in all three countries (cf. 3.). For example, only around 26% of all full-time professors in Germany are currently held by women although over 50% of all first-semester students are female and the percentage rate of completed doctoral dissertations among women amounts to 45% (cf. Himmelrath, 2021).

Women's empowerment and the relationship between women's education and their power, status, and equal opportunity in Japan have gained attention within the country and worldwide recently. According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (2021) the percentage of female lecturers in universities has reached a record high of 26.4%. However, women, as (Lau, 2020, n. p.) mentions, account for "(...) only 16% of researchers or professors, according to the government's Women and Men in Japan 2019 report: the worst figure in the OECD. At elite institutions, the figure drops further. And less than 10% of Japanese university leaders are female".

According to the Taiwanese Ministry of Education (2022), currently 49.53% of all undergraduate students and 46.96% of all graduate students are women. Looking closely into the statistical analysis, researchers found that the number of the female students in the doctoral programs plummeted to 35.84%. Considering the number of female professors, according to Chiapei Chou, the first female executive vice-president of one of Taiwan's leading universities, "(...) in Taiwan, there is not so

much a glass ceiling for female academics as a ‘net ceiling’, through which women can pass if they are determined enough” (ibid.).

In a nutshell, with regard to female participation and representation in education, Germany, Japan and Taiwan can still be considered as masculine societies, which are rather driven by competition and achievement. Taiwan, though, has a slight tendency towards being a female society, where consideration for others and the quality of life are considered as success, (cf. Hofstede Insights, n.d., n. p.), which corresponds to the above-stated higher permeability at Taiwanese universities.

## 2 Methodological Approach

Flick (2018, 7) argues for the usage of a mixed-method approach: “Qualitative and quantitative research can mutually support each other and provide a fuller picture of the issue under study.” In this case, interview results provide concrete examples underlining the results of the survey.

The study followed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods: The research group carried out an online survey as well as guideline interviews among undergraduate as well as graduate students of both genders from Germany, Japan, and Taiwan. The main fields of studies of these students were business administration, business psychology, international politics, international economics, and international communication.

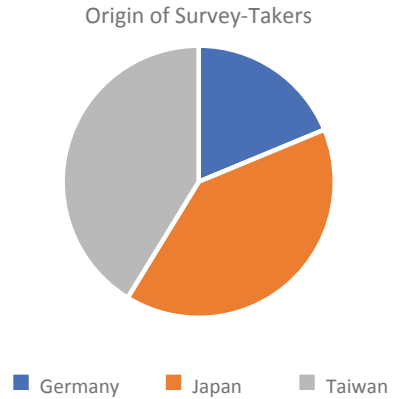
### 2.1 Short Description of the Online Survey

The survey questionnaire addressed aspects ranging from women’s behaviour, expectations, requirements and challenges at university to ‘female’ roles, projections, needs and pitfalls on the job and within the family to be able to contrast gender-specific analyses of the replies with the aim of identifying underlying similarities and differences in the mindsets of female and male students.

The survey technique was utilised to investigate women’s status quo in general, student life, career decision-making, and the workplace. The survey contained 21 quantitative questions and 19 open-ended questions. Among the 21 items, 11 were in a five-point Likert Scale, and 7 of them had a dichotomous choice of yes and no, and the other three had the options of ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘no differences’. The researchers administered the survey online to college and graduate students in Germany, Japan, and Taiwan.

The survey consisted of three questions on demographic information, four questions on the general status quo of women, seventeen questions on the status quo of women in student life and twelve questions on the status quo of women in working life. Here, a mixture of open-ended, yes/no questions and multiple-choice questions served as a basis. Survey-takers were also asked to outline their attitudes towards the

**Fig. 1** Distribution of survey-takers by country



fear of devaluation and an uncertain future during their studies and/or work. For this, eight statements had to be rated on a scale from 1 to 5.

To identify the three main structures, including educational inequality, facing failure, and workplace equality, Crosstabs, *t*-test, and ANOVA procedures were performed. The results yielded *no significant differences* in most items across genders, age groups, and regions. A quantitative text analysis of the textual data of the descriptive responses to the questionnaire survey was conducted to clarify the research questions. The 19 open-ended responses to the questionnaire were subjected to textual data analysis (see Table A1 in appendices). First, a comparison of genders, three countries, and distinctive results was analysed. Then, the text data were analysed for the answers to the 6 questions with 78 or more responses (see Table A2 in appendices).

All survey responses were analysed using MAXQDA (2022) which automatically extracted the most frequently appearing words. Prepositions, adverbs, and indecipherable characters were excluded as stop words. Frequent words in responses to each question were compared by country and gender.

The sentiment analysis matrix was compared by country and gender using automatic judgments based on the sentiment analysis provided by MAXQDA. The sentiments were categorised into six codes: five levels from positive to negative and no sentiment. The country and gender sentiment analysis matrices from the automated judgments were compared, and then each comment was manually coded. Based on this, the six codes without sentiment and neutral were deleted and re-categorised into four codes with four levels ranging from positive to negative.

Among 80 respondents, 14 were males, and 66 were females; 51 respondents were between 18 and 21, and 29 were between 22 and 29. As Fig. 1 indicates, there were 33 respondents from Taiwan, 32 from Japan, and 15 from Germany.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The low number of responses by Germans is due to a cyber-attack on the participating German university which coincided with the survey period. The authors are aware of this limitation and the resulting need for further research data from Germany.

## 2.2 *Short Description of the Interviews*

The authors conducted six short guideline interviews with two expert representatives of the target group from each country, one male, one female. These interviews were used to confirm the findings, to close potential research gaps and to compare the results among the three countries. The conversations lasted between 12 and 27 min and focused on the following three questions:

1. Please tell about a situation where you observed that you or someone else was treated differently due to gender. What were the circumstances? How did the person solve the situation?
2. Consider your own university. What differences regarding men and women do you observe? Take in consideration the subject-specific culture, but also different status groups such as students, teachers, researchers, and support staff.
3. Think about friends or relatives, who have children. Give an example of how children changed their working life. If you have children, you can give an example from your own experience.

The interviews were transcribed and underwent a qualitative content analysis using both an inductive and deductive approach (cf. e.g. Mayring, 2022).

## 3 **Women in Higher Education and Society: Status Quo**

### 3.1 *Germany*

#### **Women in Higher Education**

For several decades, the empowerment of women in higher education has been promoted in Germany. The topic has entered legislation as well as target agreements between the states, which are responsible for education, and higher education institutions, and various measures have been introduced to enhance the position of women.

Higher education legislation in all German states requires universities and universities of applied sciences to ensure gender equality and to reduce possible disadvantages due to gender (e.g., Article 10, Bavarian Higher Education Act, in German: Bayerisches Hochschulgesetz, BayHSchG, 2022). The nomination of Women's Affairs Officers on Executive-Board Level of universities is mandatory in all states (e.g., Article 4, Bavarian Higher Education Act), and gender equality is an interdisciplinary topic addressed in Sect. 15 of the *Specimen decree pursuant to Article 4, paragraphs 1–4 of the interstate study accreditation treaty (2022)*, the German legislation on external quality assurance of degree programmes.

In order to enhance the proportion of women among faculty, target agreements, e.g., between the German State of Bavaria and the higher education institutions in this state are made and women quotas among professors are set, usually about 25%



(Zielvereinbarung, 2019). In addition to that, nearly all universities have obtained the certificate “family-friendly higher education institution” through a special audit, which contains individual targets and measurements, which help faculty and staff to link profession and family responsibilities. Family offices give advice on childcare facilities in the surroundings as well as special training on time management and for team leaders (berufundfamilie, 2022).

However, the current situation shows that there is still a lot to be done to ensure academic gender equality. The higher the qualification and/or the academic position in academia is, however, the proportion of women decreases. According to Blaeschke and Freitag (2022, 116) more than half of first semester students in 2018 were women (51%), and 51% of graduates were women as well. 45% of PhDs in 2018 were obtained by women, however only 24.7% of professors in higher education were female. 53% of higher education employees were women. In contrast, academic collaborators had a far lower female proportion (39.7%).

In addition, the covid-19-pandemic has considerably affected the success of female researchers, who had to combine qualification, research and not seldom household chores suddenly due to the lockdown periods in the past 2.5 years. For example, female researchers have been publishing significantly less than their male counterparts during the pandemic (Forschung & Lehre, 2020).

Moreover, Blaeschke and Freitag (2022, 111) demonstrate that the choice of subject is gender-related in Germany. Whereas 70% of the students in humanities medicine were female in 2018, only 27% of the students enrolled in engineering were female in the same year. Since engineering professions pay more than humanities, and that entering the work market with an engineering degree is easier, this leads to a vicious circle once women start a family.

On a national level, there are several initiatives to motivate women to study STEM-subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) such as the “National Pact for Women in STEM-Professions”, “Girls Days” at universities offering STEM-programmes, special support offers for female STEM-graduates, scholarships for female students in STEM-subjects or specialised networking associations (cf. academics, 2019).

### **Females in the Workplace**

In 2005, Germany introduced a paid parental leave. According to the brochure on parental leave published on the website of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth (2021, 18), full-time paternal leave lasts up to a maximum of 1 month under the condition that both parents go on parental leave, the minimum being 2 months. The Federal Statistical Office of Germany (2021) states that in 2020, only about 28% of the fathers planned to take more than these 2 months of paternal leave; the largest proportion was ensured by women—62% of the new mothers in 2020 applied for parental allowance for at least 10 months.

Parental allowance for paternal leave is income-related, the maximum being paid is 1800€/month (cf. Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, 2021, 33). Therefore, the parent with the lower salary often takes most of the time—usually the women. Statista-Database (2022) indicates that about two

thirds of all women in Germany earn less than 1500€ net per month, whereas this concerns only half of the men.

As childcare facilities are not easy to obtain, women are also more likely to extend their paternal leave. At present 342,000 places for childcare are missing for the age group 1–3 (Handelsblatt, 2020), even though parents have the right to obtain a place in the facility for their 1-year-old, and there is a right for kindergarten as well (Deutscher Bildungsserver, 2022).

## 3.2 *Japan*

### **Women in Japan**

In March 2021, the World Economic Forum announced The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021a). Japan ranked 120th of 156 countries around the world, which was the lowest among developed countries and lower than South Korea, China, and ASEAN countries among Asian countries, with both score and rank remaining unchanged compared to the previous report.

Japan's ranking is particularly low in the categories of economy (117th out of 156 countries) and politics (147th out of 156 countries). In politics, Japan's score has risen because of its increasing efforts towards gender equality, but its ranking has fallen because other countries are also working on gender equality.

In the economic sector, it is observed that 72% of women are in the labour force; the percentage of women in management positions is low (14.7%), while in part-time positions it is almost double that of men; and average income of women is 43.7% lower than that of men.

### **Female Students**

In Japan, it is common for high school students to choose either a liberal arts or science and maths career path. According to the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2017), the gender ratio of elementary school students who list science and maths as their favourite subjects is low, but from junior high school, female students become less interested in science and maths. Furthermore, the percentage of female students in science and maths tends to decline sharply once they enter university or graduate school.

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (2022), although many children have a high science and maths literacy, the percentage of children opting for a science-related field falls to about 20% when choosing between arts and science in upper secondary school. The percentage of female students selecting a science-related field is 16% compared to that of 27% of male students, although there is no significant difference to males in terms of science and maths literacy. Moreover, at the university level, only 17% of Japanese students pursue science and engineering degrees compared to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 27%. The

gender gap is also striking, with 28% of male students majoring in science and technology at the undergraduate level compared to only 7% of the female students.

As specified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (2020), the percentage of female students in undergraduate, graduate (master's), and doctoral programs was 45.5, 31.8, and 34.0%, respectively. By major field of study, the percentage of female students is high in all courses in humanities, pharmacy, nursing, and in undergraduate and graduate (master-level) courses in education, while the percentage of female students is extremely low in all courses in science and engineering, showing a gender bias by major field of study.

Recently, several of Japanese companies have made efforts to increase the number of women in technical positions; however, the proportion of women enrolling for science is low at the student level which affects their employability in technical positions—hence the need for female students opting for science at the educational level.

### **Female Faculty**

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (2021) released the preliminary results of the 2021 Basic School Survey. The percentage of female teachers in junior high schools, high schools, special-needs schools, and universities reached a record high of 44, 32.9, 62.3, and 26.4%, respectively.

According to the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2021b), in terms of elementary and secondary education, the percentage of female teachers in 2020 was approximately 60% for elementary schools, 40% for junior high schools, and 20% for high schools. Specifically, the percentage of female principals is low with 20% in elementary schools and less than 10% in junior high and high schools.

Furthermore, looking at the percentage of female faculty members at universities, graduate schools, and junior colleges in FY 2020, the percentage of female faculty members at junior colleges is approximately 50%, while the percentage at universities and graduate schools is only about 25%. The percentage of female professors is particularly low: less than 40% at junior colleges and well below 20% at universities and graduate schools, and by field of specialisation, the percentage of female professors is low in all fields, too.

Thus, relating to positions, the percentage of female full-time professors is low but female assistant and associate professors are common in all majors. In terms of fields of specialisation, there are few science and mathematics majors with the majority of majors in humanities owing to women withdrawing from science and mathematics fields.

### **Females at Work**

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2020), the labour force participation rates for unmarried women, married women, and bereaved or separated women were 66.5, 55.9, and 31.3% respectively. In Japan, most women tend to quit their jobs after marriage or childbirth to concentrate on raising their children. The government provides maternity leave benefits to encourage women to return to work after childbirth. According to the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2021b), the chart comparing the change in the female labour rate by age group (5-year age

group) shows that the '25–29' age group accounts for the highest percentage increase in the female labour rate with 85.9% in 2020, 69.9% in 2000, and 49.2% in 1980. The labour force participation rates for all age groups have been at record-high levels since 1980 and have increased in all age groups, although the curve is M-shaped.

The childcare leave system is 1 year by law resp. One year and two months if taken by two persons through the paternity leave system, and up to 2 years if there is a reason such as inability to enter a day-care centre. Furthermore, according to a revised law, postnatal paternity leave will come into effect in October 2022, allowing up to 4 weeks within 8 weeks of the birth (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022).

The breakdown of female applicants for employment (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2021b) by desired employment type depicts non-regular employees (71.4%) and regular employees (15.9%); by reason for not seeking work, 33.2% stated they were unlikely to find suitable work, followed by 27.5% for childbirth/childcare, 16.6% for health reasons, and 6.2% for nursing/caregiving. These results reveal that most women are non-regular employees, have difficulty finding work, and are responsible for raising children and caring for elderly and other family members.

### 3.3 *Taiwan*

#### **Women in Academia**

The conventional conception of men being superior to women has long been recognised in Taiwan. In old times, boys were preferred over girls, and the role of women was not valued (Shih & Wang, 2022, p. 45). The ascribed role of Taiwanese women in society traditionally is to take care of their families and children. Due to the low status and expectations of women, there has always been a lack of women's representation in education and in academia.

However, the low education rate among females in Taiwan has significantly improved in recent decades. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Education (2022), the female-to-male ratio at university level has come close to 50% to 50% in the last 10 years. When examining the statistics after the bachelor's degree, it is found that the female and male ratio is still at 46.96–53.04% in master's programmes, but drops to 35.84–64.16% in Ph.D. programmes in the academic year 2021–2022 (ibid.). These statistics show that the higher the academic level, the lower the proportion of female students, which indicates that women are more hesitant when considering advancing their educational degrees.

The stereotyping of males and females in formal schooling influences the gendered nature of education (Amponsah et al., 2014, pp. 2–4). The field of science has been dominated by men resulting in scarce participation of women in science related fields (Lin et al., 2021, pp. 171–172). According to Shih and Wang (2022, p. 45), however, women in Taiwan have been gradually recognised academically in the

1990s, giving women more opportunities and development in education; in 2004, Taiwan enacted the Gender Equality Education Law to provide equal education for males and females; from 2010 to the 2020s, Taiwan has continued seeking gender equality actively. Until today, female students are prone to study humanities, social science, and education with the percentages of 64.58, 60.27, and 65.23% respectively. By contrast, male students are prone to study information and technology, engineering, manufacturing and construction, and sciences with the percentages of 72.07, 80.52, and 56.79%, respectively (Ministry of Education R. O. C. (Taiwan), 2022). Female representation in science-related fields is still low.

### **Women in the Workplace**

In Taiwan, men were regarded as the most valuable asset in the family, and only men could inherit the family fortune and business. Women were considered to be the deadweight in the family; families expected a bride's fee or a dowry (Francis, 2011, p. 814) because it is costly to raise a girl. The education level of women did not converge with that of men until 1991. The advancement in education enhances women's employment opportunities and status. Since the 1970s, the female labour force participation rate in Taiwan has grown rapidly but has only increased to 50% in the past decade (Yi & Chang, 2020, p. 217). However, limited by society's attitudes toward traditional female roles, women are often confined by societal expectations. They have to balance the duties and demands between work and family after they enter the workplace, while men are less likely to deal with both work and family. Moreover, women often choose to leave the workplace for family reasons (Chuang & Lee, 2003, p. 436).

In academia, based on the statistics provided by Taiwan's Ministry of Education (2022), females only account for 36.57% of the faculty numbers in higher education in the year of 2021. In terms of different rankings, the percentages of female faculty as lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors were 56.82, 40.48, 37.06, and 23.75% respectively. These numbers indicate that female teachers only have a high proportion in lower ranks. In the associate professor and full-professor ranks, the number of females is significantly lower than their male counterparts. Apparently, females in academia are still underrepresented in senior leadership roles and managerial positions (Chen & Hsieh, 2018).

Nevertheless, the status of females in Taiwan has improved due to the reforms in advocating and enforcing gender equality in the legal systems (Yi & Chang, 2020, p. 217). As a result, females have become more liberated and begun to take more part in different realms of work and influence. Taking civil servants as an example, the ratio of female civil servants has slightly increased from 42.1% in 2017 to 42.5% in 2021. In terms of the positions in the government administration, the female-to-male ratio has dropped to 39.2–60.8%, but the female ratio has experienced a stable growth from 38.7% in 2017 to 39.2% in 2021. Female legislators account for 30.5% compared to 20.5% 10 years ago, an increase of 10%. The number of female representatives in legislation in Taiwan even is slightly higher than that of Germany, 29.9% and much higher than that of Japan, 13.3% (National Statistics, R. O. C., 2021). Female CEOs from public companies account for 14.9% which amounts to a

1.4%-increase from that of 2017 (ibid.). In recent years, because of Taiwan’s Gender Equality Law implemented in 2002, females’ positions have gradually increased in the workplace including government administration, executive management positions, and technical professionals (Ministry of Labour, 2021). All in all, female representation in the workplace in Taiwan has made a considerable progress in the last few decades.

## 4 Women in Education and Society

### 4.1 Overall Survey Results

In terms of a dominant academic culture conducive to academic success for either males or females, there were *no significant differences* among genders, age groups, and regions either.

With reference to the soft skills required for studying successfully observed among males and females, the respondents from the two different age groups 18–21 and 22–29 did not have an equal distribution,  $X^2(2, N = 80) = 8.68, p < .01$ . Within the younger age group, 70.6% thought there was no difference, 23.5% agreed, and 5.9% disagreed. Within the older age group, 55.2% agreed, 37.9% stated that there was no difference, and 6.9% disagreed (Table 1).

Regarding the difference in academic communication styles among males and females, within the younger group, 70.6% claimed that there was no difference, 17.6% agreed, and 11.89% disagreed,  $X^2(2, N = 80) = 17.38, p < .001$ . Within the older group, only 24.1% were of the opinion that there was no difference, 58.6% agreed, and 17.2% disagreed (Table 2).

When encountering failure, the respondents from the younger age groups ( $M = 3.55, SD = 1.12$ ) tended to blame themselves for lacking the necessary talents more than the ones from the older group ( $M = 2.83, SD = 1.20$ ),  $t = 2.60, p < .01$ . When conducting a region-specific analysis using ANOVA, the respondents from

**Table 1** The results of Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for soft skills by age

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No difference (%)	Chi-square
Younger (18–21)	23.5	5.9	70.6	.01*
Older (22–29)	55.2	6.9	37.9	

\*  $P < .05$

**Table 2** The results of Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for communication styles by age

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No difference (%)	Chi-square
Younger (18–21)	17.6	11.89	70.6	.00**
Older (22–29)	58.6	17.2	24.1	

\*\*  $P < .01$

**Table 3** The results from one-way ANOVA across regions

	Japan		German		Taiwan		F(2,77)	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Lack talent	3.31	1.38	2.20	1.15	2.88	1.17	4.07	.02*

\* $P < .05$

Japan tended to think that if they encountered failure, it was because they were not smart enough  $F(2, 77) = 4.07, p = .021$  (Table 3).

## 4.2 Survey Data Results

As specified in chapter “Transforming Intercultural Critical Incidents of Women into Transcultural and Transcendental Growth Experiences”, survey items consisted of 21 quantitative questions and 19 open-ended questions. Of these 19 items, 6 were analysed. These six items were selected because the number of open-ended responses varied by question, as shown in Table A1 in the appendices. Therefore, only the questions no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 13, and 15, which had more than 78 responses, were selected for analysis due to their statistical significance.

### Results and Data Analysis

#### Question 1 What is the expectation from women in your country’s society?

Figure A1 (see appendices) shows the data results for *Question 1*. All three countries (Germany, Japan, and Taiwan) have similar results. Negative responses are those in which women are expected to do everything: housework, care for children and elderly, and work, which, despite all effort is still a fact as mentioned in Sect. 3. Among the country-specific differences, in Japan, respondents commented that ‘women should have good cooking skills’. This is probably because women still do household chores as a custom. There was a comment from Japan that ‘women should be good at cooking and cleaning, not be too needy, be beautiful, and be working full-time.’ However, there were no such comments on cooking in the Taiwanese and German responses. This states the importance of food in Japan and the responsibility of women in nurturing the health of their families.

Among the three countries, a common remark was regarding women’s behaviour that included words such as gentle, ladylike, graceful, beautiful, diligent, obedient, friendly, cute, girlish, and warm. Comparing the responses of men and women, several men responded that society was changing. For example, one man wrote, ‘I think the society in Taiwan expected women to be housewives before the 1990s, but now Taiwan has empowered women to undertake their preferred jobs and do things they like’.

#### Question 2 What do you think is unequal between men and women in your country?

Figure A2 (see appendices) shows the data results for *Question 2* and shows that all three countries have similar results of negative responses. All three

countries' responses indicated that men and women are unequal. The most common responses in all three countries indicate that the first difference was salary, followed by career opportunities for men.

Additionally, responses from all three countries included values, traditions, and customs of 'women not being taken seriously'. A respondent from Germany stated, 'The way a man's or woman's authority is perceived. The way women are treated, like they can do less, even though they deliver the same quality work. The man's physical superiority is projected onto his mental abilities, making the man appear superior overall, which is a complete hoax'.

The Taiwanese comments demonstrated that grandparents favour grandsons and that the elderly have a male-dominated mindset. The responses from Taiwan stated, 'Most parents or grandparents still want a baby boy than a baby girl' and 'Although Taiwan has been pursuing gender equality for years, some elderly still think that having a boy is better than having a girl', indicating the influence of Taiwanese cultural values. Such responses were not observed in Germany and Japan.

Even in the case of gender inequality, Japanese responses to inequality are given only in the context of working women. Responses from Japan included, 'Women get fewer job opportunities' and 'Women executives are much less than men'.

### **Question 3 How could/should this inequality be addressed in your opinion?**

Figure A3 (see appendices) shows the data results for *Question 3* and indicates that all three countries have similar results of positive responses. Overall, comparing country and gender, many respondents said that governments should amend laws. A respondent from Germany said, 'It needs to be addressed publicly. People need to be made aware of it. Laws should be enforced, for example, guarantee fair pay, etc.'. A respondent from Taiwan demanded, 'Establish more equal laws about gender equality'. A Japanese respondent stated, 'There should be a law to encourage women to have better environments'.

The results show that respondents believe that gender inequality should be eliminated; however, it varies from country to country. The next most common answer by the respondents in Taiwan and Germany indicated a need for advocating equality, especially to children and elderly. A response from Taiwan claimed, 'Through education, the old ideas of the previous generation would be replaced over time'. A response from Germany said, 'Teach children that expectations were equal and that both genders could have the same level'. The Japanese responses stated that men and women should raise children equally, and nevertheless, men should speak out against gender equality. A Japanese respondent maintained, 'I think both women and men should have easy access to maternity and paternity leave without pressure' and 'I think men should raise their voice against this kind of inequality, too. As long as there is only women's voice in this, nothing gets resolved'. Apparently, already existing legislation in all three countries is a start for improvement, but still insufficient.

There were also responses analysed by country and gender that establishing an equal society would take time.



A respondent from Japan said the following in this regard:

Gender discrimination is perceived as a part of the culture in Japan, and I think it will change gradually over a period of time. I believe that the younger generation is relatively immune to this culture, but they can be trained and educated as they enter the Japanese workforce. People will gradually change and new values will become the norm eventually. I think the only way to survive in a Japanese society is to be patient because it is important to not offend.

**Question 4 What is the key to (more) gender equality from your perspective?**

Figure A4 (see appendices) shows the data results for *Question 4* and highlights that all three countries have similar results of positive responses. More specifics about gender equality were answered in *Question 4* than in *Question 3*. The responses were compared by country and gender, but overall, the focus was on new laws, eliminating stereotypes, changing traditional values, respect for all human beings, and educating equality. A response from Japan indicated the importance of education in this question, ‘Education. It is necessary to teach the young generation about gender equality.’ A response from Germany pointed out the importance of new laws, ‘Introduce new laws and guidelines. Talk about the problem openly’. Moreover, the responses from Taiwanese emphasised the importance of education and laws, ‘The quality and education level of people’ and ‘Fair opportunities, laws, and regulations’.

One particular response from a Japanese man was very interesting. He pointed out the following:

I think it is a matter of working freely without being bound by the existing values from those who can. I think gender discrimination encompasses differences in values between generations and discrimination against men by women. Some women who are valued by existing rules have more powerful ideas than men, and I do not think that the object of discrimination should change. Therefore, I hope that eliminating inequality will lead to the creation of new values.

He suggests that women also discriminate.

**Question 13 How would you describe the current professional situation of women in your country?**

Regarding the current professional situation of women in each country (see Fig. A5 in appendices), some respondents said that it was improving, while others mentioned that it still needed improvement. Comparing by country, Germany still had many negative responses, while Taiwan and Japan had equal positive and negative responses. The responses from Germany are as follows: ‘Women have several job options, although most jobs are gender-specific jobs, there are opportunities for women to foray into different job roles irrespective of gender’ and ‘Most women work only part-time and for considerably less money than men’. A response from Taiwan stated, ‘There are certainly some discriminations against women when applying for a position, especially for those who are unmarried and childless. Moreover, maternity leave is a huge hurdle for women in the job market’. The responses from Japanese survey-takes are as follows: ‘Nowadays, many women

work at the office even after childbirth’ and ‘The number of working or executive women seems to have increased.’

Comparing by gender (see Fig. A6 in appendices), more positive responses were given by men than women. For example, ‘women can get whatever job they want just like men’ and ‘Women in Taiwan can freely choose the jobs they prefer’. Comparing the positive responses by gender, female positive responses indicate that the current situation is better than before, while male positive responses indicate that there is no problem with the current situation, indicating a difference in perception of the current situation by gender. However, both men and women acknowledged that the current situation was still not equal and needed transformation.

**Question 15 How would you describe the current status and power of working women in your country?**

Compared by country (see Fig. A7 in appendices), there are roughly equal positive and negative responses. In terms of gender, as with Question 13, males responded more positively than females. Specifically, German women’s responses were more negative, whereas Taiwanese and Japanese women’s responses were more positive. The responses of Taiwanese women are as follows: ‘We have a female president which is quite rare around the world (though it has become more and more common)’ and ‘It is getting better as working women and women in a higher position are more socially accepted than before’. A Japanese woman said ‘I think they are doing their best to help the future generation of women to be able to work in a more comfortable condition’.

As both Taiwan and Germany have resp. had female prime ministers, it is assumed that there is less inequality between men and women in these countries than that in Japan. However, text data analysis reveals that inequality between men and women persists in all three countries. Further, it shows that Taiwan and Japan have improved on gender inequality compared to previous years. However, respondents in all three countries say that further improvement is required in terms of new legislations and government suggestions to reduce gender inequality. Education plays a crucial role in changing the mindset that men are better than women, as not only men and elderly but also some women hold old, male-dominated values.

None of the interviewees, no matter from which country, mentioned legislative or official inequality in higher education. There was only one response that indicated that there are fewer women in science and maths: ‘Sons are expected to go into STEM, whereas people are still surprised when a woman enters that space’.

Furthermore, once women start working, they have fewer job opportunities than men, and it is difficult for women to achieve higher positions. Additionally, women are expected to do all household chores, child rearing, and family care while working or after quitting their jobs, which indicates inequality.

### 4.3 *Expert Interview Results*

On a general basis, intercultural settings can also challenge gender roles in academia. One male German interview partner described a situation at a German university when a foreign male guest only addressed him but seemed to ignore the female professors present. The situation could not be solved. Apparently, the guest was not aware of cultural differences. The question is, though, how to prepare foreign guests for a visit in order to avoid bad treatment due to gender, which was the case, at least from the German point of view.

(1) “And also, when other professors were introduced, he was rather orienting the whole talk to me instead of the female professors who were also on campus and actually on a higher level or higher status than I have. And that was a bit weird for me and also for my female colleagues, I fear, as they were also the inviting ones.” (*male student from Germany*)

An interviewee from Taiwan presented a situation in which gender equality was emphasised where it was actually not needed. Classes in her elementary school were supposed to name representatives for a gymnastics performance, a boy and a girl by all means, even though the boys were not interested. A second girl from the class was not allowed to act as representative first, only after a discussion among teachers.

(2) “But in my class, there was me and another girl who danced better than all the other children in my class. I was in a more feminine hair style at that time. But the girl, she was a judo athlete. So, she had short hair like a boy. So, she once told me that she was worried she couldn’t get the chance to be the representative. So, she wanted me and her to tell the teacher that she can be in the boys’ position and I could be in the girls’ position. (. . .). At the end, the teacher had the discussion with the other principals and teachers at the school, and she may have in mind that we two can be the representatives for our class.” (*female student from Taiwan*)

This example shows, however, that equality is emphasized and that equal representation is considered seriously by the institutions.

The same female interview partner from Taiwan actually observed in sports classes at university that female teachers were stricter when female students asked to be excused from class due to their period. The male teachers obviously feared complaints about discrimination, and was obviously aware of legislation and societal demands concerning gender equality.

(3) “But I have heard that in some universities, the teachers don’t really believe them and want them to come to class, even though they said they aren’t feeling good. (. . .) If the teacher is male, he doesn’t actually interfere in any of these requests. They might be afraid that something bad happens to them because they are not of the same gender. So other people might think that this teacher is very bad. And a teacher of the same gender will not receive that much complaint.” (*female student from Taiwan*)

In the university world, in all the three countries which are part of this contribution, gender seems to considerably affect the choice of subject. Whereas men obviously prefer engineering and science, women tend to prefer languages, but also finance and intercultural topics, which corresponds to official findings and statistics as indicated in Sect. 3.

(4) “Then in Taiwan, women are usually more than men in finance, languages. But in science and mechanics, the men are usually more than women instead. So that is what I observed in Taiwan.” (*male student from Taiwan*)

(5) “In my department [Intercultural Communication], there are 70 people in one grade, but only 15 are male, and the other people are women.” (*female student from Japan*)

(6) “Here I can say, I can still see a strong division between the engineering faculty and the faculty for business and law, as there is a huge difference of female students. We have female students in business and law, and, depending on the subject, some subjects have more female students than male ones. And in the engineering faculty, this is not really the case.” (*male student from Germany*)

None of the interview partners mentioned a real discrimination situation at university. Still, one female student from Germany criticised that a male professor in data science would mostly address female students with questions in class; however, female students did not obtain worse grades in the exam.

(7) “And I remember that I myself was one of the women he asked. I knew the answer. But even if male students raised their hands, it was always the women that were questioned. (. . .) I managed to score an A+ in the exam and that made me really happy.” (*female student from Germany*)

In addition to that, according to the same interviewee, a male professor in finance would mainly present examples, e.g. for a tax report, where women earned considerably less than their husbands or even nothing at all.

(8) “And the last example is financial accounting. And again, most women earn a little less than men. We talked about taxing, I think, and he explained, if you invest more money than you earn with your company, you don’t have to publish a balance. And then he described that the housewife at home knits shawls or something and sells them at the Christmas Market. And this was the standard example: the housewife doing something.” (*female student from Germany*)

The examples might, unfortunately, reflect reality in Germany, as greater involvement in childcare as well as lack of childcare facilities often make women reduce their working hours, which results in less income (cf. Sect. 3). However, the instructor could have used these examples to enhance a deeper understanding of the issue and discuss societal consequences of income differences for women, such as reduced retirement, for example. He did not do so, though.

Studying with children is a general challenge. The female students from Taiwan gave an example of a fellow-student, who went back to obtain a degree, when her children were grown up.

(9) “One of my classmates, she is now in her forties, I think. She said she comes to the school to get a degree so that she can . . . so that she can take the teachers’ examination test. (. . .) She says she finally has time to do this because her daughter is now grown up and she has the time to pursue her dream. And she is glad that her husband supports her.” (*female student from Taiwan*)

Considering the fact that ageing societies require advanced retirement ages, continuing one’s education is a reasonable approach.

One of the German interview partners had observed that the university institution providing counselling for students with children was named women's and families' affairs office and that invitations for information sessions often were not sent to male students. In other words, university could serve more as an example for raising awareness for the men's role and responsibilities for gender equality. Already existing institutions required by law, as indicated in Sect. 3, are important but obviously insufficient, as legislation does not define or make suggestions how to live this role.

As far as the world of work is concerned, in all three countries children affect participation in working life, but there are also generational differences to be observed. The findings comply with the literature mentioned in Sect. 3. In the past, women would rather stay at home with their children, nowadays governmental policies encourage mothers to go to work.

(10) "but I remember opinions back to old time in Taiwan, if women have children, that some of them may be forced to quit their jobs. Because their supervisors think that it takes so much time for the women to get back to work. That was the past. But now our government in Taiwan has made some kind of laws or policies about women or men to have their right on parental leave without any excuses." (*male student from Taiwan*)

Putting these ideas into practice seems difficult though. One female interviewee from Japan mentioned that she observed that companies were angry when mothers left for maternity leave. Apparently, this creates a vicious circle as one male interview partner stated that some female fellow-graduates would choose the company in accordance with possibilities for 'husband hunting'.

(11) "I am not sure about the government thing. I think, on the surface, they are encouraging women to go back to their jobs after they give birth, but in... I think in like in the workplace, it's when women quit their job, it's going to be tough at (*the*) workplace, right. So, it's not a kind atmosphere at the workplace. So, like in Japan, we focus on harmony, and if one person quits the job, they are kind of like 'why?'" (*female student from Japan*)

(12) "I asked: "Why?" And then she said: "I am not looking for a big career, but I am looking for a future husband who has a high salary. We can't seek for a big career when we are women. We don't have a big proportion." (*male student from Japan*)

However, role models may have a positive effect. One female interviewee from Germany mentioned a manager from a company who encouraged his male colleagues to take paternal leave and even more than the 'usual' 2 months. Obviously, the motivation of the father is crucial in this situation as well.

(13) "And out of seven, only of them took parental leave. And he said he has a leading position and had leading positions in other companies, and he kind of encouraged other male colleagues or employees to take their parental leave, also at a time when men were just embarrassed to do it. And when they do it, they blame it on their wife. Or they wouldn't admit that it is their personal decision. But I think this is also changing. I have one example of a couple I am friends with. They are the first couple in my age group that have children, so they are both 25 and 26. And they also both took parental leave, and they split all their tasks equally. And the husband is very, very eager about splitting that time very equally." (*female student from Germany*)

## 5 Discussion

The outcomes of this study with regard to the values and attitudes of the young generations as well as understanding these better can be used as a basis for future improvements in women empowerment.

As for academics, women can pursue studies in all three examined countries, but the problem is that female students are not empowered in STEM areas as a concentration. Female students rate the subjects of mathematics, physics and chemistry as masculine (Makarova et al., 2019). Changing the image of maths and science in secondary education is important to increase the likelihood for female students to pursue STEM careers. Therefore, it is necessary to promote female studies and their specialisation in all subject areas, regardless of gender. In general, a lack of female representation in STEM areas reduces diversity and different perspectives on problem solving (Lin et al., 2021).

Regarding working life, there still are evident hurdles: women have fewer opportunities to work than men, there is a gap in salary, many women are non-regular employees because they do the housework, it is difficult to return to work after leaving, and it is impossible to become a female executive. The underlying study also showed that even if women receive the same education as men, there still is inequality in the workplace.

In the female research workforce, there are various factors such as a lack of role models, and gender bias, i. e. STEM research careers not being suitable for women, with a serious challenge also posed by work-life-balance (Shinohara, 2020). Therefore, further support is needed not only to increase the number of women in research positions, particularly in STEM fields, but also to support work-life-balance so that female researchers can continue their careers when founding a family.

With the proportion of young people declining demographically, women will need to work as much as men in the near future. In this situation, women will not be able any more to combine work with household duties, childcare and care for the elderly all at the same time. Younger generations of women are already now anxious and frustrated. Instead of looking at the past only to see that the status of women is better than a few decades ago, and instead of passively waiting for gradual changes over time, it is crucial to actively strive for making societies more equal as soon as possible. To achieve this, it is essential to create the necessary laws and rights and to educate the younger generation about gender equality. Improved laws provide a legal basis for gender equality, and simultaneously, education on gender issues at all levels can advance gender equality and help eradicate unfair practice (Shih & Wang, 2022).

Simultaneously, universities could obtain and live the role of changemakers more profoundly. In particular the expert interview results indicate that looking into the mirror of reality with its gender income differences, for example, could and should be used more thoroughly to enhance reflection among students on these issues. Instructors could encourage students as both future employers and employees to develop alternative ideas and practices for family-friendly working conditions which

disadvantage neither men nor women. Even though higher-education experts are often members of relevant committees and boards advising policy makers on governmental level, it is mainly the direct contact with students which enables and advances the application of theory in practice. Therefore, an intensified dialogue between these parties is vital for bringing about changes in the mindsets and realities of societies with regard to the promotion of women empowerment.

Some progress due to increased awareness has already been made across Asia, where “(. . .) the number of young women enrolling in higher education has risen across the continent to match or even slightly exceed enrolments by young men” (Lau, 2020, n. p.). Interestingly, “(. . .) top Asian business schools have a slightly higher proportion of female faculty than those based in the West, according to the 2020 Gender Balance Scorecard, (. . .)—although the figure is still only 28 per cent” (ibid).

However, as especially the months of campus closures and lockdowns related to covid-19 were impacting most females in education more than their male counterparts as the latter were more likely to have a partner to support them with the household and family chores (cf. ibid.), in the endemic era, heightened attention should be dedicated to securing and stabilising the fragile ‘net-ceiling’ that has already been achieved and making sure it does not re-transform into a ‘glass-ceiling’. This is a danger in all three examined countries—not only in Germany and Japan, countries scoring higher on masculinity than Taiwan (cf. Hofstede Insights, n.d., n. p.), that the women empowerment achievements of the past 50 years are led ad absurdum.

## 6 Conclusion

The authors also identified further fields for research concerning the world of higher education.

In all three countries examined, policies and institutions are in place to encourage female empowerment in the academic world. Even though societal change may need time, the influence of these policies and institutions seems limited, due to a lack of a strategic and holistic nature. It would be interesting to identify best practice examples and the intertwined circumstances which lead to success.

Moreover, from the experience of the authors, efficacy and efficiency of certain measures to encourage women empowerment in higher education are not or insufficiently evaluated. Therefore, there is no ‘real’ data, whether and why certain measures are effective, and others are not—if this information is even wanted.

A third field of research could be the examination of the role of Women’s Affairs Offices and Family Offices with a special focus on how people in charge perceive their task—according to the motto “Only if I know my own role, will I be able to fill it appropriately”. As one interviewee mentioned, the influence of the naming of these offices could also be investigated. The mere fact that the words ‘women’ or ‘family’ are still part of most offices’ names and not all offices have been renamed into Equal

Opportunities Offices etc., could promote certain stereotypes, raise certain prejudices and thus have a selective and discriminatory effect (at times also on a subconscious level) and hinder women empowerment in higher education.

Additionally, the status quo and the role of a specific higher-education lecturer qualification, awareness and sensitiveness towards gender-specific differences in learning motivation, learning styles, self-assessment and competences would be an interesting and complementing field of study contributing to an advance in female empowerment.

While it is certainly important to change laws and other regulations for women empowerment, it is also necessary to create and cultivate an open, ethical mindset, values and attitudes among students, their families, and society as a whole. One insightful approach could be to conduct a long-term study for about 15 years, using questionnaires and interviews to distil the kind of support that would be effective, such as coaching in the critical transition phase, when female students in junior high school grow into university students and finally working adults.

Although people's values and prejudices are difficult to change, another useful approach could be to organise and assess self-reflective workshops for students and parents already in primary schools to pave the path for a successful school and university career, i. e. promoting women empowerment by addressing stereotypes and eliminating traditional misogynist notions well before female students actually opt for certain courses of study and enter higher education institutions.

It is essential to continue promoting gender equality and breaking through the gender stereotypes. Educational curriculum design on all educational levels needs to encourage female students to engage in diversified studies from an early age onwards.

## Appendices

**Table A1** Number of respondents by question

Questions	Number of responses
01 What is the expectation from women in your country's society?	80
02 What do you think is unequal between men and women in your country?	80
03 How could/should this inequality be addressed in your opinion?	78
04 What is the key to (more) gender equality from your perspective?	80
05 Education is equal for both men and women in your country. If you disagree, please specify.	18
06 Sons are expected to study more than daughters in your country. Give reasons for your choice.	49
07 There is a difference in the study courses/programs selected by male and female students in your country. If you agree, please specify.	37

(continued)

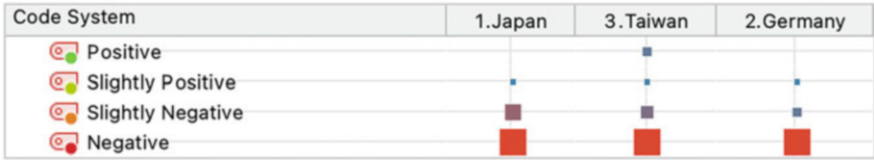


**Table A1** (continued)

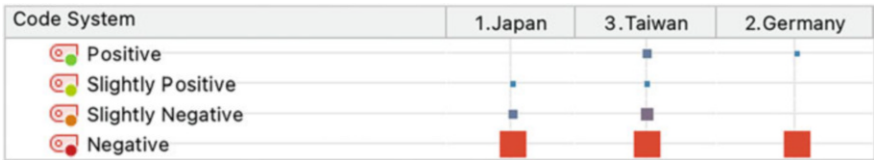
Questions	Number of responses
08 Do you think that the academic culture has an impact, please specify?	22
09 In your opinion, are there key competences and/or soft skills (e.g. language skills, communication, leadership, teamwork) required for studying successfully that can be more often observed among male or female students? If you think that there are differences among the soft skills of the genders, please specify.	31
10 Have you noticed any differences in the academic communication style of male and female students, e.g. in classroom discussion, during presentations, etc.? If you have made any observations, please specify.	29
11 Could you imagine pursuing an academic career yourself? Please give reasons for your answer.	47
12 Do you think it is harder for women to pursue an academic career in your country than for men? Please give reasons for your answer.	44
13 How would you describe the current professional situation of women in your country?	78
14 Are there still gender-specific roles at work and at home in your country? If so, which ones? Give examples.	61
15 How would you describe the current status and power of working women in your country?	78
16 Would you say that there is still a glass ceiling that prevents women from climbing the career ladder in your country? If your answer is yes, why?	51
17 Are derogatory terms for working women (e.g. Rabenmutter in German, or deadbeat mom in English) still used in your country for referring to mothers who work and seemingly neglect their childcare duties? If your reply is positive, please indicate any derogatory term(s) used.	19
18 Is it common for fathers to go on parental leave in your country? Please specify your choice.	53
19 Are fathers looked down upon in your country if they do so? Please explain your answer.	44

**Table A2** Six open-ended questions

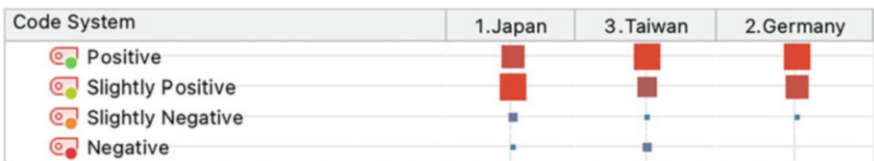
Questions	Number of responses
01 What is the expectation from women in your country's society?	80
02 What do you think is unequal between men and women in your country?	80
03 How could/should this inequality be addressed in your opinion?	78
04 What is the key to (more) gender equality from your perspective?	80
13 How would you describe the current professional situation of women in your country?	78
15 How would you describe the current status and power of working women in your country?	78



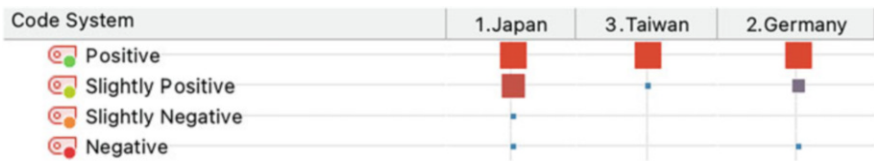
**Fig. A1** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 1 What is the expectation from women in your country’s society?’



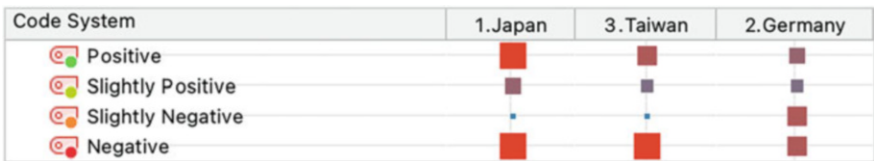
**Fig. A2** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 2 What do you think is unequal between men and women in your country?’



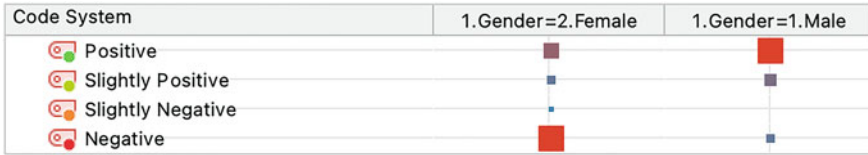
**Fig. A3** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 3 How could/should this inequality be addressed in your opinion?’



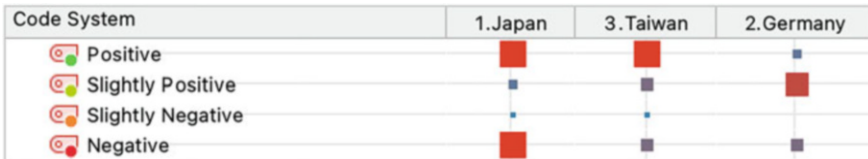
**Fig. A4** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 4 What is the key to (more) gender equality from your perspective?’



**Fig. A5** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 13 How would you describe the current professional situation of women in your country?’



**Fig. A6** Interactive quote matrix by gender of ‘Question 13 How would you describe the current professional situation of women in your country?’



**Fig. A7** Interactive quote matrix of ‘Question 15 How would you describe the current status and power of working women in your country?’

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# Stepping Stones to Empowerment for International STEM Students in Japan



Sandra Healy 

**Abstract** To date, little research describes the lived experiences of non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) students outside English speaking countries. This chapter explores the experiences of three female students, from Africa and Asia, who came to Japan to pursue graduate studies in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. The results showed that Japan was a largely positive place to undertake their studies. The university environment was shown to provide a linguacultural environment that enables academic success for female international students. Linguistic and cultural barriers including gender barriers remain, however, for those who would like to stay in Japan once they graduate. These barriers contributed to positioning Japan as a steppingstone for these international female students, empowering them to develop stable and independent futures whilst limiting opportunities for them to stay.

**Keywords** Women · STEM · WEIRD · Japanese universities

## 1 Introduction

International tertiary-level student mobility has risen in recent years. In 2018, 5.6 million students were studying abroad, more than twice the number in 2005 (OECD, 2020). Many factors have contributed to this increase, including economic ones such as cheaper flights, technological ones such as increased internet and social media usage which enable increased access to information, support and communication, and cultural ones including the use of English as a common language in academia (OECD, 2020). Gender is another important factor, as more women participate in international programmes than men (Di Pietro, 2022). Many of these mobile students enrol in European and American educational programmes, but Japan has also become a popular destination because of government and university promotional

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efforts. Some 228,403 students, mainly from other Asian countries, undertook studies in Japan in 2020 (Project Atlas, 2020).

The number of women in tertiary education outnumbers that of men globally. Similarly, 64% of Japanese women aged 25–34 have a tertiary qualification compared to 59% of men. Globally, academic field enrolment in terms of gender varies significantly. A 2021 OECD report showed Japan had the lowest number of women studying science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects among 36 comparable OECD member countries (OECD, 2021). According to the report, in Japan, only 27% of university women were in STEM compared with the 52% OECD average. Despite this disparity, students from countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia which have the highest levels of women graduating from STEM programmes in the world (54, 49 and 45% respectively (Bothwell, 2022)) come to Japan. Additionally, Japan is noted in the Global Gender Gap report (World Economic Forum, 2021) as having particularly high levels of economic and political gender inequality. It ranks 120 (of 157 countries) on the Global Gender Gap Index largely due to political and economic disparities (World Economic Forum, 2021). Although employment for women has increased in recent decades, there is a 24.5% gender wage gap, which is a result of women working in non-regular employment and few holding higher level positions in companies (Yamaguchi, 2019). Politically, only 12.6% of elected national lawmakers in 2016 are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.)

There has been little research on international students coming to Japan, particularly in terms of the lived experiences of non- Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) (Clancy & Davis, 2019) students outside English-speaking countries. The chapter addresses this issue describing the lived experiences of three female students, from Africa and Asia, who moved to Japan to pursue graduate studies in STEM subjects, traditionally male-dominated subjects in Japan. Stoet and Geary (2018) suggest that women from more precarious societies select STEM subjects for job security, thereby empowering and creating more sustainable futures for themselves and the women in this study may have viewed Japan as a potential steppingstone to economic success through employment either here or in a Western economy (Kobayashi, 2020).

## 2 Method

Due to sensitive political situations in their home countries, the three female graduate student participants in this study are referred to by pseudonyms and their nationalities are omitted. The participants ‘Vella’ (26) and ‘Kai’ (28) are from Asia, and ‘Hana’ (32) is from Africa. Vella and Kai came to Japan for master’s degrees and Hana, for a PhD. All studied STEM subjects. While Vella and Kai were single, Hana was married and accompanied by a young child, whilst her husband remained in their home country. All were working as English language teaching assistants and were interviewed in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Two semi-structured interviews were held with each participant using a topic guide (Edwards & Holland, 2013, pp. 56–57), which enabled them to express their own narratives and experiences more freely than in a more highly structured framework. The interviews were 65–95 min in length and administered in English. No participants' first language was English, although all have high levels of communicative competence and have passed their Japanese university graduate school English examination. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai software and the transcriptions manually reviewed for accuracy. Each participant consented to be interviewed and for the data to be used for research purposes. The quotes in this chapter come from the transcriptions.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as it situates individuals in their broader social, cultural and political contexts. IPA commonly uses small samples and works in a

dynamic, iterative and non-linear manner, examining the whole in light of its parts, the parts in light of the whole, and the contexts in which the whole and parts are embedded and doing so from a stance of being open to shifting ways of thinking what the data might mean. (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 12)

As such, the data was manually coded and repeatedly examined for patterns which were refined and developed into themes. IPA acknowledges that researcher bias is inevitable and should be acknowledged and reflected upon. For transparency, I am a non-Japanese female, from a WEIRD country, working within the Japanese university system.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

Five themes were found were found to be salient: the social, political and cultural contexts which led the participants to study in Japan, the concept of boundaryless careers, gender discrimination, the impact of role models, and finally religion.

#### ***3.1 Social, Political and Cultural Backgrounds of Participants***

In IPA, context is a central concern and the participants' social, cultural and political contexts are important.

The meaning that students give to the action of studying abroad is dependent on aspects of the political economy in both the sending and receiving countries, as well as the actors' understanding of these aspects, and may not be assumed as the same for all students (Cantwell et al., 2009, p. 350).

Two of the participants have faced significant difficulties in their home countries due to the political situations there, and moving to Japan was a proactive way to address

these. Due to her ethnicity and religion, Vella suffered from serious discrimination in her home country. In contrast, she felt she had experienced little discrimination in Japan, “I heard [about it] often but as for me I didn’t . . . [at] university I didn’t feel [it] that much.” She expanded on this, saying, “Japan has good advantages more than my hometown. There is really a system. You can figure things out quickly. I think there are a lot more opportunities here.”

Kai’s country has suffered from years of ethnic conflict, civil war, and political repression. She stated, “The reason I came here is my country is very underdeveloped, so I want to have life experience of what is going on in a developed country like Japan.” Here, she has become involved in political resistance supporting anti-government groups in her home country, and as a result she says, “I think I can’t go back now. If we win this political crisis I can go back, but if not, if I go back to my country, they will arrest me. I will stay here forever or go to another country.” Japan has been an important steppingstone, giving her physical distance from her country that has in turn given Kai freedom and perspective, allowing her to discover her voice.

### 3.2 *Boundaryless Careers*

The concept of ‘boundaryless’ careers describes “careers that move dynamically in non-traditional ways in time and space and across different employers” (Baruch & Reis, 2016, p. 14). This concept can be extended to geographical as well as organizational boundaries, and to educational contexts. At the core of the concept is “mobile, self-determined, free agents, who are able to seamlessly connect with work in multiple contexts” (Harrison, 2006, p. 20). All three participants in this study expressed this positive view of mobility, and the concept of Japan as a steppingstone to further mobility. For example, Vella said, “I want to start my first job here. And then I hope if I have a chance, I want to go to some other places like Europe or America.” Hana also expressed an interest in moving to Europe after finishing her PhD.

The concept of boundaryless careers has been criticized as an ideal rather than a reality, however, as it excludes concerns such as language and gender barriers. This is of relevance in the Japanese context, where the number of universities offering English-medium instruction (EMI) has grown by more than 50% in the past decade (MEXT, 2017), and many universities are expanding existing EMI programs with more than 40% of the total number of universities in Japan offering some EMI as of 2015 (MEXT, 2017). English Medium Instruction (EMI) is often promoted as a way for international students to enter Japanese universities (Hino, 2017). While all three participants were able to complete their studies in English, not all courses were available in the language, limiting their access to needed background knowledge. Vella’s Japanese skills enabled her to overcome this challenge, but the other two participants’ lack of fluency was problematic, highlighting the “key role of language in the production of knowledge and in the delivery of education” (Śliwa &

Johansson, 2014, p. 1134). Another problem, identified by Pudelko and Tenzer (2019) is that the use of English in wider Japanese society is still limited. This gap impedes international students' ability to find employment in Japan after graduation and contributes to Japan becoming a steppingstone to somewhere else. Although many can communicate successfully within the university setting using English, to achieve gainful employment, they need functional Japanese literacy.

Additionally, Japanese has been described as a language with particularly marked gender-differentiated forms (Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith, 2016). Coates (2015) discusses Reynolds' (1998) findings concerning the pressure on women in Japan to use language that is *onna rasiku*, like a woman, restricting Japanese women's linguistic range. This conflict seems to be more extreme in Japan than internationally, as

In order to be accepted as a "good" woman, a female speaker of Japanese must choose to talk non-assertively, indirectly, politely, deferentially: but in order to function as a supervisor, administrator, teacher, lawyer, doctor, etc. or as a colleague or associate, she must be able to talk with assurance (Reynolds, 1998, p. 302).

The participants in this study were studying in predominantly male environments. Two participants were the only women in their laboratories, and consequently experienced little Japanese female spoken language. Many women, both Japanese and non-Japanese are unwilling to use gendered language and try to use 'defeminised language' in order to overcome this barrier. For female international students they have the double burden of trying to function in Japanese whilst sounding acceptably feminine. Vella said, "I have to think when I am speaking Japanese if I sound okay or not. I have been told I sound like a man and that it wasn't good." Kai said, "I communicate mainly on Slack [a chat application] because the men in my team don't respond to me if I speak to them in English or in Japanese. I guess I sound wrong."

The participants viewed these gendered linguistic barriers as preventing them from fully participating in the workforce in Japan and hence achieving a sense of belonging to society. As a result Hana, who does not speak Japanese, says, "I think it is difficult to find an opportunity here. Maybe just go to Europe." The gendered language barrier therefore contributes to Japan being a steppingstone for female international students who, while they recognise the benefits of tertiary education in Japan, are aware of barriers outside academia.

### 3.3 Gender Discrimination

The participants all described gender discrimination in their home countries and how coming to Japan affected their views. One aspect they discussed at length was the expectation to fulfil traditional gender roles. For Hana, who is a mother, this was significant in both her home country and in Japan. While Hana's own family were supportive of her goals, her husband's family were not. In a study by El Feki et al.

(2017) undertaken in North Africa and the Middle East it was found that three-quarters of both male and female respondents felt that women's most important role was to take care of the home. Hana indicated that this, along with a lack of support at home had led her to move to Japan to pursue her goals. She found, however, that such gendered expectations followed her to Japan. Her female Japanese supervisor initially questioned Hana's ability to combine the roles of mother and researcher as is seen in this excerpt, "My professor is single. [. . .] She said she gave up everything for her research and that being a mother means I cannot be a researcher." Hana acknowledged the difficulties of combining motherhood and academia, saying,

It is very difficult to be by myself, like a single mother. My time in the laboratory is limited. Sometimes when my son goes to sleep, I have a couple of hours to study. Some other times I am really tired. If there is a holiday, I cannot come to do some experimental study.

However, because she had seen her mother succeed academically, she disagreed with her supervisor's view, and was determined to overcome the practical difficulties of her dual roles, remaining optimistic that this would be possible. It should be noted, however, that Hana lacked the positive and practical family support here in Japan that her mother had benefitted from.

Vella also described how moving to Japan had allowed her to overcome the traditional gender roles prescribed in her home country. There, she was also expected to do housework, and wear traditional female clothes. She spoke about the freedom she gained in Japan to wear whatever she liked and have her hair cut short saying, "You can see that I wear like a boy. I really like I feel comfortable. . . . I buy these clothes with my own money, why can't I wear like this."

Whilst Japan has been shown to lag behind other nations in terms of gender equality (Kobayashi & Eweje, 2021), the participants in this study found that coming to Japan increased their freedom in the university setting. However, they questioned whether this freedom would continue once they graduated. Vella said she had read a lot about gender discrimination in Japan but did not feel she had experienced any, although she wondered what it would be like when she went to work. Hana found it difficult to obtain either part-time or full-time employment in Japan and was told directly that motherhood was a problem for her studies and would be problematic particularly for full-time roles in the future. As a result, she had become reticent about working in a Japanese company, imagining that it would be difficult to combine with her role as a mother and talked about moving to Europe or returning to a university position in her home country.

### **3.4 Role Models**

Due to the low numbers of women in STEM, particularly in Japan, female STEM students may experience a lack of social support leading to isolation and alienation (Wang & Degol, 2013). Because female peers and professors in Japan are so few, female role models are less common. Previous research on mentoring has found

positive relationships between mentoring and female empowerment. Near-peer mentors (e.g., undergraduate or graduate students) can also have a positive influence on students' perceptions of STEM (van den Hurk et al., 2019).

The participants all belonged to different laboratories on campus. Similar to other East Asian countries, Japanese laboratories are organised hierarchically, referred to as the *senpai-kohai* system, in which senior (*senpai*) members are viewed as holding higher status due to being more knowledgeable and experienced than the junior (*kohai*) members. This important part of knowledge transfer forms the basis of social organization (Qie et al., 2019). The participants were active parts of this system whilst also being the only females in their laboratories. During their studies, they progressed to become laboratory seniors, achieving the power and agency accorded to their position. This system is not dependent on ethnicity or gender, and is based on rank and age, however, the participants felt some linguistic, gendered, and ethnic barriers remained. Kai felt that it was difficult for her to have her voice heard as she was not Japanese and female. She tried to overcome these issues by using non-face-to-face communication through the application Slack in English, which she found improved communication and relationships.

All three described positive relationships with their supervisors which are vital to student satisfaction and success (Dericks et al., 2019). Hana talked at length about her supervisor and portrayed their relationship as being very close, saying "She is the mother, and I am the daughter." She described how her supervisor was very sensitive to her religious needs, helping inform and mediate with the other members of her lab saying, "She strongly supported me. I really like her so much and want to stay in her lab." However, she felt a lack of support academically due to her supervisor's negative view of combining motherhood and research. She also commented that she felt her supervisor focused on the Japanese students as she would have long term connections with them, and that Hana would leave Japan and so it was not worth investing as much in her academically or career wise. Kai and Vella both had male supervisors, and they, too expressed very positive opinions about their relationships with them. Vella ate lunch most days with her supervisor and he supported her academically and helped her to build the necessary foundation for her future career. Kai's supervisor encouraged her in her academic work and she said, "My professor is great and encouraged me to do my PhD."

All three participants described female family members as mentors. Vella and Kai were both influenced by their sisters who had also studied in Japan. Kai explicitly stated, "She inspires me a lot. So I follow her. My primary motivation is my sister." Vella expressed a similar sentiment, calling her own sister a source of support and describing how they lived together and discussed their research daily. Hana's initial encouragement to continue her studies was from the women she observed in her immediate family. Hana's mother, her greatest role model, is now a retired university professor. The people who made her mother's success possible are also an important source of inspiration. Not only did Hana's maternal grandparents encourage their daughter, but the couple that would become Hana's paternal grandparents also supported her goals. The fact that Hana's paternal grandmother was completely illiterate and never attended school, makes this a further source of pride for her.

However, the lack of support Hana received from her husband and his family contributed both to Hana's move to Japan.

### 3.5 Religion

Two of the participants are from Muslim backgrounds. There are approximately 170,000 Muslims in Japan, and a growing number of them are university students (Yamagata, 2019). Recently, a rise in Islamophobia has been observed in Europe; however, Yamagata (2019) found that in Japan previously negative media images have recently been replaced with more positive ones due to the representation of Muslims as tourists and visitors. The participants found that living in Japan is relatively easy in terms of religion, as Vella states, "Yes. They [Japanese people] will respect your religion. And yeah, I think it's quite good." Muslim women, especially those with *niqab* or who wear headscarves, often experience exclusion when living outside Muslim dominant cultures (Tariq & Syed, 2018), and Hana showed awareness of this aspect of intersectionality discussing at length how friends in Europe experienced explicit discrimination being told not to wear their *niqab* in public. Japan was pleasant in comparison, she said. No one commented on her *niqab*, her supervisor provided a place for her to pray, and her son's day-care provided halal food without question. The multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion facing Muslim women found in other countries (Tariq & Syed, 2018) were found to have a lesser impact in Japan.

By studying abroad, Vella was able to see a variety of approaches to Islam through contact with Muslim and non-Muslim students from different countries:

I was questioning myself; did I do something wrong? But after when I went to university, and I read some books, and some news and met some people. And when I came to Japan, I found that we are not all the same. It doesn't mean if you are Muslim you have to do 100% the same thing. It is different for everyone.

Her reflection on the role of Islam in her life led her to conclude that the perspective she gained from being in Japan had given her more control in her life.

## 4 Conclusion

The participants came to Japan to create stable and independent futures and the university provided an environment in which they could succeed academically. However, persistent gender, linguistic and cultural norms in Japanese society are hard to overcome, and lead to Japan becoming a steppingstone for many female international students. Future research is needed to further explore the impact the hierarchical *senpai-kohai* structure has on female students and their academic and career success. At present no training is given to supervisors in Japan, and while

these women were successful, it is recommended that training is given to improve these transcultural and gendered relationships. Additionally, we need to gather more data on women at Japanese universities, as for example, at present, only one third of Japanese universities track female outcomes (Bothwell, 2022). Increased data would enable us create more sustainable futures for all women in Japan. It is hoped that focusing on the positive attributes of disenfranchised groups such as the participants in this study a more inclusive approach to science may develop in Japan. Creating spaces for diverse groups of people could lead to better and more interesting science.

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**Part III**  
**Women Empowerment in the Workplace**

# Remote Working as a Source of Women's Leadership and Empowerment



Claude-Hélène Mayer  and Elisabeth Vanderheiden 

*Three trends characterised women's leadership in the pandemic: (1) effective management, (2) rapid response, and (3) socially inclusive policies*  
*U.N. Women working paper*

**Abstract** The pandemic has had numerous long-term effects across the globe and has impacted strongly on various workplaces and concepts of work. In Covid-19, organisations and employees working in remote working scenarios have collectively reorganised work. It is often pointed out that women have faced more challenges than men during Covid-19. This chapter, however, aims to present a qualitative single case study of a selected woman leader, the remote working environment, and how it contributes to the empowerment of women. Also presented in this chapter is how the remote workplaces have become a source of empowerment for a woman leader, her team, and her organisation as a whole.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Women · Remote workplace · Strategies · Well-being · Transformation · Cultural contexts · Case study

## 1 Introduction

Leaders who embrace change and lead their employees through change successfully are a valued commodity in the future-oriented workplace (Clifton & Harter, 2019). This depicts the new world of work as one where industries are increasingly shaped by systemic interactions and advancing organisational designs

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(Sumantran et al., 2017). These interactions require new skills and forms of leadership which focus on automation and augmentation, machine-driven and data-powered environments, problem-solving, analytical and remote working skills, as well as cross-functional teamwork. To deal with the new challenges and global competition, organisations need new strategies (Gissler et al., 2016), in particular when individuals are working remotely. Although workplaces have been changing rapidly for several years now, Covid-19 has accelerated this (Maar, 2020). Leaders as well as employees need to be smart and agile to cope with the new workplaces and their respective difficulties and intricacies (Morieux, 2011). However, since the beginning of Covid-19, a decrease in the quality of mental health and well-being in the workplace can be seen (Jungmann & Withhöft, 2020; Ripp et al., 2020). In a global social crisis, keeping a positive, healthy mindset is extremely important (Mayer, 2021). Such a mindset can be brought about by making use of various coping mechanisms which impact positively on resilience, happiness, social support and connection (Edwards & Martin, 2014). Edwards and Martin (2014) highlight the extraordinarily positive effect of social media posts in times of crisis and challenge. During the early outbreak of Covid-19, Thelwall and Thelwall (2020) emphasised that tweets and retweets were very important in coping with lockdown regulations, social distancing, support-building, criticism of governments, expressing key and frontline worker support, and in helping individuals through isolation and loneliness. Other researchers (Cauberghe et al., 2020) confirm that the use of humour in social media has counteracted feelings of anxiety and loneliness during Covid-19. Humorous coping particularly helps to increase feelings of happiness (Cauberghe et al., 2020) and has a strong therapeutic component, especially when people are confined to their home space (Chaturvedi et al., 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to present a single case study on a woman leader of a nation-wide non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Germany, her experience as a women leader, going through times of rapid change and remote work along with the empowerment of women in the remote working scenario. The main research question which needs to be addressed is: ‘What empowers women leaders during remote work scenarios?’

## 2 Remote Working

Since COVID-19, remote workspaces have become extremely popular and have influenced managers and leaders in their decision-making processes, communication, staff retention and turnover strategies (Onnis, 2019). Furthermore, remote working strategies have had an impact on employee relationships and organisational settings and structures. Five aspects were reported to have changed strongly in US-workplaces (Bolick, 2020):

1. the connections between manager relationships, innovative behaviour, and psychological safety were strengthened in the shift to remote work;
2. perceptions of managerial relationships declined slightly, particularly in the sense that the manager knows the employee's needs;
3. communication patterns shifted to virtual mediums impacting the willingness of professionals to speak up;
4. professionals indicated an increase in self-reliance and innovative behaviours; and
5. informal social connections decreased in the virtual environment highlighting challenges associated with building relationships with colleagues.

For the German context, Hofmann et al. (2022) stated that if remote working is to succeed, companies must become social places that have important additional functions. The workplace, for example, should be a social place that creates a sense of belonging, a sense of pride in belonging. It should be explicitly designed as an opportunity space for planned and unplanned encounters and invite exchange and joint innovation. Leadership is defined as relevant for the level of commitment between employees and the organisation.

Remote working scenarios challenge employees and organisations in new ways. Previous research has also highlighted that remote work scenarios impact the work, the flexibility and the mobility of employees (Donnelly & Johns, 2021), e-work scenarios and the internationalisation of the global work environment (Cooke et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2014), the change of practices, such as design thinking (Sivathanu, 2019) and other innovative and entrepreneurial components thereof. Moreover, remote work leads to new working conditions, both remote and virtual, (Adamovic, 2018) and questions the management of uncertainties across long distances (Wood et al., 2018). But remote work also has implications for leadership, as well as for meaning-making of leaders in the workplace (Christianson & Barton, 2021), implementation of innovative workplace behaviours (Bednall et al., 2018), employee engagement (Syed, 2020), and changing policies and practices of human resources (HR) (Bos Nehles et al., 2013).

### 3 Empowering Women

Women's empowerment is seen as an essential criterion for achieving the Sustainable Global Goals (SDGs) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). Women's empowerment can be understood as the process by which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in a context that previously prevented them from doing so (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (1999) assumes that the ability to make individual decisions is based on three interconnected elements: resources, agency and achievement. Resources are realised in the context of material,

human and social expectations and allocations, whereas agency is understood as the ability to define one's strategic goals and act on them. The concept of empowerment is based on the basic assumption that women have resources and actively use them through personal strategic decisions to achieve certain goals (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002). This correlates with the idea that empowerment is a process that enables people to take action in ways important to their individual lives, their communities and their society (Bandura, 1986; Page & Czuba, 1999; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). These approaches emphasise the individual capacities of women and choice in terms of the exercising of personal choice (Budgeon, 2015) to establish agency and achieve their goals. This achievement is reached by accessing resources such as "the capacity and willingness to mobilise them, and the belief that it can be done" (Ventura et al., 2021, 2). Stromquist (2006, 2014) assigns an important role to the dimension of consciousness regarding empowerment and, like Kabeer (1999), recognises it as a multifaceted context-dependent concept where diverse aspects and interdependencies, such as women's awareness of the causes of their oppression up to collective action as a group for corresponding processes of change and transformation, must be accounted for. In this sense, individual and collective action are intertwined in the interest of developing women's empowerment (Stromquist, 2014). Huis et al. (2017) point out:

While individual differences between people from the same cultural background are omnipresent, people within the same culture tend to hold similar values, beliefs, and practices . . . (Huis et al., 2017, 9).

In this context, culture can be understood as a construction that changes momentarily, but is also negotiated and constructed (Mayer, 2004). By this understanding, cultures construct themselves "through perspectives, communication and encounters again and again" (Mayer, 2017, 7). Huis et al. (2017) highlight that individuals in different cultures differ in how they construct their self-concept, deal with deviant behaviour, and how meaningful it is for them to shape their lives in accordance with social norms.

## 4 Research Methodology

This study is anchored in a qualitative research design and uses a hermeneutical research approach (Creswell, 2013; Dilthey, 2002). In accordance with this approach, it uses a single, in-depth qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) to provide a reflective and creative view into the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the woman leader and her experiences (Lock & Strong, 2010) in remote work scenarios for women at work. The experiences explored significant remembered moments in life (Denzin, 1989) and stimulated new insights into women empowerment in remote contexts (Hunnicut, 2017).

## **4.1 Sample**

The study is based on in-depth interviews with a single, top management woman leader who is the leader of a nationwide German NGO. The NGO is one of the largest national organisations of continuing education in Germany. The organisation was founded in 1957. It offers adult education programmes for people over the age of 16. Before the pandemic (2019), the organisation reached about 4 million people in total with about 150,000 educational programmes.

It has been operating there for 10 years. The team consists of 20 people. This study explores and evaluates her experiences, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. The woman leader is of Dutch origin and German nationality and has worked fully remotely from March 2020 until March 2022 and has then started hybrid working. Her work involves leadership of the NGO, daily meetings with colleagues, stakeholders, subordinates, private and governmental cooperation partners in glocal contexts, as well as political institutions and Ministries.

## **4.2 Data Collection, Analysis, Interpretation and Reporting**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (two interviews 1.5 h) with the woman leader which explored questions and worked with the reconstructive memory of the interviewee. Reconstructive memory is memory which takes the construction of meaning into consideration and is based on experienced and lived situations (Bartlett, 1932). Reconstructive memory hardly ever remembers anything exactly, but remembers the essence of an incident and therefore mentally (re-)constructs the lived experience using the mental construction of one's understanding of the meaning in the world (Roediger, 2001).

## **4.3 Quality Criteria, Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

The study is based on the qualitative quality criteria of confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Kohlbacher (2006) capturing the holistic perspective is of main importance for this study as it contributes to capturing its complexity and impacts on its quality. Further, the researchers included intersubjective validation of their ideas and reconstructions of the research topic (such as familiarization with data, analysis, discussion, reconstruction) and the responses of the interviewee.

This research followed ethical considerations, including a transparent presentation of the reconstruction of memory and a clear description of situations and interactions (Mohajan, 2018). The narrations of experiences are based on the

openness of the individual as well as on memorising and managing the complexity of the experiences from an in-depth perspective during the interview, as well as on the moral responsibility of the researcher.

As with every study, this study has limitations: it is limited to a single case study, the specific context of the woman leader, the exploration of her worldview and experiences and a possible researcher bias since the researchers and the individual researched are all German women.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

At the time of the pandemic outbreak, the NGO led by the interviewee was composed of 17 workplaces. There was already a long history of digital literacy in the organisation, as digital training had been available for 20 years. This proved to be an advantage at the beginning of the pandemic. In addition to this tradition in digital experiential spaces, the organisation is characterised by a flat team structure.

### 5.1 *Empowerment Through De-hierarchisation and Democratisation*

The decision to completely dispense with hierarchisation proved to be central in setting up remote workplaces, in regard to the empowerment of the employees, the free arrangement of working hours and the choice of work location. This support for the equal value of all workplaces was an important step towards empowerment, especially because in Germany there are still strong distinctions between the sexes, meaning that women are allowed to work in a home office less than men (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2022) and, in many organisations, only hierarchically higher positioned managers and employees are even entitled to home offices (Kunze et al., 2020).

In the organisation described here, this regulation has led to a de-hierarchisation and a democratisation of employment relationships. The equal value of all jobs—regardless of formal education, professional competence, remuneration and position in the hierarchy—was thus clearly communicated and demonstrated.

X said:

In many organisations I have observed that when it comes to access to remote work, it is mainly managers and people higher up in the hierarchy who are considered. It was very important to me that remote work was an option for everyone in the system. Everyone was given the appropriate equipment and the freedom to decide when and where they wanted to work. They could manage this in their respective teams. My stipulations were: there must be one person in the office every day to receive mail; accessibility must be organised for each team; and the government's respective COVID rules must be followed.

This equality was reinforced by another decision: In 2021, employers' associations and trade unions had negotiated Corona allowances for (almost) all women workers, with lower income groups benefiting more than higher income groups. Certain groups of workers, such as apprentices or working students, were excluded. Here it was important to make the decision that this supplement must be paid to all, even though it was not provided for, and to make this public in the organisation. This is closely related to Naila Kabeer's concept (1994, 1999, 2003, 2008a, b, 2021) of empowerment, which makes clear, among other things, that empowerment is decisively characterised by strategic decisions and that it is a matter of keeping the power dimension in view during the empowerment process, for example to decide against financial savings and for justice and the equal value and equal treatment of all individuals engaged in the system.

## 5.2 *Empowerment Through Cultural Change*

The pandemic and the associated escalation of remote work has led to empowerment through culture change in the organisation. Various online collaboration tools have been established, such as *Slack*, *Miro* and *Trello*, making it possible to work together on topics and projects regardless of time and place. Above all, it has been shown that a new form of equal access to information and knowledge has developed; an important prerequisite for empowerment, since knowledge is power. The introduction and selection of these tools came from employee initiative. It has led to new forms of cooperation and communication, but also to optimising processes and diverse product developments, often based on employee initiatives.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the challenge for the management and the executives was to keep the whole team together, even though there were no analogue contacts. To this end, regular virtual team meetings were introduced on the one hand, and informal digital meeting spaces were opened up: joint lunches or coffee breaks, for example. It quickly became apparent that the individual teams organised themselves well and worked together effectively and productively, but that the exchange between teams decreased significantly. The management reacted to this by establishing team-related, digital, jour-fixe meetings. At first, the team leaders and employees feared that this would lead to greater controls and the need to report back. However, this was allayed in discussion. These digital interactions quickly proved to be a place for professional discourse and a space where the undivided attention of superiors could be experienced as an expression of appreciation. At the same time, these meetings proved to be a space in which cross-team exchange or training needs were identified and subsequently addressed in the overall team meeting.

X said:

I quickly noticed that in the course of the pandemic, the individual teams grew closer together. The teams are very different, so I think that that's a good thing. I always say that



travelling between different offices is like travelling between different countries, which is evident in the fact that all the teams decide for themselves how they want to paint and decorate their office, what furniture they have and how they want to interact with each other. This is not a problem normally because we had breaks and other social interactions together that bound us as a group, but in the pandemic it has led to compartmentalisation and communication gaps. I really wanted to counteract that.

This led to further positive development: further individual and organisational training and development needs were identified. Some of these were covered by external offers, others were developed by the team members themselves, alone or in freely chosen teams. For two people, this proved to be a decisive factor for career advancement (outside the organisation).

The remote work contexts and the changed work and communication culture drew attention to another important facet, namely safeguarding health in the remote context. The arising dangers to mental, psychological and physical health when boundaries between work and private life shift more and more also gained additional importance in the context of remote working. This also describes an important aspect of empowerment. The Public Health Charter of the Austrian social insurance system states:

Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their lives (as cited in Klausberger, 2018, 2).

In order to maintain and promote health in remote contexts, the individual ability to understand health information and to act accordingly is required (Abel et al., 2018, 1). In addition to this empowerment dimension at the individual level, however, Abel et al. (2018) also refer to another empowerment as “an important component of community development in the sense of “community development”” There has been an exchange about what the individual in the team needs to maintain health or create well-being and ensuring corresponding free spaces, e.g. by the employee or manager only having to come to the office once a month or only twice a year, another only starting work later in the day or only working every fortnight because she has a long-distance relationship with her partner who lives in France and travels there every other week. Providing this freedom brought clear benefits for the employees.

X said:

The employees expressed higher job satisfaction. They were proud to work in an organisation where people trusted each other and refrained from micromanagement. They saw that this was not the case in other organisations. Productivity also increased. It led to more innovation, because the employees developed many new products and optimised processes. Above all, however, the employees expressed a high level of satisfaction about a changed work-life balance. This does not mean that the amount of free time increased and the amount of work decreased. Much more decisive was the individual freedom to decide and shape this.

On a systemic level, such freedom can bring challenges, e.g., increased team-building and communication effort or conflicts arising because of the perceived differences in freedoms. Here it was important to develop spaces for discourse and to try out peaceful conflict resolution strategies.

### ***5.3 Empowerment Through a Changed Connection Between Work and Life***

In Germany, many people still hold the view that a mother should not work if she has a child of pre-school age (21.8% in 2012; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2017). This is one of the reasons why there are still strong deficits in the provision of childcare places in Germany, especially in rural areas. This often leaves parents with the choice of having to decide between childcare and working for themselves. The problem was exacerbated by schools closing, which further challenged parents in terms of care.

In the establishment of remote workplaces, initiated or reinforced by the onset of the pandemic, facilitating the reconciliation of family responsibilities and work commitments was a significant empowerment goal. All staff were given the opportunity to work from their home offices. It was only necessary that all employees had the necessary infrastructure at their disposal. This was implemented in a flexible way, in some cases new equipment was purchased, in others the upgrading of the home technology was taken over financially for female employees. But technology solutions for collaboration, such as a VPN, were also developed jointly. What proved to be decisive, however, was that the employees were able to decide independently about their own working times: they could and still can work when and where they want to work. On the basis of trust-based working time, the individual teams were able to make arrangements that suited them. It has been shown that the employees see this as an enormous increase in self-determination and freedom. However, it also relieved some of the organisational burden and was described as an experience of stronger self-efficacy and an expansion of the ability to act.

The onboarding of several people hired in the last 2 years is another aspect of empowerment. These people live several hundred kilometres away from the organisation's headquarters and were given positions in this way. This was only possible because there was and is a functioning remote working system in the organisation.

These processes were simultaneously related to issues of social sustainability, which Littig and Griebler (2004, 3) define as:

... distributive justice. They describe sustainability as a development process that strives for a balance in the following three relations:

- between human needs and the capacity of nature (interconnectedness problem),
- between the needs of the present and future generations (intergenerational justice problem) and
- between the needs of the poor and the rich (intragenerational justice problem).

## 5.4 *Empowerment Through Overcoming and Transforming Crises*

A major challenge in the remote context is coping with psychological and emotional crisis situations, e.g. fears of infection with the COVID virus. Some staff members had and still have a great fear of infection and a pronounced need for protection. They wanted stricter protective measures in the office and with each other, others found these annoying and superfluous. In order to prevent conflicts among themselves, the employees wanted the management to lay down rules, a proposition which was rejected by management. In order to comply with the minimum legally prescribed protection standards, employees demanded a discourse to negotiate rules with the team as a whole. This was a tough but ultimately successful process, which led, among other things, to a better perception and appreciation of respective needs. Conflicts between vaccinated and non-vaccinated persons could also be prevented in this way, even though they tore the entire German society apart to a certain extent during the period mentioned.

X said:

I found it very exciting and also very beneficial how we managed to deal with our differences in our team. We could observe every day how the interactions between those who were vaccinated or supported vaccination and those who rejected it or denied that COVID even existed, became more aggressive. This was different with us, although one of our people was/is not vaccinated and others were and are big supporters of vaccination.

This joint negotiation process contributed to the empowerment of all participants, because it was experienced as an expansion of one's own decision-making space, but also that one's own wishes, needs and solutions were taken seriously and thus as an increase in the power of each individual. Power is realised here in the sense of Hannah Arendt:

Power arises from the human ability not only to act or to do something, but to join forces with others and to act in agreement with them. Power is never possessed by an individual; it is possessed by a group and remains in existence only as long as the group holds together (Arendt, 2000, 1).

Power is not understood here as a property of the individual, but is defined as a relational phenomenon.

The death of a staff member in the first few months after the start of the pandemic proved to be a particularly strong crisis. Due to the lockdown, team members could neither visit her in hospital nor attend her funeral. This proved to be a heavy burden for the team. Although informal virtual meetings were held where there was space for grieving, a digital whiteboard was also set up where photos of the deceased could be placed and candles could be lit virtually and last words to the deceased could be placed and condolence cards left for the husband, the limitations of the digital were very much felt here. A transformation of this crisis in a remote context was not possible.

## 5.5 *Empowerment and Sustainability*

Remote working has had an enormous impact on CO<sub>2</sub> savings. Studies show that this is particularly high in Germany, where the average remote worker saved 1144 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions during the lockdown (Carbon Trust & Vodafone Institute for Society and Communications, 2021). The study predicts that

around 17.5 million jobs in Germany will be 'teleworkable', meaning they can work remotely, and that people will do so on average 2.7 days a week. (Carbon Trust & Vodafone Institute for Society and Communications, 2021, 1).

A recent study (Harrach et al., 2020) shows that employees' sustainability orientation and perceived organisational support for sustainability are two important determinants of sustainability empowerment in the workplace (SEW). The study also makes clear that SEW increases job satisfaction and the commitment of individuals to the system. This is reflected in the system described in that the concepts, rules and freedom developed during the pandemic will last beyond the end of the pandemic.

Not having to travel to work or conferences or meetings saves time enormously, an important side effect of remote working: achievements that need to be safeguarded for the future beyond the pandemic.

## 5.6 *Individual Empowerment Experience and Leadership*

In connection with remote working, the managing director reports a change in her leadership style. In the course of the pandemic, her leadership style changed from a laissez-faire style, which had characterised her leadership for almost 40 years, to a partnership-based, democratic (socially integrative) leadership style (Mayer, 2021). This has resulted in stronger empowerment experiences for themselves, but also for team members. Gammage et al. (2015, 5) emphasise that for empowerment it is important to have a voice, which must be seen as an important expression of agency and enables decisions to be influenced.

X said:

I am convinced that when it comes to my leadership behaviour, many factors play a role: my personality, my cultural contexts, my values, my experiences, aspirations and passions, but also my gender. I have been a leader since I was 24 years old, and I believe there are good leaders and bad ones. There are good male leaders and bad ones. There are good female leaders and bad ones. But I believe, and I observe, that leadership styles differ with genders. For example, it has something to do with own personal experiences of discrimination as a woman. This makes me more sensitive to other experiences of discrimination and I do not want to contribute to this through my leadership behaviour.

Kabeer highlights the special role of choice, which is closely related to power. Kabeer points out that a person who has opportunities to make a strategic decision for his or her own life has a positive form of power. It was important for the executive director to use this decision-making power in the sense of empowering

everyone (including herself), e.g., to expand the scope for action, to open up spaces of freedom and creativity and to contribute to distributive justice by making access to resources available regardless of status in the system and by handing over control of resources to the female staff. Kabeer considers functioning achievements, such as adequate nutrition, health, housing, clothing, clean water, life expectancy, education and income, to be important indicators of empowerment. These are not touched in a rich Western context in a non-profit organisation in the existential and dramatic way that they are in most countries of the Global South. Nevertheless, in this specific organisational context, education, income, health proved to be important indicators.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The authors of this chapter explored how a selected remote working workplace has become a source of empowerment for the women leader presented in this chapter, her team and her organisation during COVID 19.

Based on a single case study and an in-depth exploration of a German woman leader (executive director) working in a male-dominated nation-wide NGO, it can be concluded that for this specific organisation, COVID-19 and the new remote working scenario brought challenges, but also new and innovative practices to the organisation which supported the empowerment of women in the organisation. The remote work changed the relationships in the team, with the leader and innovative behaviour increased. Further, communication patterns shifted and informal social connections changed based on the remote workspaces. Additionally, the leadership style changed towards a more de-hierarchical style and HR practices changed. Uncertainties were managed according to the described changes made and sustainability was reached and women supported through the new ways of handling work and family life, flexibility and mobility within the workplaces.

Future research could focus on the voices of women leaders from different cultural contexts and backgrounds and a comparison of remote work scenarios. Further, not only women leaders should be interviewed across countries, but also employees in different work positions.

Finally, it can be recommended that women leaders, employees and organisations foster open discourses on changes, advantages and disadvantages of remote work scenarios or new hybrid work places in the context of gender and gendered roles. How new remote workplace scenarios can support empowerment on different levels of the organisation and with regard to intersectionalities, such as gender, age, (dis-)ability, culture, as well as social and professional contexts, should become a new, open workplace discourse across cultures and leaders, as well as employees, should be trained to deal with remote workplace scenarios professionally and innovatively.

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# A Predictive Model of Women's Work Engagement



Karolina Łaba , Anita Bosch , and Madelyn Geldenhuys

**Abstract** With increasing numbers of women at work, we explored daily fluctuations and individual patterns of change for commonly held constructs, said to be supportive of women's work engagement, for 60 employed, diverse women between the ages of 24 to 55, in South Africa. Online diary entries were completed for 10 consecutive working days. The study finds that women's daily work engagement is predominantly predicted by psychological availability (.63 unit change), followed by daily positive home-work interaction (.20 unit change) and daily positive work-home interaction (.18 unit change). No significant fit ( $p > .05$ ) was found for work-family culture (support). A shortitudinal multilevel design, utilising an online daily diary, modelled their experience of work-family culture, work-home interaction and psychological availability, in relationship to work engagement. The findings indicate that support through a work-family culture which is provided by organisations, does not predict women's daily work engagement. Instead, constructs within the realm of the individual woman have predictive power.

**Keywords** Shortitudinal · Daily diary · Work-family culture · Work-home interaction · Psychological availability · Work engagement · Women

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## 1 Introduction

Globally, less than half of working women are engaged in their jobs, which may explain their decision to seek better employment opportunities (Gallup, 2018). Fostering work engagement has shown to lead to positive individual outcomes e.g., job satisfaction and commitment (Borst et al., 2020) and organisational outcomes e.g., performance (Bailey et al., 2015). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) report, women face societal care burdens such as having children and doing a disproportionate amount of unpaid work, which either limits or prevents them from engaging at work. Women's disengagement at work is detrimental for both individual and organisational outcomes (Da Silva, 2019).

South Africa has one of the highest levels (42%) of female headed households globally (Saad et al., 2022). South African women's labour participation rate stands at 50% whilst men's is at 63.2% (Statistics South Africa, 2022), however, challenges remain in retaining and advancing women in their careers (Banihani et al., 2013; Casale et al., 2021), as South African women's unemployment rate is higher than that of men (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Employers and employees alike are sceptical on whether work-family initiatives serve them (Clay, 2011; Ely & Padavic, 2020), as the nature of work espouses norms such as expecting the employee to separate career and life (O'Neil et al., 2008) and to be constantly available through the networked nature of work (Vandecasteele et al., 2022).

Work engagement in the business and management literature is viewed as gender neutral, which ignores societal expectations of women and men and considers that work engagement is displayed to the same degree by both<sup>1</sup> groups at work (Banihani et al., 2013). Understanding the gendered nature of work engagement would sensitise employers and employees alike to the biases that still prevail in organisations (Bosch & Booyesen, 2021). Bosch and Booyesen (2021, p. 5) argue that failing to address the gendered nature of work and workplaces "... may unintentionally be reinforcing gender inequality at work". With a deliberate focus on challenging the gender-neutral assumptions regarding work engagement, this study sought to understand the predictive value of work engagement when considering constructs such as work-family culture (support), positive work-home and home-work interaction and psychological availability. All of these constructs show specific promise in supporting women's work engagement.

The main research question is: *What are the predictors of women's work engagement?*

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<sup>1</sup>Although the authors acknowledge multiple gender identities and identification, the study constructs gender in the binary i.e. woman and man.

## ***1.1 Contribution***

In considering the influence of culture-, family-, and individual-level constructs in predicting women's work engagement across time, this study found that focus should be given to individualised interventions that encourage the practice of psychological availability.

"Conducting time use studies to adopt policy measures to ease the burden of the multiple roles played by women" was identified as a South African Development Communities Protocol (Article 16) (Mokomane, 2009, p. 16) to address gender equality as part of the South African National Development Plan 2030. This study's results inform the South African Development Communities Protocol on how to empower women in industry.

To address the gendered nature of work and workplaces, with the aim of reducing gender inequality at work, a gender specific strategy (psychological availability) was identified in promoting women's work engagement. Psychological availability was thus recognised as an initiative to support retention and promotion strategies of women in the workplace.

## **2 Conceptualising the Predictors of Women's Work Engagement**

### ***2.1 Work Engagement***

Schaufeli et al. (2002) identified vigour, dedication and absorption as components that represent the work engagement construct. Whereby vigour represents the individuals' feelings that they possess physical strength, emotional energy, and cognitive liveliness in their work environment. Dedication is characterised by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge; whilst absorption refers to being.

happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. Work engagement has proven to contribute to productivity (Burton et al., 2017; Okazaki et al., 2019), whereby productivity is associated with long business hours and being constantly available (Pencavel, 2015). Williams (2000) reports that the ideal worker is regarded as one who prioritises work over other life roles, which lead Banihani et al. (2013) to explain that these expectations, together with the multiple roles women occupy, are not commensurate with them experiencing work engagement (Banihani et al., 2013).

## **2.2 *Work-Family Culture (Support)***

Work-family culture support (Dikkers et al., 2007) refers to “the employees’ perceptions of the organisations, supervisors, and colleagues’ responsiveness to work-family issues and the use of work-family arrangements” (p. 156). Organisations have been increasingly focusing on work-family policies to assist employees with the multiple roles that they hold (Kelly et al., 2008). Employees however remain hesitant in utilising these family-friendly initiatives (Kossek et al., 2010), as utilising work-family initiatives may indicate that they are neither interested in career advancement nor committed to the organisation (Behson, 2002). Modifying work for family reasons remains a gendered issue (Mauno et al., 2005), where women, more so than men’s career advancement opportunities are limited (Ely & Padavic, 2020).

## **2.3 *Positive Work-Home Interaction and Positive Home-Work Interaction***

Geurts and Demerouti (2003) define work-home interaction as a process in which a worker’s functioning (behaviour) in one domain (e.g. home) is influenced by (negative or positive) load reactions that have built up in the other domain (e.g. work). Geurts et al. (2005) differentiate not only between the direction of influence (i.e., influence from work on private life and vice versa), but also consider the quality of influence (i.e., negative versus positive influence). Family responsibilities, particularly parenting, involve time investment that working parents may not be able to manage successfully (Milkie et al., 2010). This trend, and the increased participation of women in the South African labour market (Casale et al., 2021), suggests an escalation in work-family conflicts. Facilitating initiatives to balance family and work roles has demonstrated positive employee and organisational outcomes (McNamara et al., 2013).

## **2.4 *Psychological Availability***

Employees choose whether to invest themselves fully and authentically in their role based on their experiences within the working environment (Kahn, 1990). A state that resides within the person, rather than the job (Lewis, 2011), it is “the belief an individual has that they have the physical, emotional or psychological resources to personally engage at a particular moment” (Kahn, 1990, p. 714). Each job has different physical, emotional and psychological requirements (Kahn, 1990). Also, the physical, emotional and psychological resources differ between individuals. Construction workers would for example be expected to be more physically engaged with their work, whilst teachers and psychologists would be required to tap into their

psychological resources. To extend on the aforementioned definition “depletion of physical energy, depletion of emotional energy, individual insecurity, and outside lives” are factors that influence the experience of psychological availability (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). When the woman for example is involved in care responsibilities (outside lives) this directly impacts on the amount of energy she can invest in role performance at work. With the constant change in demands from family and work, the woman would require physical, emotional, and cognitive resources to meet her employer and family's needs (Danner-Vlaardingerbroek et al., 2013). Positive organisational outcomes (Robertson & Cooper, 2009), physical health and psychological well-being (Crabtree, 2005) have been associated with the psychologically available state.

### 3 Study's Sample

Non-probability snowball sampling was applied where a total of  $n = 60$  women took part in the study. The majority were married (60%), whilst 15% were single or divorced and 10% were in a permanent relationship. Almost half the group speak English (48.3%), with 13.3% speaking an African language. 13.30% Respondents were African; 78.30% were White; 5% were Indian; and 3.3% were of Mixed race. Most had a tertiary qualification where 20% qualified with a Bachelor's/B.Tech/Diploma and 71.7% hold a postgraduate degree. 60% held leadership positions within their organisations, whilst 40% were not involved in leadership roles. Of the  $n = 60$  woman, 48.3% indicated that they had no children, 18 (30%) have one child, while 13 (21.7%) indicated that they have two or more children.

### 4 Measuring the Predictors of Women's Work Engagement

A longitudinal multilevel design, utilising an online diary was utilised to collect data from  $n = 60$  women. Each woman was required to complete a set of questions for each of the constructs (work-family culture, work-home interaction and psychological availability) across 10 consecutive working days. An electronic link was sent each day, where response times were limited to (17:00–00:00). Data was downloaded into an Xcel spreadsheet and structured into a long, instead of a wide (multivariate) format, as recommended by Kabacoff (2011).

Figure 1 demonstrates the model used to analyse the data at two levels (the higher level and the lower level), which is in line with Twisk's (2006) work. The higher level represents the participant, and the lower level represents the observations. As observations at two levels are interdependent, linear mixed effect regression method (LMER) was best suited for this longitudinal data (Long, 2012).

Given the short time period within which the data is collected, Dormann and Griffin (2015, p. 11) coined the term “shortitudinal” study, as this more accurately

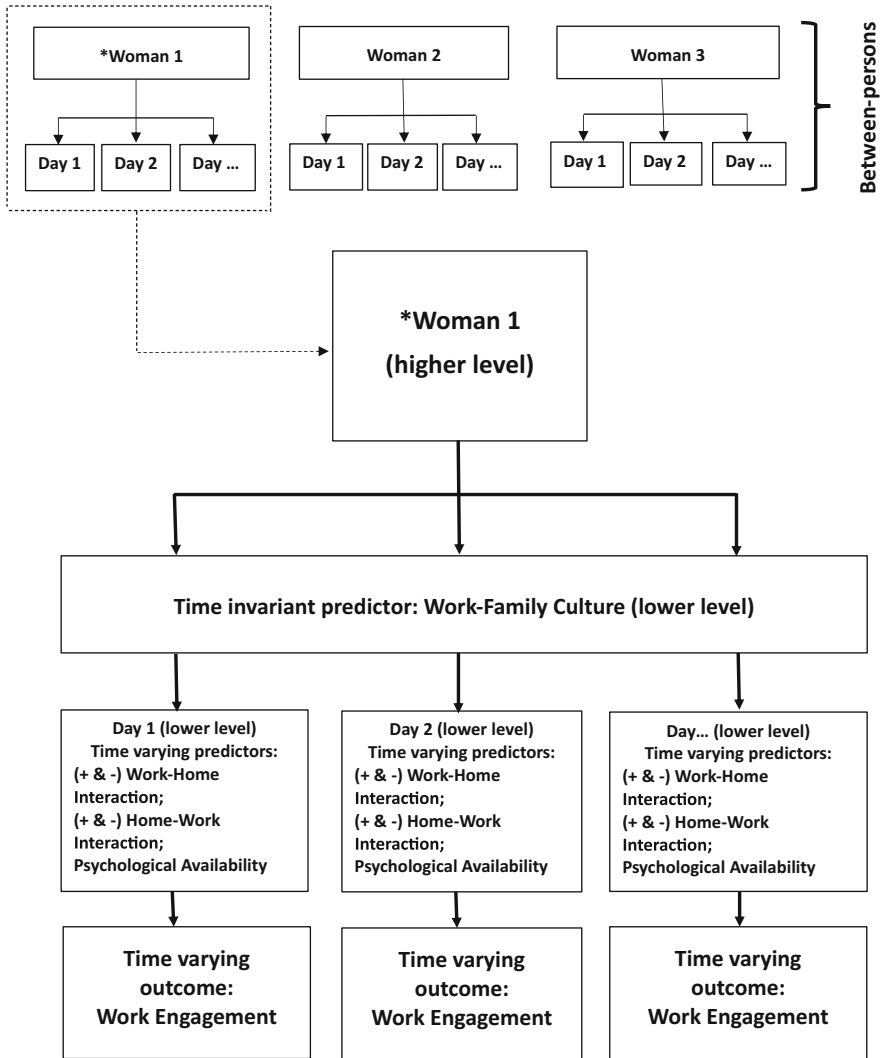


Fig. 1 Structure of longitudinal data

portrays the longitudinal nature of the data and its shorter time lags; and reveals important information about the unfolding of psychological processes over time.

Research questions for the diary were extracted from:

- Schaufeli and Bakker’s (2003) work engagement scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ): “Today, I felt proud of the work I did”
- Dikkers et al. (2007) work-family culture ( $\alpha = .89$ ): “At my work, people are sympathetic towards family care responsibilities of employees”

- Geurts et al. (2005) positive work-home interaction ( $\alpha = .88$ ): “After a pleasant day at work today, I had more energy to take part in activities with my spouse/family/friends”
- Geurts et al. (2005) positive home-work interaction ( $\alpha = .88$ ): “Today, I managed my time at work efficiently because I managed my time at home well.”
- May et al. (2004) psychological availability ( $\alpha = .89$ ): “Today, I was confident in my ability to think clearly at work”

Statistical analyses were carried out using the R software package to analyse the shortitudinal data through multilevel analysis, using LMER. Figure 1 depicts the multilevel nature of the constructs and how they were measured for each woman. This figure is the original work of Dr. Karolina Łaba, and an exert from her doctoral dissertation, is included below.

## 5 Results

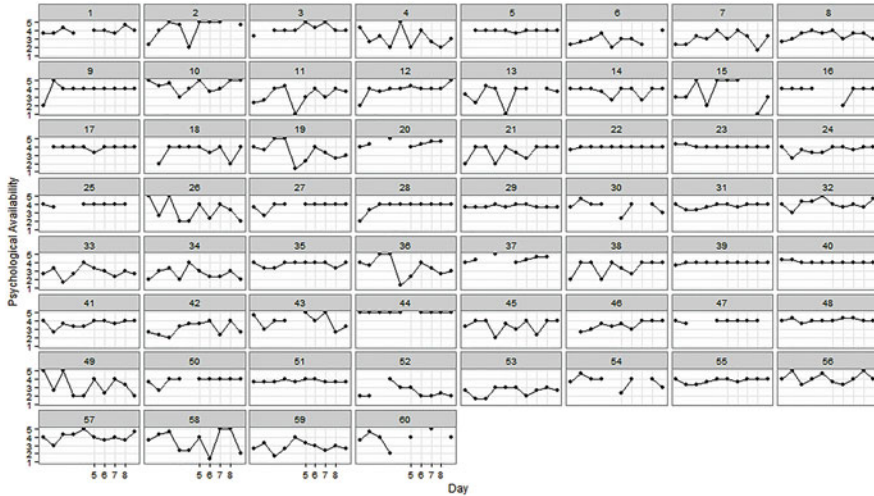
In focussing on the predictor that had the most significant contribution towards women's daily work engagement (and working within the page limitations of this chapter), only the daily psychological availability results will be reported on, and a summary provided in the section: Daily psychological availability on daily work engagement. An overview of the results for each predictor is included below:

- No significant fit ( $p > .05$ ) was found for work-family culture (support) contributing to women's daily work engagement.
- Daily positive work-home interaction contributed toward a .18 unit change in daily work engagement.
- Daily positive home-work interaction contributed a .20 unit change in daily work engagement.
- Daily psychological availability contributed toward a .63 unit change in daily work engagement.

### 5.1 *Daily Psychological Availability on Daily Work Engagement*

The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) demonstrated a variation of 26% for daily psychological availability. The individual difference for each woman is depicted in Fig. 2, where the construct ‘day’ indexes the ordinal time point of the diary entry (0–9), representing the 10 consecutive daily reports of daily psychological availability for all women. Each construct was simulated to lie on a one to five interval, such that one was the lowest possible score and five was the highest





**Fig. 2** Person-by-person scatterplot of psychological availability across days

**Table 1** Modelling daily psychological availability on daily work engagement

Models	AIC	BIC	LogLik	$\chi^2$	$\Delta\chi^2$	df	p
1	733.87	751.20	-362.93	725.87			
2	721.39	747.39	-354.69	709.39	16.48	2	.00***
3	721.39	747.39	-354.69	709.39	0	0	1.00

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

possible score. Similarly, Fig. 2 is the original work of Dr. Karolina Łaba, and an exert from her doctoral dissertation, is included below.

As variation was demonstrated for daily psychological availability, three models were tested to determine which one would represent the best fit for modelling daily psychological availability on daily work engagement.

- Model 1: included a random intercept for daily psychological availability.
- Model 2: included a random intercept for daily psychological availability and a random slope was added for daily psychological availability (Table 1)
- Model 3: similar to model 2, where a term was incorporated to model the covariance structure/errors (correlation =  $x$ ) where ‘ $x$ ’ represented the first-order autoregressive covariance structure.

Of the three models, the fit indices indicated that model 2 (random intercept and a random slope for daily psychological availability) showed significant model fit and was hence reported on in Table 2. The chi-square  $p$ -value statistic ( $p < .001$ ) suggested that the hypothesis of perfect fit was rejected. Given the aforementioned and in summarising the lower AIC, BIC, LogLik and  $\chi^2$  values, model 2 suggested an adequate overall fit.

**Table 2** Summary of parameter estimates for the random effects of daily psychological availability on women’s daily work engagement

Random effects ([co-]variances)	Estimate	CI <sub>95</sub>	
		Lower	Upper
Between-Person			
Intercept	.63	0.39	1.01
Psychological availability	.16	0.09	0.26
Intercept and psychological availability	-.94	-0.85	-0.62
Within-Person			
Residual	.47	0.44	0.50

**Table 3** Summary of parameter estimates for the fixed effects of psychological availability on women’s daily work engagement

Fixed effects (intercepts, slopes)	Estimate	(SE)	t	p	CI <sub>95</sub>	
					Lower	Upper
Psychological availability						
Intercept	1.11	0.14	7.60	.99	0.83	1.40
Slope	.63	0.04	16.64	.00***	0.56	0.71

Bolger and Laurenceau’s (2013) guidelines were used to report on the random effects as presented in Table 2. The random intercepts varied across participants  $b = .63$  (95% CI: 0.39, 1.01),  $x^2 = 725.87$ . The intercept variance of .63 corresponds to an *SD* of  $\sqrt{.63} = .79$ , suggesting that 95% of the sample vary between  $\pm 1.58$  units of the typical intercept for the group. The random slopes varied across participants,  $b = .16$  (95% CI: 0.09, 0.26),  $x^2 = 709.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Hence, the slope variance was .16, which corresponded to an *SD* of  $\sqrt{.16} = .4$  and indicated that 95% of the population varied between  $\pm 0.8$  units of the typical slope for the group. The intercepts and slopes were negatively and significantly correlated,  $cor = -.94$  ( $-.85, -.62$ ), suggesting that the intercepts were lower with more positive slopes. The sample variance of the residuals from the group average is .47 that corresponded to an *SD* of  $\sqrt{.47} = .69$  units, which implied, that 95% of observed residuals lay between  $\pm 1.38$  units of their fitted values. Variance is thus accounted for in the model.

Table 3 demonstrates the fixed effects of 1.11 units (likert scale ranging from 1–5). The intercept was the level of daily psychological availability at day one for the group. The level of 1.11 units specifies that the daily psychological availability level was low at day one. The slope estimate was  $b = .63$  (95% CI, 0.56, 0.71),  $t = 16.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggests that the group showed a .63 unit increase over time in daily work engagement, which proves that daily psychological availability is a significant predictor in women’s daily work engagement.

## 6 Discussion

From the study's results, the relationship of the predictors to women's work engagement are reported follows:

In the relationship between *work-family culture (support)* and work engagement, work-family culture was non-significant. Multiple studies have demonstrated the benefits of supportive work-family cultures in balancing work and home responsibilities (Bobbio et al., 2022; Den Dulk, et al., 2016; Masterson et al., 2021; Rothbard et al., 2005). With male-defined norms of vocational achievement prevailing (Acker, 1990; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000), perhaps a supportive work-family culture in this case may be deemed inadequate in influencing the daily work engagement of women. Alternatively, within the context of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 1966), work-family culture could be viewed as a hygiene factor. Hygiene factors are extrinsic to the work itself and comprise of aspects such as company policies, which do not lead to higher motivation (Herzberg, 1968). In line with the aforementioned, as work-family culture support is external to woman and influenced by company policies, this may hence not contribute to motivation/work engagement.

In the relationship between *daily positive work-home interaction, positive home-work interaction* and work engagement, daily positive work-home interaction and daily positive home-work interaction proved to be statistically significant. These findings are in line with existing research where Barnett and Hyde (2001) mention that the transfer of positive resources between work and home domains, result from involvement in meaningful roles, which contribute to positive behavioural outcomes. Ahl (2007) attributes the frequency of reported positive home-work interaction experiences, to the societal and family norms that perceive women as the primary caregiver for the family. To corroborate, Eagley (1995) mentions that gender is a negotiated social process that is context dependent. Should an organisation promote the care responsibilities of the women, her family life may be prioritised over her work (Rehman Muhammad Azam Roomi, 2012). Similarly, Casale et al. (2021) report that South African women's constraint in the labour market is due to the additional responsibility they face in the home, due to retaining the primary responsibility for the household and the provision of care (Saad et al., 2022).

In the relationship between *daily psychological availability* and work engagement, daily psychological availability proved to be statistically significant. Chikoko et al. (2014), as well as Towsen et al. (2020) support the role internal psychological processes have in the experience of work engagement. Psychological availability, closely associated with self-efficacy (Jacobs, 2013), is the internal psychological process that has been identified as lacking in women when they undertake roles and responsibilities related to their job (Kay & Shipman, 2014). O'Neil et al. (2015) thus affirm the importance of promoting psychological availability in retaining and developing women within organisations.

## 7 Conclusion

Providing a supportive work-family culture, together with initiatives that create positive work-home experiences and positive home-work experiences continue to be promoted in organisations to retain woman. This study contributes to the debate by endorsing individual-level initiatives, such as that of fostering psychological availability, and cautions against assuming that a work engagement intervention will benefit all employees equally. With the realities of current family structures (Blow, 2008; Quamina, 2018), time-intensive and insecure jobs (Gerson, 2009), where over work prevails (Ely & Padavic, 2020) this study questions the ideal of providing a supportive work-family culture which does not consider the needs of the modern-day woman.

Contrary to literature endorsing work-family culture (Beauregard, 2011) and work-home initiatives (Oosthuizen & Mostert, 2010) as solutions to supporting the woman's progression within an organisation, this study's findings indicate that support through a work-family culture, does not predict women's daily work engagement. With work-home interaction demonstrating a significant, but small contribution to women's work engagement, and psychological availability indicating a significant and considerable contribution to women's work engagement, suggests that constructs within the realm of the individual woman have predictive power. This finding promotes the recommendation for endorsing leadership development initiatives, through assigning coaches to identify the women's specific developmental need for maintaining their work engagement.

### 7.1 Limitations

The sample consisted of a diverse group of South African women. Caution should be observed in generalising the findings of this study to an international audience.

Steyn and Grobler (2016) found sex bias in the measurement of work engagement (UWES-9), which suggests that the measured constructs may have different meanings for men and women. The reliability and validity for this study's sample were met, however academics and practitioners (human resource professional, industrial psychologists) alike should be mindful of the sex of the employee when utilising a psychometric test to assess behaviour in the organisation.

This study was conducted before COVID, hence these results should not be interpreted in the context of the ensuing pandemic.

### 7.1.1 Recommendations for Future Research

As psychological availability significantly contributes to women's work engagement over time, identify antecedents of psychological availability via qualitative studies, could provide further insight into women's developmental needs at work.

Between-person differences were conducted in this study for each woman over time. To further understand the influence that demographic variables (age, education, number of children, etc.) may have on her experience of work engagement, a longitudinal study should be conducted focussing on within-person differences.

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# Towards Mainstreaming Gender Equality in the Workplace: A Gender Perspective on Advancing Transformation in South Africa



**Zethu Mkhize**

**Abstract** South Africans are emerging from an era of institutional inequality. While women in general have been negatively affected by inequality, African women, in particular, have carried a disproportionate burden of the underdevelopment caused by inequality. This burden has permeated every sphere of life, hence the conception of the national transformation project, which is aimed at ungendering all institutions of the state and civil society. The South African government has developed a Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality aimed at creating an enabling environment to facilitate continuous development of individual potential. The conception of such an ideal emerged from people whose history is steeped in institutional inequality and sexism. This historical legacy of patriarchy influenced essential informal and formal human relationships, with a marked impact in the workplace. Non-sexism forms the cornerstone of South Africa's transformation project, which is well underway.

This chapter illustrates a disconnect between the legislative framework, policy provisions for equity and the disregard of women's interests in the workplace. It further encapsulates how this disconnect between policies and practice presents a never-ending balancing act in women's pathway for career development. The focus is on women's empowerment principles and how the non-realisation of these has perpetuated gender inequality in the workplace. I contend that leveraging on these principles will promote social justice, equity and gender perspective transformation in the workplace.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Employment equity · Gender equality · Institutional culture · Transformation

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## 1 Introduction

South Africa has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world (International Monetary Fund, 2020). This is reflected in disparities in income distribution and unequal access to opportunity along gender lines. Women have been subjected to subordination and discrimination in institutions serving the interests of men, and the workplace is no exception. The trajectory of gender equality was formalised through the promulgation of several pieces of legislation and policy frameworks. These include the Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (2002), which aims at the achievement of equality of opportunity; access to and sharing in employment opportunities, services and resources; as well as equality of treatment by employers. The Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) (EEA) (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1998) was promulgated to ensure the achievement of equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity for men and women.

Affirmative action is one measure that has been established to redress disadvantages in employment experienced by members of the designated groups, which include women. While programmes based on the principle of affirmative action are lauded for the positive effect they have had on women's access to opportunities, climbing the corporate ladder is often fraught with challenges for women, as the work environment has not transformed in favour of women's interests. I argue that while the workplace has been diversified, African women face serious challenges, as the work environment remains genderised, which impact negatively on the development of their individual potential. The argument is based on the lived experiences of African women who participated in the study.

## 2 Methodology

This was a qualitative study of women's workplace experiences. A problem-oriented case study methodology was applied. Case studies of African professional women who have advanced to senior and executive management levels were used as analysis tools to state and describe how women's interests are ignored in the workplace. The purpose was to provide a deeper understanding and meaning of these women's workplace experiences.

The case study approach was underpinned by empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2012), which explains the ongoing processes by which people gain access and control of valued resources to achieve their goals. Empowerment theory was adopted for its relevance in advocating policies that promote greater social justice, equity, self-development and awareness, and help women address oppressive forces blocking them from thriving.

Twelve participants were selected from three provinces in South Africa through a triangulation of purposive and snowballing sampling strategies. I structured a specific approach in putting together the typical characteristics of participants to

constitute a sample of African women employees who have advanced to senior and executive management. The initial contact was by means of a purposive sample focusing on typical characteristics, which included gender, race and managerial position. The snowballing strategy was accommodated to ensure representativeness of age categories and different sectors.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews to solicit the participants' workplace experiences and establish why the identified challenges still exist despite the legislative framework aimed at protecting women's interests. Qualitative face-to-face interviews were conducted after informed consent was obtained from the participants. These opened spaces for the women to talk about their subjective understanding of their lived experiences.

### **3 Literature Review**

In South Africa, an African woman is by law considered an equity candidate, something which not only best facilitates her opportunities for jobs, but also positions her for advancement in her career. The advent of democracy witnessed more African women assuming responsibility in every industry. This has come with positive gains for the workplace as women have made their presence felt in the workplace because most of them are clever, technically competent and emotionally stable, as compared to their male counterparts. Reddy (2022) asserts that despite achieving such success as new age corporate women, women still face challenges in their workplace that impinge negatively on their dexterity on the corporate scene.

The argument presented in the chapter is that the workplace environment has not been levelled for African women to compete equally with their male counterparts. While there may be more of these challenges, the discussion is limited to the most prevalent ones that disproportionately affect African women. These are pregnancy and maternity, sexual harassment and work–life balance.

#### ***3.1 Pregnancy and Maternity***

Theodorou (2022) contends that starting a family is a major dilemma facing many working women, as the years of career development coincide with the years of starting a family. This might be a challenging period for working women; however, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (No. 75 of 1997) (BCEA) (RSA, 1997) makes provision for maternity leave. Maternity leave is important, as it allows working women time off with their children. Huysamen (2012) states that the maternity leave and protection provisions of the BCEA are undoubtedly a step in the right direction in terms of the advancement of employment security for pregnant employees.

Section 25 of the BCEA deals with maternity leave with reference to various sensitivities. Among these is the provision to consider a suitable alternative placement for pregnant women to protect them from work that might threaten their unborn babies. However, if such suitable alternative placement is not available, the employee is compelled to take leave. There are, however, discrepancies in the legislation that predispose women to discriminatory practices. Paid maternity leave is not a statutory requirement. Levy (2021) contends that while some employers may opt to offer a form of payment during maternity leave, they may set limitations or conditions on such payment. I argue that while maternity leave is a benefit for working women, unpaid maternity leave remains a challenge.

### ***3.2 Sexual Harassment***

Sexual harassment is the most deplorable and distressing challenge for women in the workplace. Many men have the notion that working women are compromising by nature, which is the foundation for such vicious deeds (Reddy, 2022). The EEA makes provision for any form of harassment. It further stipulates the method by which the removal of discrimination in the workplace is to be achieved (Levy, 2021). I argue that reporting sexual harassment is an ordeal for women, as the perpetrators are in most instances men holding positions of authority or influence in the organisation and the complainants are usually young women employees. Nxumalo (as cited in Bowmans, 2016) asserts that sexual harassment is not reported for fear of being blocked in a career move.

Leaving employment often becomes the only option available to these women to maintain sanity and a sense of well-being; however, the choice to leave or not to leave the job is a difficult one to make, considering the high rate of unemployment in South Africa and that gainful employment is the surest means for an African woman to escape generational poverty (Mkhize, 2021). According to Davies (2018), the Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) and labour courts have shown themselves to be unsympathetic towards employers who allow sexual harassment of their employees.

### ***3.3 Work–Life Balance***

Most individuals struggle with balancing their work and personal life; however, this is more challenging for African women due to their societally ascribed roles in line with the traditional system. The African woman's role of caregiving and support provision is not limited to her immediate family, but extends to the extended family, the neighbourhood and the community. The expectation is for women to adapt to the different roles as and when situations present themselves. Theodorou (2022) asserts that the challenge of work–life balance was made obvious during the Covid-19

pandemic, with workers working from home reporting they were unable to switch off and maintain boundaries with their work.

## 4 Findings

The research questions were on the women's experience of workplace challenges and why these continue to exist. Women were invited to share the impact of these challenges on women and elaborate on their experiences. In presenting the findings I have structured themes that characterise the experiences of the participants. These are discussed in the following subsections.

### 4.1 *Maternity as a Barrier to Development*

The lived workplace experiences of the African women in this study indicated that women have unique challenges in the never-ending balancing act on their pathway of development. Twenty-five per cent of the participants shared that historically, unmarried pregnant women's services were terminated and married pregnant women were given three months' unpaid maternity leave. They further lauded the reforms regarding maternity leave, but maintained that the reforms are still inadequate, as women are still penalised for becoming pregnant. These women started their careers during the apartheid era when inequality was institutionalised.

All the participants (100%) held the view that there is a sense or pervasive message that becoming pregnant is wrong, as a pregnant employee is perceived as an inconvenience to the employer. The attitude is that a pregnant woman must be removed from the corporate environment and will return post-maternity with no proper plan for her integration. Each time operational plans are discussed, the question "Are you going to take maternity leave?" is thrown into the conversation. The expectation is that a woman should put her plans for pregnancy on hold and focus on work-related projects. In the event that they fall pregnant during the lifecycle of a work-related project, the expectation is that they will report for work until the last trimester.

The women's lived experience is that pregnancy and maternity present a concomitant financial challenge. It is worse in circumstances where women do not qualify for paid leave. While the physiological strain might present a need for extended leave, the reality of the financial constraints and demands would compel women to return to work. In some instances, women would work overtime during the early pregnancy stages to ensure that they have sufficient financial resources during maternity. Women perceive this as corporate servitude and an infringement on women's rights.

The general view of women is that the concept of four months' maternity leave is flawed; hence its definition as a 'benefit' is a misnomer. The specified period of

maternity leave makes no provision for legitimate post-natal circumstances that might dictate a need for extended leave of absence. In such instances, women would consider using their sick leave and annual leave. One participant who is a corporate affairs director reaffirmed that challenges concerning pregnancy and maternity continue to exist in the workplace. She attributed these to the lack of women's voices at bargaining councils. As much as there are employee representatives serving in the bargaining structure, these representatives do not consult enough with women employees. Once collective agreements have been reached, the onus is upon the employment organisations to develop strategies for pregnancy and maternity leave management. Whenever leave management policies are developed, the focus is on the collective agreements and there are no further considerations of the practicability of the implementation and the effects on women.

The impact of maternity leave on women is huge, as women cannot easily advance in their careers or qualify for promotion. Seventy five percent (75%) of the participants reported that work assignments are in most instances project-based and time-bound; hence it is important that all role players are on board for the entire project cycle. They stated that consequences are dire for women employees who become pregnant during the project cycle, as their contribution will not be recognised. Whenever a project is conceptualised, a woman's previous pregnancy is raised against her. In most instances, whenever promotions are discussed for executive and the most senior positions within the organisation, pregnancy and maternity leave are issues brought up. The thought of being left without an incumbent in a work division or section for four months lingers during the promotion committees' decision-making process. In the event that a woman is competing with a man, the selection committee's choice will gravitate towards the man.

#### ***4.2 Sexual Harassment as an Oppressive Force***

Women's view is that sexual harassment is often very subtle, as men tend to objectify women instead of seeing them as co-workers to deliver on the mandate of the organisation. Some men can neither differentiate sexual appreciation from sexual harassment, nor do they understand boundaries between a workspace and a social space. Women's opinion is that it is disgraceful when sexual innuendos are made by senior officials in the presence of executives who trivialise such behaviours instead of calling their colleagues to order. This normalisation of sexual harassment in the workplace unfortunately socialises men on what behaviour is acceptable, hence the perpetuation of sexual harassment.

Women's lived experience is that workplace sexual harassment policies are developed for compliance purposes and there is usually no accountability. Employers have not demonstrated the will to deal with workplace sexual harassment, as the policy provisions are rarely followed. Toxic masculinity manifests itself in men being protective of one another, while women complainants become subjects of office gossip. Women's experience is that the toxic work environment becomes

stress inducing for them and this negatively affects their mental health. An internal transfer to another department is not always possible, as senior officials would not necessarily be keen to facilitate.

Reporting sexual harassment is a brave step for a woman employee who would have to navigate a hostile environment as they continue working with the alleged perpetrator, who in most instances becomes vindictive. The hostility and vindictiveness meted out by the perpetrators are massive and intense. These behaviours range from nasty remarks to allocation of difficult tasks or assignments without the necessary support. Women expressed the fact that in some instances, victimisation is in the form of poor performance assessment scores given only at the end of the performance management cycle. This amounts to an impediment to the development of a woman's potential. I argue that while the CCMA and labour courts are meant to be unsympathetic towards employers who allow sexual harassment of their employees, on the contrary, the lived experiences of women indicate that sexual harassment still leads to resignations and employers are never made to account for constructive dismissal. The burden to report the matter to the CCMA is on the woman.

### ***4.3 Societal Roles as Barriers***

As mentioned, balancing work and personal life is more challenging for an African woman due to their societally ascribed roles in line with the traditional system. Performing these roles may not always be of her own volition, but as a result of multiple pressures that are placed on an African woman. A married woman, for instance, is expected to bear children immediately after marriage. Family planning is not a matter between her and her husband, as the extended family and the community members indirectly put pressure on her. The manner of greeting includes a nagging question about her plans to have children. The woman will then consider the purpose of getting married, which was to build a family, and is pressurised to the point of giving in. Only the brave and courageous women are able to ignore these pressures and focus on their own plans.

In the event that somebody dies in the family, cultural convention dictates that the daughter-in-law must be at home to attend to certain traditions or rituals. This means taking compassionate leave for an extended period, and days that fall beyond the duration regulated by the employer will be debited from her annual leave if there is no cumulative leave. Death is unpredictable and multiple compassionate leave breaks are likely to disrupt work plans. Compassionate leave poses a challenge for women managers, as they might be constantly called whenever there is a crisis at work. This happens despite the organisational arrangement to have a colleague stepping in temporarily into the managerial role. One participant's lived experience was having to attend to an instance of industrial action while she was on compassionate leave.

The expectation for women to split their energy and time in a way that balances work demands and their personal lives is further complicated by male colleagues on whom women must depend. The women's experience is that male colleagues are usually not supportive and they consider women as a threat. The perception among women is that men are engaged in a constant 'gender tussle'. They would not support women, just to prove that women employees are incompetent and irresponsible.

The lived experiences of the women attest to the challenge of work–life balance, which was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The implications were huge for African women employees. Women, as caregivers, had to attend to the members of their households and balance this with the expected flexibility at work. The challenges facing African women were compounded by their lack of resources to hire additional domestic assistance and nursing care. The Level 5 hard lockdown regulations meant that even the limited domestic assistance that they use to have was not available. This was complicated by the women's inherent responsibility for the well-being of their nuclear family and that of their extended family and the neighbours. This is the unrealistic expectation that faced African women employees. The easing of Covid-19 regulations to levels 4 and 3 exacerbated the work–life imbalance for senior and executive managers who had to be agile in providing direction for organisations. In addition, work–life balance was not feasible for women employees who were in essential services, as they were expected to be at work during the peak of the pandemic.

While working from home presented the possibility of flexi-time for women, it was more often an overload, as in-person meetings were coupled with umpteen online meetings, workshops and conferences. These online activities were quite strenuous, as one would finish one meeting at 16:00 and switch to another from 16:00 to 19:00, for example. The normal eight-hour office job turned into an overnight extended-hours job. One participant's view was, "There was no respect for personal space and invariably I was living at work, it was almost like, there's no knocking off." The experiences of the women indicated that work–life balance is an elusive ideal for an African woman. The women expressed the view that the workplace imbalance is complicated by male counterparts who in most instances drive an agenda of proving a woman's incompetence, rather than being supportive.

## 5 Conclusions

Employers have provided opportunities for African women to access employment; however, not enough barriers have been removed for women to enjoy equal opportunities for success, as attested by women's workplace experiences. The disproportionate burden carried by women in the workplace indicates a disconnect between policy and practice, thereby perpetuating gender inequality in the workplace. This does not bode well for the vision for gender equality and is also contrary to the objective of the Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, which is to create an enabling policy environment to translate government commitment to gender equality into a reality.



Workplace policies and practices are still discriminatory and oppressive to women employees. Huysamen (2012) asserts that family responsibility could potentially affect a woman's career. I argue that employers have not taken cognisance of this issue, as women struggle between procreation and career development. While women are on maternity leave, for instance, their male counterparts are afforded career development opportunities and advancement. When women contest for senior positions with their male counterparts, they struggle their way up the corporate ladder, while the men breeze their way up. It is therefore not equitable to have universally applied job requirements for managerial positions.

I conclude that the non-statutory payment of maternity leave is an exclusionary labour practice, as women would have to consider their financial obligations and economic needs and how these would be met during the maternity leave period. This is a serious discrepancy, as it creates an economic setback for a woman, considering that a woman's years of fertility are the same years as the ones for developing her career path. The continual tension between career development and procreation is unique to women and presents a discriminatory practice, as their male counterparts are never exposed to such.

The persistent prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace is an indication that employers are failing to ensure the safety and well-being of women. The women's lived experiences revealed how sexual harassment is an oppressive force blocking them from thriving in the workplace. South Africa has developed a new Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment (RSA, 2022), which came into effect in March 2022. The code identifies the steps that employers must take to create harassment-free workplaces. It further places vicarious liability on employers for wrongful acts of their employees if these are committed in the course and scope of employment, unless the employer can prove that it has taken all reasonable steps to prevent this from happening. However, I assert that the test of the new code will be in its implementation, as employers will be expected to transform the code from paper to actual accountability.

## **6 Recommendations for Employers**

African women's experiences of the workplace have exposed the extent to which the workplace is genderised and how the institutional culture is exclusionary and discriminating for women. This remains a challenge for African women to develop and realise their potential, thrive in the workplace and advance their careers. The legislative framework is supposed to be empowering and this objective is far-reaching, yet some employers have not demonstrated their intent for inclusion. Workplace policies are not empowering, but are exclusionary, as they place a burden on women. Employers have a responsibility to review their policies to ensure that they advance the national agenda for gender equality.

It is therefore important for employers to institutionalise women's empowerment and gender equality, along the lines recommended in the policy framework. Richter

(2022) contends that transformation can only arise from fundamental changes within organisations and that embracing diversity and inclusion is a more compelling value proposition for the sustainability of organisations. I contend that while employers have diversified the workplace, they do not embrace inclusion adequately and therefore gender equity has remained a simply rhetoric and an elusive ideal. Employers should advance transformation by systematically removing barriers to inclusion through empowerment and the promotion of equity.

### ***6.1 Encouraging Policies That Promote Equity***

The workplace environment with its genderised institutional culture is a misfit for African women. Mohanty (as cited in Gouws, 2020) contends that the complexities of the lives of women are ignored and not taken into account. It is critical that employers advance the gender equality agenda and ensure gender equity. Central to this mission is the promotion of inclusion, which demands deliberate steps to facilitate participation that is aimed at addressing policies as key drivers for exclusion. Employers have a duty to address the exclusionary elements of workplace policies to eliminate employment barriers to women.

It is indisputable that the issue of maternity leave must be reviewed to ensure its equitable implementation. Maternity leave is not a benefit, but a form of enslavement for women employees. The undifferentiated regulated duration of maternity leave makes it a misnomer, considering that each pregnancy is unique. The best approach would be to improve women participation in the review of policies, as the current ‘one size fits all’ approach is not equitable.

Unpaid maternity leave is a discriminatory practice and must be addressed. Employers should implement relevant measures to provide some form of paid maternity leave to their employees. My recommendation is that paid maternity leave should be legislated, as the current status quo is a driver of exclusion. While pregnancy is an individual’s choice and personal aspiration, it is also essential for the continuation of the human species; hence pregnant employees must be supported, rather than discriminated against.

### ***6.2 Practices Promoting Gender Equality***

Employers have successfully established high-level corporate leadership for gender equality, but this must be complemented by consistent promotion of gender equity to ensure inclusion. An inclusive organisation removes barriers limiting the participation and achievement of all staff; respects diverse needs, abilities and characteristics; and eliminates all forms of discrimination in the work environment. African women are a unique component of the workforce and have unique interests and obstacles in realising their potential. It is therefore important for employers to remove the barriers

that limit women's participation and achievement in the work environment. Molefi et al. (2021) assert that equity achieves equality through treating people differently dependent on need, circumstance and consideration of historical and systemic inequities. I affirm that an African woman is different and her unique challenges can be traced to South African historical and systemic inequities.

Concerning sexual harassment, both men and women employees should participate in awareness conversations in line with the provisions of the Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment. These conversations will awaken women to their responsibility to identify and report any unsolicited and unwanted actions from their male counterparts. The conversations will hopefully assist men in differentiating sexual appreciation from sexual harassment and understanding boundaries between a workspace and a social space. I contend that it would be in the interest of inclusion for employers to introduce these conversations during the induction process of employees.

Employers should embrace practices that promote gender equality. Central to such practices are the norms, assumptions and values that are enacted through everyday practices of organisations. My argument is that employers have a legal obligation to create a safe and healthy workplace for women. Employers have to consider new perspectives and ways of working. While the Covid-19 pandemic presented a production threat to organisations, the flexible response of organisations has presented a hybrid mode of working arrangements. Employers should consider sustaining these to accommodate young women's needs, but in an uncompromising manner.

## **7 Recommendations for Future Research**

While employers boast about their gains in diversifying the workforce, it is equally important that the workplace becomes a conducive environment for women employees to thrive. This can only be achieved when employers develop specific equitable policies and genuinely foster an institutional culture that promotes gender equity. There is a need for an impact assessment of leave policies, with specific reference to maternity leave and compassionate leave. This would assist in identifying policy elements that are inequitable and removing them, thereby ensuring that South Africa's vision for gender equality is realised and that transformation in the workplace becomes more meaningful for African women.

## **8 Limitations of the Study**

As a case study method was used, cases were selected for a better understanding of women's workplace experiences, hence the emphasis was on particularisation and not generalisation. The focus was on the three provinces in a country that has nine provinces.

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# Enhancing Psychological Capital and Career Development of Female Employees in South Korea: Focusing on Gender Diversity and Inclusion Climate and Open Leadership



Soyeon Kim

**Abstract** Gender disparity commonly exists in companies. Companies' HRM practices and current organizational environment are advantageous to male employees rather than female employees. As female employees are capable and ambitious as much as male employees, this organizational environment and unequal treatment that female employees face make them discouraged and psychologically low-empowered. Against this backdrop, this chapter focuses on female employees' psychological state to clarify the organizational factors that contribute to improving female employees' psychological capital, characterized by subdimensions; efficacy, hope, resiliency, and optimism. From positive psychology and human capital perspectives, the study investigates the direct and interactive effects of organizational factors (i.e., gender diversity and inclusion (D & I) climate and a supervisor's open leadership) on increasing psychological capital of female employees. The data analysis of 507 female employees working for large-sized Korean manufacturing companies shows that gender D & I climate and a supervisor's open leadership positively influence female employees' psychological capital; specifically, gender D & I climate increases efficacy and hope. And a supervisor's open leadership enhances all the subdimensions of psychological capital. Notably, the interactive effects of the organizational factors and tenure indicate that early-career female employees feel more hopeful and optimistic under the pro-gender D & I climate than mid and late-career female employees. Moreover, early-career female employees become resilient at their work when supervisors implement open leadership style. The findings highlight the organizational factors' vital role in developing female employees' psychological capital and career-building. The study provides practical advice and suggestions to current business organizations regarding

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diversity management and contributes to the realm of leadership and positive psychology studies.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Gender diversity & inclusion climate · Open leadership · Psychological capital · Female employees · Career-building · South Korea

## 1 Study Background

### 1.1 *Gender-Diversity and Inclusion Management and Its Significance in Korea*

Diversity and inclusion (D & I) management has been advocated globally and is gaining in importance in business (Magoshi & Chang, 2009; Kundu et al., 2019; Nishii, 2013). People have become more aware of diversity issues, calling for individuality and fair treatment to be embraced in the workplace. This has required companies to concern themselves with the issue and deal with it appropriately and responsibly. Companies thus, have become obliged to structure D & I management practices and implement them. Research consistently reports companies' strategic approaches to D & I management (Jonsen et al., 2021; Rabl et al., 2020). For instance, Jonsen et al. (2021) investigated five different countries including France, Germany, Spain, the UK and the US and clarified that companies' commitment to create D & I branding can attract future talents and also increase the possibility of being their employers. Also, companies' continuous efforts to embrace diversity improve employees' work engagement and stimulate them to perform beyond what is expected of them (Rabl et al., 2020); thus, D & I management has a strategic importance in managing human resources in companies.

Diversity issues and D & I management have gained much attention in Korea (Bae & Skaggs, 2019; Magoshi & Chang, 2009; Tanikawa et al., 2017). Due to the homogenous demography of Korea and the solid social stereotype of gender roles, the immediate issue of diversity is that of gender diversity. It is well-known that female employees are disadvantaged in their treatment and advancement in Korean society (Min et al., 2014). Female employees face a glass ceiling that stops them from moving up the ladder, which consequently leads them to feel powerless, hopeless, and incompetent (Sueda et al., 2020). Such psychologically negative feelings influence their work performance negatively or lead them to exit the company, which incurs losses to the company (Harman & Sealy, 2017). This low empowerment of female employees is even more serious in male-dominated and hierarchically structured and conservative organizations such as governmental agencies and companies in manufacturing, engineering, and heavy and construction industries. There is no consistent evidence about the financial benefits of gender diversity management in Korea (Bae & Skaggs, 2019). Nonetheless, considering its

indirect and non-financial benefits through its positive linkage to talents and employee management (Jonsen et al., 2021; Rabl et al., 2020), gender D & I management and the supporting programs to empower and advance female employees should be considered important as an organizational strategy in Korean companies.

## ***1.2 Organizational Factors Affecting Female Employees' Psychological Capital***

Individuals interact with society and are influenced by the social environment in which they are involved in work (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Social information processing theory argues that individuals perceive social environments and their interpretations of the surroundings determine their attitudes and behaviors (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). This suggests that organizations' social and environmental factors influence employees to shape desired certain organizational attitudes and behaviors (O'Reilly & Roberts, 1975). This further implies that the social and environmental context of organizations should be investigated to clarify and predict potential employees' work attitudes and behaviors. Psychological capital is a higher-order construct of positive psychology that comprises subdimensions of self-confidence/efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency (Luthans et al., 2007). Confidence/efficacy refers to an individual's perceived capacity to complete tasks. Hope means a motivational state to put effort into achieving goals. Optimism is about perceived positive expectation and thought about work and resiliency refers to a perceived capacity to rebound from challenging situations and adversity at work. As a significant derive for the productive and desirable work outcomes, employees' psychological capital increases productive organizational outcomes such as creativity, job satisfaction, commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors (Luthans et al., 2008; Avey et al., 2008; Rego et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2011). This psychological capital is argued to have the "state-like" property, not the "trait-like" so, it is open to change and development by the influences of external stimuli (Luthans et al., 2007). Due to this developmental and progressive nature of psychological capital through the influences of organizational contextual factors (Bandura, 2012), it should be understood in relation to organizational factors.

Organizational climate is one of the critical organizational factors with a significant impact on employees. Suppose employees perceive that their organizational climate is supportive and encouraging to them, and also treats them fairly. In that case, they are motivated to work, feeling more confident, hopeful, and positive about their work. Gender D & I climate shaped by implementing gender D & I policies and practices reinforces employees' trust and sense of fairness in their organization, which thus shapes their positive attitudes toward their work and enhances their positive and hopeful energy toward work (Kim, 2022b). In addition, since companies' policy and direction on gender D & I are an immediate issue to female



employees, companies' D & I climate will significantly influence female employees to shape their attitudes toward their work. This rationale suggests that gender D & I climate increases female employees' psychological capital.

A supervisor's leadership is an influential organizational factor determining employees' work attitudes (Kim & Shin, 2019, 2022; Hu et al., 2020). Its effect is particularly critical to employees because employees and leaders frequently interact and build close relationships. Leadership behaviors give a signal to employees regarding the organizational values and the goals that employees should share. Through leadership behaviors, employees understand the organization's strategic direction and values, which affects their work attitudes and values. Consequently, leadership behaviors convey a meaningful message to employees, thus helping them to shape certain psychological states and work attitudes, which subsequently determine their work outcomes. Specifically, the open behaviors of supervisors, defined as "encouraging doing things differently and experimenting, giving room for independent thinking and acting, and supporting attempts to challenge established approaches" (Rosing et al., 2011, p. 967), allow employees autonomy and freedom in their work, which thus increases the variance in employees' positive work behaviors. Leaders with such open behaviors appreciate individuality, accepting different work processes and ideas of employees.

Female employees may want to pursue approaches and ideas of working that differ from their male counterparts. In a male-dominated organizational structure where formal and typical working procedures and methods are encouraged, female employees are not confident about implementing and testing their different working ideas and methods (Harman & Sealy, 2017). Therefore, in most cases, they are discouraged from testing their ideas and working methods, thus, following the standard and safe way. However, under open leadership implemented by their supervisor, female employees think that their individual differences and different behaviors are valued and embraced, which leads them to feel psychologically competent and hopeful at their work, which consequently, increases their psychological capital. Based on these ideas, this study assumes that the organizational factors of gender D & I climate and the open leadership of supervisors have significant effects on enhancing female employees' psychological capital.

In addition, the study presumes that the positive effects of organizational factors on female employees' psychological capital are contingent on their career length. In other words, the effects are more considerable on early-career female employees than mid or late-career female employees. This assumption is because early-career female employees are less knowledgeable and experienced, so the organizational factors of gender D & I climate and supervisor leadership play an important role in shaping their perception and attitude toward their work. Additionally, early-career female employees may face a large reality gap between their perception of organizational life and their real organizational life (Harman & Sealy, 2017). Therefore, such organizational factors, which send positive signals about the working life at the organization and thus shape positive attitudes toward work, will play a more critical role for early-career female employees. The organization's supportive and embracing environment, represented by its gender D & I climate and direct leaders' opening

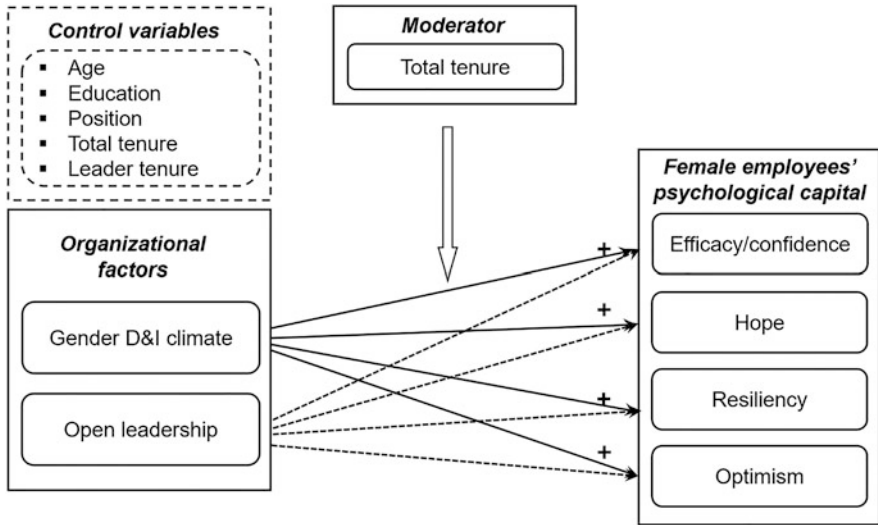


Fig. 1 The research framework

and embracing behaviors, leads them to see their work positively and pursue it more enthusiastically and effectively through the increased psychological capital. The research framework is developed based on these considerations (Fig. 1).

## 2 Research Method and Measures

### 2.1 Data Collection

This study used a two-wave data collected for a large-scale project. Participants working for large manufacturing companies in Korea joined the surveys. The survey was conducted twice, with a two-week gap to regulate common method bias and also to address the causal effects of organizational factors on employees. In the first survey, respondents were asked about their company's gender D & I climate and direct leader's open leadership behaviors. The same respondents were invited again to the second survey and asked about their psychological capital. The study focused on large manufacturing companies with more than three hundred employees in Korea because the industrial sector is particularly male-dominated and its economic and social impacts are significant in Korea (Kim, 2022a). Thus, it has a strong image that confronts women with considerable obstacles and challenges to joining and building a successful career. The total number of respondents was 513, and after removing six insincere respondents who answered the same for all questions, 507 responses remained and were used for the statistical analysis.

## 2.2 Measures

Each concept adopted in this study was measured using valid scales used in prior research (Kim, 2022b; Rosing et al., 2011; Luthans et al., 2007). Gender D & I climate was measured by the five questions developed by Kim (2022b), for example: “My company has diversity practices to support female employees,” “My company treats employees fairly regardless of gender.” The Cronbach’s alpha of this concept is 0.85. Open leadership was measured with seven questions created by Rosing et al. (2011). Sample questions are “My direct supervisor gives possibilities for independent thinking and acting” and “My direct supervisor allows different ways of accomplishing a task.” The Cronbach’s alpha for open leadership is 0.92. Psychological capital was measured by the twenty-four questions that Luthans et al. (2007) developed; every six questions were used to measure the subdimensions of efficacy/confidence, hope, resiliency, and optimism. A sample question for efficacy/confidence is “I feel confident helping to set targets/goals in my work area.”

A sample question for hope is “At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my work goals.” A sample question for resilience is “I usually manage difficulties one way or another at work.” A sample question for optimism is “I always look on the bright side of things regarding my job.” The items were rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alphas for the subdimensions are 0.89, 0.90, 0.75, and 0.72, respectively.

In addition, the survey participants’ individual characteristics were measured and added to the analysis to regulate their potential effects on dependent variables. Age was coded categorically from one to five: one indicates the 20 s, two for the 30 s, three for the 40 s, four for the 50, and five for the 60 s. Education was coded categorically based on participants’ education level: one is for graduates from high school, two is for those from a two-year college, three is for those from a four-year university, four is for those from a master course and five is for those from a doctoral course. 80% of participants were four-year university graduates. Position was also categorically coded as one to five: a high number indicates an upper-level position. Total tenure and leader tenure were measured as the total working period until now and the total working period with their current leader expressed in years. Table 1 shows all measured variables’ means, standard deviations, and correlations. The correlations among variables indicate that the main independent, dependent, and moderating variables are significantly associated. For instance, gender D & I climate is positively correlated with open leadership ( $r = 0.349, p < 0.05$ ) and also the efficacy subdimension of psychological capital is significantly related with gender D & I climate ( $r = 0.180, p < 0.05$ ) and open leadership ( $r = 0.148, p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among variables

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	1.83	0.73	1										
2. Education	2.99	0.67	0.109*	1									
3. Position	1.91	0.83	0.561*	0.286*	1								
4. Total tenure	4.33	0.84	0.677*	0.013	0.570*	1							
5. Leader tenure	3.39	1.01	0.291*	-0.151*	0.216*	0.410*	1						
6. Gender D & I climate	2.63	0.86	0.058	0.107*	0.096*	-0.063	-0.081	1					
7. Open leadership	2.97	0.92	-0.074	0.003	-0.009	-0.069	-0.061	0.349*	1.0000				
<i>Psychological capital</i>													
8. Efficacy/confidence	4.04	0.82	0.123*	0.153*	0.264*	0.101*	0.020	0.180*	0.148*	1			
9. Hope	4.19	0.75	0.120*	0.026	0.174*	0.106*	0.026	0.177*	0.174*	0.752*	1		
10. Resiliency	4.07	0.62	0.113*	0.041	0.115*	0.122*	0.043	0.1117*	0.195*	0.509*	0.582*	1	
11. Optimism	3.96	0.63	0.140*	0.001	0.105*	0.095*	0.025	0.147*	0.200*	0.454*	0.561*	0.619*	1

Note: \* $p < 0.05$

Tenure: unit = ln(year)

Total tenure: the total period of working by now. Leader tenure: the period of working with the current leader

### 3 Results

Table 2 shows the regression analysis among the organizational factors and female employees' psychological capital. Models 1 to 4 indicate the effects of the demographic variables of female employees on each component of psychological capital. Models 1 and Model 2 show that position is significantly related with efficacy ( $\beta = 0.271, p < 0.01$ ) and hope ( $\beta = 0.154, p < 0.01$ ), which suggests that female employees in a high position feel more confident and hopeful about their work than those in a low position. Model 4 indicates that age is related to optimism, indicating that older female employees tend to have a more optimistic view of their work than young female employees ( $\beta = 0.112, p < 0.05$ ).

Models 4 to 8 show the results concerning the effects of gender D & I climate and the supervisor's open leadership on female employees' psychological capital. The findings indicate that gender D & I climate significantly influences female employees' psychological capital; specifically, it increases female employees' efficacy ( $\beta = 0.103, p < 0.05$ ) and hope ( $\beta = 0.103, p < 0.05$ ). In addition, open leadership of direct supervisor is closely related to all the components of psychological capital: efficacy ( $\beta = 0.098, p < 0.05$ ), hope ( $\beta = 0.114, p < 0.01$ ), resilience ( $\beta = 0.126, p < 0.01$ ), and optimism ( $\beta = 0.127, p < 0.01$ ). This finding signifies that the supervisor's leadership has a particularly significant impact on elevating psychological resources among female employees more than gender D & I climate.

Table 3 shows the moderating effects of total tenure on the relationship between organizational factors and psychological capital of female employees. Models 1 to 4 show the moderating effect of tenure on the relationship between gender D & I climate and psychological capital. The regression analysis indicates that tenure negatively moderates the relationships between gender D & I climate and hope ( $\beta = -0.013, p < 0.05$ ) and also between gender D & I climate and optimism ( $\beta = -0.014, p < 0.01$ ). This finding suggests that the positive effects of gender D & I climate on hope and optimism are significantly higher for early-career female employees than for mid and late-career female employees. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the relationships between gender D & I climate and hope and between gender D & I climate and optimism under the two different conditions of tenure: low and high tenure. The graphs indicate that the hopeful and optimistic view about work is much higher for low-tenure female employees than high-tenure female employees under the high-gender D & I climate. This implies that organizations' gender D & I climate can benefit early-career female employees by effectively increasing their hope and optimism.

Models 4 to 8 report the moderating effect of tenure on the relationship between the supervisor's open leadership and psychological capital of female employees. The regression analysis reports that tenure negatively moderates the relationship between open leadership and resiliency ( $\beta = -0.012, p < 0.05$ ). This significant moderating effect implies that the open leadership' positive effect on resiliency are more influential to early-career female employees than mid and late-career female employees. Figure 4 depicts the moderating effect of tenure on the relationship

**Table 2** The regression analysis among gender D & I climate, open leadership and psychological capital

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	<i>Psychological capital</i>			<i>Psychological capital</i>				
	Efficacy	Hope	Resilience	Optimism	Efficacy	Hope	Resilience	Optimism
Constant	3.492**	4.008**	3.670**	3.860**	2.852**	3.317**	3.138**	3.267**
Age	-0.001	0.042	0.031	0.112*	-0.009	0.035	0.036	0.114*
Education	0.091	-0.034	0.020	-0.030	0.087	-0.038	0.020	-0.031
Position	0.271**	0.154**	0.037	0.041	0.249**	0.131*	0.022	0.024
Total tenure	-0.053	-0.007	0.051	-0.010	-0.025	0.021	0.065	0.009
Leader tenure	-0.004	-0.018	-0.002	-0.015	0.004	-0.009	0.004	-0.008
Gender D & I climate					0.103*	0.103*	0.036	0.055
Open leadership					0.098**	0.114**	0.126**	0.127**
R-squared	0.079	0.032	0.019	0.022	0.110	0.076	0.063	0.071
Adjusted R-squared	0.069	0.023	0.009	0.012	0.098	0.063	0.050	0.058
F-value	8.550**	3.326**	1.961	2.250*	8.853**	5.824**	4.800**	5.422**

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

Tenure: unit = ln(year)

Total tenure: the total period of working by now, Leader tenure: the period of working with the current leader

**Table 3** The regression analysis on the moderating effects of female employees' total tenure

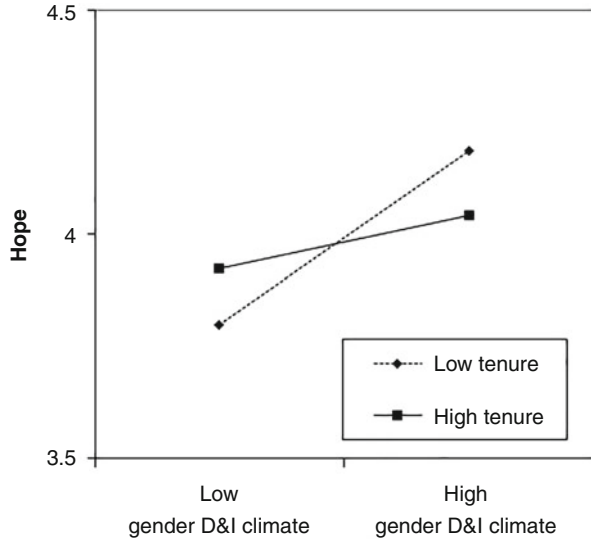
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	<i>Psychological capital</i>			<i>Psychological capital</i>				
	Efficacy	Hope	Resiliency	Optimism	Efficacy	Hope	Resiliency	Optimism
Constant	4.131**	4.912**	4.372**	4.438**	4.102**	4.873**	4.547**	4.778**
Age	0.027	0.030	0.039	0.091	0.066	0.072	0.065	0.125*
Education	0.073	-0.042	0.013	-0.032	0.080	-0.026	0.036	-0.020
Position	0.268**	0.143**	0.041	0.030	0.275**	0.148**	0.040	0.030
Total tenure	-0.081	-0.106*	-0.046	-0.111*	-0.017	-0.052	-0.093*	-0.036
Leader tenure	0.009	-0.001	0.014	-0.003	0.002	-0.010	0.013	-0.009
Gender D & I climate	0.119**	0.118**	0.067*	0.075*				
Open leadership					0.132**	0.133**	0.109**	0.134**
Gender D & I climate X Total tenure	-0.008	-0.013*	-0.006	-0.014**				
Open leadership X Total tenure					0.000	-0.006	-0.012*	-0.005
R-squared	0.106	0.067	0.032	0.054	0.105	0.066	0.070	0.068
Adjusted R-squared	0.093	0.054	0.018	0.041	0.092	0.053	0.057	0.055
F-value	8.414**	5.097**	2.332*	4.106**	8.359**	5.067**	5.401**	5.163**

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

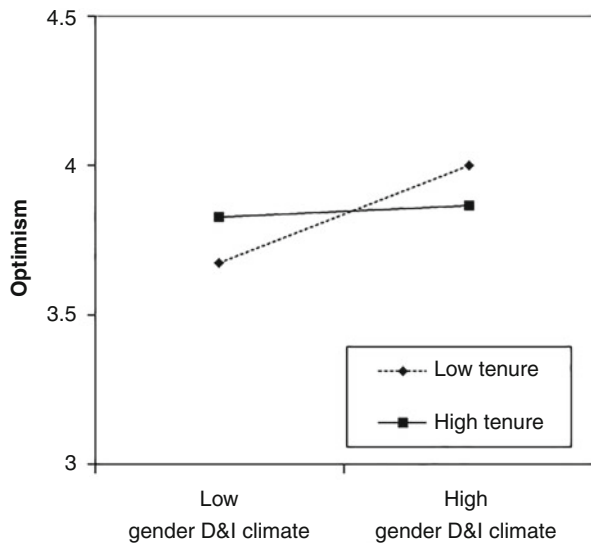
Tenure: unit =ln(year)

Total tenure: the total period of working by now, Leader tenure: the period of working with the current leader

**Fig. 2** The moderating effect of tenure on the relationship between gender D & I climate and hope



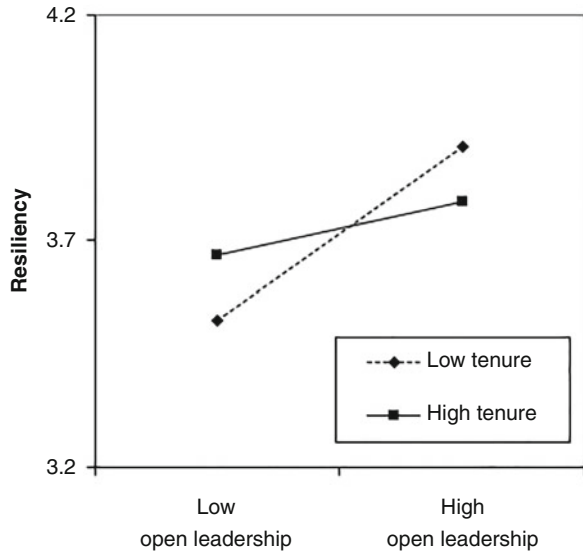
**Fig. 3** The moderating effect of tenure on the relationship between gender D & I climate and optimism



between open leadership and resiliency. This clearly shows that low-tenure female employees feel more resilient when they find that their supervisor implements open leadership in comparison to those with high tenure.



**Fig. 4** The moderating effect of tenure on the relationship between open leadership and resiliency



## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Building on positive psychology and human capital perspectives, this study clarified the importance of organizational environmental and social factors in enhancing female employees' psychological capital. The findings showed that gender D & I climate increases female employees' confidence and hope about their work. Additionally, the supervisor' open leadership style has an influential effect on female employees, elevating all aspects of their psychological capital including efficacy, hope, resiliency, and optimism. The moderating effect of tenure clearly shows that the positive effects of such organizational factors on psychological capital are more influential to early-career female employees than mid and late-career female employees.

The findings offer significant academic and practical implications. First, the study contributes to the development of positive psychology studies (Rego et al., 2012; Kim, 2022b) by clarifying the significant effect of gender D & I climate and open leadership on female employees' positive psychological state. Since psychological capital is a critical construct to determine productive organizational outcomes of work performance, job satisfaction, work engagement and organizational citizen behaviors (Luthans et al., 2008; Avey et al., 2008), this finding of the stimulating factors of psychological capital has a significant meaning. Specifically, the positive impact of a direct supervisor's open leadership on psychological capital is meaningful considering Korea's organizational context which is characterized by group collectivity and male dominance in which female identity and individual differences

are rarely appreciated. The study highlights that female employees perceive that their difference and individuality are embraced through supervisors' open leadership behaviors of allowing differences in ideas, working styles and behaviors. Thus, they feel fair and develop a positive psychological state, feeling psychologically efficacious and hopeful about their work with optimism and resiliency.

Also, the study illuminates the role of gender D & I climate. The finding indicates that gender D & I climate allows female employees to feel confident and hopeful toward their work because such a climate signifies organizations' direction toward embracing difference and pursuing fair treatment regardless of gender. Such signals about organizations' pro-gender D & I thus contribute to shaping the positive attitude of female employees toward their work, so they engage in their tasks with greater confidence and hope. Unlike leadership effects, gender D & I climate didn't significantly affect resiliency and optimism. This may be because such dimensions are more related to social factors such as leadership or individual factors such as individual-specific features, personality, experiences or demographic factors than organizations' environmental factors. The direct positive effect of organizational factors on developing psychological capital of Korean female workforce reinforces the important role of organizations' environmental and social factors in the realm of positive psychology, which corroborates the studies that argued the state-like and developmental nature of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007; Bandura, 2012).

Furthermore, the study contributes to the research of diversity management and career development of female employees (Harman & Sealy, 2017; Bae & Skaggs, 2019; Magoshi & Chang, 2009) by elucidating the interactive effect of individual and organizational factors that determine female employees' psychological capital. The finding proves that gender D & I climate and open leadership are more influential to early-career female employees than mid and late-career female employees. This implies that the target organizational factors that support female employees matter particularly to young generations who are concerned with fair employment and treatment of human resources related to companies' D & I directions and practices. This result corroborates the argument that D & I management is particularly critical for companies to attract and retain young talents (Jonsen et al., 2021; Harman & Sealy, 2017). The finding signifies that companies can enhance female employees' hope and optimism toward work and career-building by successfully implementing pro-gender D & I practices. Female employees' elevated positive psychological state contributes to yielding more productive and innovative work outcomes by motivating them to fully exert themselves in complementing works (Luthans et al., 2008; Rego et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2011). In addition, successful work experiences and task completion lead them to continue their career and elevate their commitment and loyalty to companies (Harman & Sealy, 2017). Such improvement in female employees' organizational loyalty contributes to achieving organizational goals effectively, which reciprocally motivates companies to address D & I issues more proactively and strategically. This vicious cycle consequently leads to achieving successful D & I management of companies.

Related to this, the interactive effect of open leadership and tenure on psychological capital should be noted. Female employees, particularly early-career female

employees, may face challenging situations stemming from the gap between their expected and real organizational environments, a gap that manifests itself in the employees' tasks, their relationships with people, and the organizational structure and climates. Such a gap discourages them, making them feel powerless and hopeless, which consequently leads them to "opt-out" of their careers (Harman & Sealy, 2017). However, the finding suggests that direct supervisors' open leadership can help the early-career female employees not to opt-out of their careers by embracing their individualities and guiding them to focus on their work and work goals. Such leadership behaviors support them to be resilient at work by overcoming problems and challenging situations they face in their early career. Therefore, the leader's opening and embracing leadership behaviors are very essential for female employees to rebound from challenging situations and adversity at work and to continue and build a successful career, particularly for the early-career female employees.

This chapter addresses the gender D & I issue in Korea, focusing on female employees' psychological capital. The findings can provide practical ideas for current Korean companies regarding gender D & I management. Managing D & I is indispensable for companies to achieve sustained competitiveness (Magoshi & Chang, 2009; Kundu et al., 2019; Nishii, 2013). The finding informs the benefits of shaping pro-gender D & I climate in organizations and advises companies to engage in shaping gender D & I climate. Companies need to articulate how well they care about the gender diversity issues in managing employees when it comes to human resource management procedures including hiring, educating, evaluating, promoting, and rewarding employees and also convey such specific gender D & I policies and practices strategically to target stakeholders. For instance, companies let employees informed of their gender D & I direction clearly and perceive pro-gender D & I climate from their working experiences by implementing D & I management through the fair treatment of female employees and the provision of the same opportunities to female employees for the middle and senior managerial positions. The implementation of gender D & I management can enhance employees' perception on gender D & I climate, reducing the gap between rhetoric and reality of D & I management among female employees. As a result, companies can accrue psychological capital among female employees, which will benefit and promote companies' short- and long-term success.

## ***4.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions***

Despite the academic and practical implications of the study, some limitations should be addressed. First, this study measured gender D & I climate of an organization by the perception of employees, not knowing about the actual gender D & I climate of companies. Even if the study presumed that employees' perception is based on the actual gender D & I climate, so their perception can be its appropriate proxy, such an assumption should be clarified by measuring the actual gender D & I

climate by investigating and measuring companies' D & I directions and practices. Future studies should investigate the organization-level variables and clarify whether there is no discrepancy between employees' perceptions and the actual situation about companies' gender D & I climate.

Second, the study didn't control other relevant organization-related factors. As posited by social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), socio-environmental factors that individual faces are influencers that determine individual attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, other potential organizational factors such as organizational support for employees' work and well-being at work that potentially determine employees' psychological capital (Wu & Nguyen, 2019) should be controlled to examine the true effects of the current organizational factors of the study. In addition, the relationships between organizational factors and a potential mechanism through which a particular organizational factor leads to employees' positive psychological state (Kim, 2022b) should be examined in future studies.

Third, related to the second point, individual-specific factors may influence the variance of psychological capital. The demographic factors added in this study such as total tenure, education and position can capture the potential variances of individually different factors. However, they cannot capture the actual differences in individuals' work experiences, ambitions for their careers, and personalities that may influence individuals' psychological capital. Therefore, such individual factors should be considered and investigated in future studies to regulate their probable effects on psychological capital.

## 5 Conclusion

The study elucidates the influential role of organizational factors in increasing female employees' psychological capital in Korea. Findings from 507 female employees working for large Korean manufacturing companies showed that companies' gender D & I climate and the direct leader's open leadership significantly improve female employees' psychological capital. The findings highlight, in particular the role of the leader in enhancing all aspects of psychological capital and also the role of gender D & I climate to increase the dimensions of efficacy and hope of female employees. Importantly, such positive effects of organizational factors are more significant for early-career female employees than mid and late-career female employees. This finding provides useful and strategic ideas to companies for managing and keeping early-career female talents.

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# South African Women Academics Navigating to the Top: A Positive Psychology 2.0 Perspective



**Brightness Mangolothi**

**Abstract** Globally, the participation of women in leadership positions in academia has been the subject of intensive research. Studies have found that some universities are gendered and racialised, and women lack role models, mentors, coaches and sponsors. These factors serve as barriers to career progression. Bias against women in academia is experienced globally. This is mirrored in South Africa, where few women, especially Black, are in leadership positions or holding a professorship title. This study looks, in particular, at these highest career rungs in academia. In 2019, of the 46% of South African university academic staff holding PhDs, most were men; this positively correlates with the appointment to a professorial role or holding a leadership position, therefore being at the height of a professional career. This chapter explores articles written by fifteen Alumna from Higher Education Resource Service-South Africa (HERS-SA), who were female academic leaders in 2020 to 2021. The study uses an interpretivist qualitative research design and thematic analysis. Positive psychology 2.0 underpinned by Intersectional Theory was used to explore how the women navigated the promotion process to leadership positions. Thereafter, thematic analysis was used to analyse the fifteen articles. The study's main findings indicate four themes: I was challenged, I am able, I am not alone, and I want better for others. Further shows that intersecting social identities mediate women's career progression experiences. The study contributes to understanding female South African academic leaders' career progression to professorship and leadership position, through the lens of positive psychology.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Women leaders · South Africa · Academia · Intersectionality · Professorship · Tenure

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## 1 Introduction

In 1994, the democratic government had to undertake the onerous task of transforming South Africa and its higher education to ensure equal rights and access to education for all. Pre-1994, South Africa was under an apartheid system, which enacted laws that promoted racial segregation. Whites were privileged at the expense of Natives (Africans), Coloureds and Indians (Mokhoanitse, 2015). It is important to note not only the racial divide but also the gender divide. Mokhoanitse (2015) indicates that while White women's experiences were better mediated by their race, their gender placed them under oppression as the system was patriarchal. In terms of the racial divide, the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 classified the population into Whites, Natives, Indians and Coloured people (people of mixed race), which created a racial hierarchy signifying power, status and worth (Posel, 2001). The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 created a racial separation of public services, such as schools and universities. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 was enacted to provide a poor quality education. The vast majority of Blacks were relegated to a labouring class, which was poorly paid. After the demise of apartheid, post 1994, races were re-classified as whites, coloureds, Indians and Africans. To redress the injustice of the past the word Blacks was used to describe Africans, coloureds and Indians who were previously disadvantaged by the apartheid system (Posel, 2001). In 1996 the Constitution (RSA, 1996) was adopted, which prohibited unfair discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 (RSA, 1998) aimed to eliminate unfair discrimination and implemented affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by Blacks. These laws contributed to the empowerment of women. According to Maton and Salem's (1995) empowerment is a mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs. Huis et al. (2017) posit that women's empowerment should take a form of personal empowerment, relations empowerment and societal context empowerment. This is supported by Skene (2021, p. 13) who argues that

A relational self can only thrive if the unit of empowerment is the ecosystem within which they live, because wellbeing can only occur if the totality of their being, individual, society and ecosystem, is resonant with each other and is functioning as a totality.

The following sections discuss literature on women's experiences in South African higher education and the chosen theory underpinning the study.



## 2 Women's Experiences of Career Progression in South African Higher Education

Tree and Vaid (2022) posit that universities were not made for women, especially Black women, but for white men. In 2003 HERS-SA, a managed network, was founded to improve the status of women in higher education in South Africa by providing professional development programmes to empower women to take leadership positions in higher education institutions. This provided a much-needed leadership-role model, challenging institutional culture and facilitating workplace change, thereby addressing gender inequity (Eslera et al., 2006). While there is a visible shift in the appointment of women leaders, it is at a slow pace. Barnes et al. (2022) found that academics who successfully progressed have three main competencies. Firstly, they have reflective competencies: gap analysis, self-evaluation, social comparison and goal orientation; secondly, they have communicative competencies: information seeking and negotiation; and thirdly, they have behavioural competencies: strategy alignment, control and agency, university awareness, continuous learning and collaboration.

Mandleco (2010) argues that women do not get promoted at the same pace as they get PhDs. In 2017, out of 19,631 academic staff, only 9032 had doctorates. Of the 9032 doctoral holders 24.3% were white, 13.9%, African, 3.7% coloureds and 3.6% Indians. Out of 2285 professors, only 662 were women. Of the 2199 associate professors, only 905 were women. There were more white women professors in comparison to Black women professors. Institutional culture has been ascribed as the main cause of the lack of transformation (Keet & Swartz, 2015). There are gatekeepers who want to keep the status quo who decide who deserves or does not deserve to be in academia (Keet & Swartz, 2015). Idahosa (2019) argues that university structures exclude women by valuing, evaluating, and promoting them differently from their male colleagues. Zulu (2013) reports that promotion focuses heavily research and overlooks teaching and learning, and community engagement. Additionally, Zulu (2021) posits that women still find that in some institutions it is harder to get promoted if they have a family.

Although there is research on why women do not progress in higher education, there is not much research focusing on the experiences of white women academics in South African higher education. There is more research focusing on the experience of Black women academics, and these studies confirm that they are othered, silenced, lack upward mobility, and that their research contribution is disregarded, while they mentor students and serve on committees to advance transformation (Khunou et al., 2019; Ramohai, 2014; Zulu, 2021). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) found that racism and sexism were prevalent in universities and that there were challenges with recruitment, retention and progression of Black South African academics. Furthermore, there were PhD graduates who were not South African. Additionally, the DHET found that while there are different promotion requirements according to different universities, on average, a senior lecturer, associate and full professor must have a PhD, which also applies to leadership

positions such as head of a department, deputy dean, dean, deputy vice-chancellor and the chancellor (DHET, 2019).

Mandleco (2010) posits that universities can support women at organisational and departmental levels. At the organisational level the promotions process should be made transparent during induction; knowing the process earlier can empower women to do proper career planning. Family-friendly policies (childcare facilities, flexibility to work at home, and equitable workload) should be implemented. To ensure a positive and supportive departmental climate, line managers should prioritise working on staffs' personal development plan and provide mentorship support.

### 3 Positive Psychology 2.0

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 5) define positive psychology as “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions”. Even in adverse situation humans use positive emotions to overcome the challenges. Luthans et al. (2007) posit that when humans are confronted with challenges others thrive because they own what he calls the psychological capital. Psychological capital (PsyCap) includes self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience (Luthans et al., 2007). Self-efficacy is the belief that one can succeed. Hope preserving toward the goal. Optimism making positive attribution to succeed. Resilience is the ability to bounceback. Lomas and Ivztan (2015) refer to this as a “first wave” of positive psychology (PP). Wong (2020) criticised the first wave of positive psychology for emphasising the positive aspects of life. At the same time, Henrich et al. (2010) noted that the positive psychology research focused on the WEIRD phenomenon, an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic Societies. This means emerging and developing countries were excluded. These desentments led to the birth of positive psychology 2.0. Paul Wong is credited as the pioneer of positive psychology 2.0 (PP 2.0), also named the second wave of positive psychology (SWPP) (Held, 2004). PP 2.0 focuses on a better understanding of the dynamic nuanced interaction between positive and negative aspects of thriving and wellbeing (Lomas et al., 2020). It maximises the positive and controls the negatives in order to improve wellbeing and lessen mental illness (Wong, 2011). According to Wong (2011) the four pillars of PP 2.0 are virtue, meaning, resilience, and wellbeing. Virtue defines our moral being, which includes contributing to a socially just society. Meaning is a sense of purpose and order in life. While resilience is about the ability to bounce back from illness or trauma. Wellbeing is the umbrella term for “happiness, health, flourishing, and optimal functioning” (Wong, 2011, p. 16).

According to Lomas and Ivztan (2015), the dialectical of PP 2.0 centres on three principles: The principle of appraisal shows the challenge of classifying a phenomenon as positive or negative. The principle of co-valence demonstrates that experiences include both positive and negative elements. The principle of complementarity

reveals that wellbeing and flourishing depend on the harmonisation of light and dark aspects of life. It, therefore, shows that the positive and negative co-exist and complement each other.

## 4 Intersectional Theory

Crenshaw is recognised as the pioneer of Intersectional Theory. Intersectionality is defined as “overlapping social categories such as race and gender, that are relevant to the identity of a specific individual or group and create a unique experience that is distinct from its originating categories” (Rosette et al., 2018). At the heart of the development of Intersectional Theory is the invisibility of Black women in dominant theorisations of gender-based oppressions (Jordan-Zachery, 2007), and a failure by mainstream (white) feminism to acknowledge differences amongst different groups of women (Davis, 2008). According to Crenshaw (1991), studies neglect to explore the intragroup dynamics, which contribute to conflict amongst groups. Hooks (1994) and Saad (2018) argue that, at the time, mainstream feminism claimed to advocate for women struggles, but mainly focused on white women. It failed to consider the lived experiences of Black women and how intersections of such social identity categories as race, class, age, ability, sexual orientation, amongst other factors, affected them differently. Magnusson (2011) argues that the human identity is inherently complex; thus, no social identity can satisfactorily account for the meanings a person places on his/her social relations. Lutz et al. (2011) posit that an intersectionality approach encourages us to consider how women (and men) various social positions and to contemplate how they reproduce the inequalities. Intersectionality suggested itself as an appropriate lens, particularly for the South African context, due to the gendered, racialised and classed nature of South African society and organisations.

## 5 Research Methods

A research design refers to a plan or blueprint of how you intend to conduct the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). It involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry and specific methods. According to Creswell (2014), the different research designs used in qualitative research are phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, case studies and narrative research. The best-suited design for this study was phenomenology. “Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). In other words, the participants document their own experiences. According to Willis (2007), the phenomenological approach is very good at surfacing deep issues. In this study, it meant bringing the voices of women on their professorship journey.

**Table 1** Below categorises the participants, from participant 1 (P1) to Participant 15 (P15)

Pseudonym	Race	Nationality	Relationship status
P1	African	South African	Not-stated
P2	African	South African	Mother
P3	African	South African	Not stated
P4	African	South African	Not stated
P5	African	South African	Not stated
P6	African	South African	Not stated
P7	Coloured	South African	Not stated
P8	Coloured	South African	Married with children
P9	Indian	South African	Single parent
P10	White	South African	Not stated
P11	White	South African	Not stated
P12	Coloured	Non-South African	Married with children
P13	African	Non-South African	Married with children
P14	African	Non-South African	Mother
P15	African	Non-South African	Not stated

There were seventeen articles written by participants, two were written by support staff who were in leadership roles but who did not have a professorship rank. Only fifteen articles were selected as they were written by fourteen professors and one associate professor. This chapter consequently reports on fifteen articles written by fifteen women leaders and professors to celebrate women leaders' professorship journey (Table 1). In total, there were fourteen professors and one associate professor. They were Directors, Head of Departments, Executive Deans, Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor from eleven universities out of 26 universities. The researcher kept a self-reflective journal from the inception to the completion of the research (Morrow, 2005), where she recorded her experiences, reactions and emerging awareness of any assumption or biases that came to the fore. She took precautions that they were not consciously incorporated into the analysis (Morrow, 2005).

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process thematic analysis. The articles were extracted in text format. The analysis was primarily conducted by the author. Texts were read and any identified patterns were included in the sorting process. Specific phrases and explanations used by the participants were grouped into codes. The relations between codes was identified, leading to the review of themes. The final review led to four themes and the write-up of the findings.

According to Saunders et al. (2012, p. 226), ethics refers to "standards of behaviour that guide your conduct in relation to the rights of those who become subjects of your work, or are affected by it." In terms of applying ethics to this study, it can be noted that all articles were available in the public domain. To ensure confidentiality, instead of the names of the authors, the codes or pseudonyms P1, P2, . . . to P15 are used. According to Flick (2009), confidentiality means that the

information about the participants is used in a way that makes it impossible for other persons to identify the participants, or for any institution to use it against the interests of a participant.

## 6 Findings

The findings are presented in this section. Four themes emerged naturally out of the data: I was challenged, I am able, I am not alone, and I want better for others.

### 6.1 *I Was/Am Challenged*

Women shared that they experiences different forms of challenges that could have deterred them from being professors or in the leadership positions. Women mentioned experiencing sexism, work overload and work–life imbalance. Both single with children and married women paid a motherly penalty of having to work and take care of their families while striving to move up the ranks. This means at times having to neglect their family to be able to get the prize of being in a senior position.

Within a decade, my outputs moved from one to more than 100 publications and I became a full Professor by 2016 (about 7–8 years). By 2018, I was an established researcher and a SARChI. This journey was no easy feat as a woman, a wife and a mother because work and family can become seamless given that being an academic is not a 9-5 job. P8

Personally, I couldn't find the so-called work–life balance even now. At every stage of my career, I have had to pay different prices all the time. I've lost on family times, friendships, among others. P13

My biggest low climbing the ladder is the stigma and shaming of getting pregnant as a junior academic. One Professor once said, I love her so much because she is smart and brilliant, but she must just slow down with making babies...". Looking back in time today, I wonder which of my babies, I should have waited to have or never had! P13

African women also experienced racism, thus causing a double-edged sword because of their intersecting gender and race. Some mentioned that support from social networks and religion enabled them to cope.

My lows! Racism and Sexism: Black women professors and aspirants, be ready for it and be prepared to fight it. Most importantly, know that you are not alone in the fight for social justice and inclusion. It is important that Black African women take a stand against structural violence: racism and sexism but also be mindful that doing so is very risky in the current climate. P1

Participant 8 shared that it is also the lack of support from colleagues, leadership and the university processes that can serve as a barrier. These demonstrate the need for positive organisational psychology. This was perceived as the psychological contract being broken.

I believe professional jealousy, un-visionary and unsupportive leadership and inflexible university systems are factors which create barriers in the journey and therefore impede or stifle the growth of academics. P8

Participant 12 mentioned how difficult it was for her to get through without a bursary as a non-South African.

I had to split my salary between research and rent, but after a few years, the degree was funded by the [international country] government. P12

Participant 5 shared wisdom shared by her parents that even when challenged, it is essential to stand on your principles, it will not be easy, but it has to be done.

From my teacher parents, I would often hear them quote, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown”. Now, one fully understands and appreciates this proverb. Contesting constituents and competing interests muddy the waters. Being firm and standing on principles makes one to have many adversaries. Saying “NO” on good account, and valid reasons make one to be erroneously regarded as hogging power and being arrogant. P5

Interestingly, all women kept a positive outlook despite the challenges, appreciating that success was not reserved for a few, but all it takes is determination.

Success is not reserved for special people. It is out there waiting for those who are prepared to embark on a journey to reach a wonderful destination called “making success a reality from dreams”. P9

In the end, when you believe in yourself, you will find that those around you will too! P10

Almost all women shared that academia was their purpose and something that propelled them to do better, not only to empower students and colleagues, and was part of contributing to a better South Africa.

I get to live my passion and work at my Alma Mater. P8

There is no job that can bring more joy and satisfaction, that can positively impact so many, and that leaves one with a sense of having done a good job. . . I keep reminding myself in my leadership journey, that I am a woman of determination. This helps me to navigate any leadership challenges I am confronted with. I believe determination is the driving force towards excellence and, in order to work consistently and tirelessly at something, one needs perseverance. P5

## **6.2 I Am Able**

The women shared that despite the challenges of being socialised into gender roles and living in a patriarchal society, they believed they could be anything they wanted to be. Their ability was shaped by five sub-themes under “I am able”, which are discussed below:

### **a. Childhood**

African women and one white woman framed their childhood as the first socialisation for their career journey. In a gendered society, it was interesting to

note that fathers and grandfathers encouraged their grand-daughters and daughters to be educated. African women from educated families were affirmed that they could be anything they wanted.

When I was 13 years old, my father made the following observation, “You are a girl of great determination”. His words became indelibly etched in my heart and mind. P5

My father taught me to believe in myself and to do my part to improve the quality of life of the people that I interact with every day and to foster mutual respect. P10

Other African women described witnessing the struggle of their families, which inspired them to do better. Others shared that their relatives were their first role models, as they were the first graduates in their families.

My desperation to not live with the struggles of my parents, as well as my mother’s decision to have more education, were my motivation for the pursuit of the highest possible level of formal education. P13

#### b. Setting goals

Women stressed the importance of planning and the appreciation that one will need to make sacrifices and that things will not always go according to plan; hence some opportunities are not always part of the plan. It is also important to share your plan with others to gain all the support needed.

I set goals in terms of my career and being a typical Capricorn, I was adamant about achieving my goals within the time frames I set. This entailed sacrifices. . . I persistently tried to maintain a work–family life balance. This was not always successfully achieved, as my son always retorted “catch a life mom”. P9

The journey requires three factors: (1) Goal setting (personal, professional and topic focused—What and who do you want to be known as? What would you like to achieve?); (2) Intrinsic motivation (passion to teach/train and grow people and the field); and (3) External support and belief from others for what you do (colleagues, students and family). While it is important to have a plan, one should also have a plan b, c, d and even more important, be flexible as some of the opportunities are not always part of the plan. P8

Plan to arrive at Professor as soon as possible and while getting there, know that supervising and mentoring of the next generation of academics and professionals is the best reward ever. . . I recommend taking the opportunities that open up even if not precisely what you had planned for yourself. Life is not a straight line, be agile and flexible, or you might miss out on the best that is on offer. P11

#### c. PhD and research as the rite of passage

A PhD and research output were identified as critical to attaining a professorship. One African woman mentioned challenges of having a PhD supervisor working at another university and province which brought challenges to her PhD journey. Delivering excellent research work was said to be crucial for one’s progress and opened doors of opportunities such as funding, community engagement and research collaboration. One South African and one Non-South African Africans shared that they initially were not even sure of their career choices and were not aware of the university space, thus having to learn and adapt as they were learning. This affected

their career progression although the support from others made the adjustment easier.

I knew the same year all that I needed to acquire to become a professor. I had to obtain a PhD to be recognised as a university lecturer. P13

Qualifications are the entry to research and funding, and it was all the studies and other academic engagement that enabled me to apply for and be promoted. . . P11

Women stressed the critical role of research, of identifying a research niche area, exploring opportunities for multi-discipline research and following research experts on social media to keep abreast with the research trends, affiliating to a society, attending conferences and active involvement in the research community, consequently building one's networks.

Keep doing excellent work, and to never cut corners with your research. My research has opened doors for me and brought me into rooms that I could only dream of. . . Women should cultivate their research interests in an area that is nascent, where your expertise can be quickly seen because the "arena" is not crowded. . . Follow the leading thinkers in that area on social media, so you are always current and begin to write and publish. Schedule your writing as an appointment you keep with yourself and aim to write at least 300 words a day. P14

You may have a clear research direction and then follow that dream. For me, I like to work in a team of multidisciplinary researchers, and this has taken me in different directions. Latterly I moved towards the social sciences and community-based research. P11

#### d. Working at different universities, attending women's development and international exposure

African women, especially African non-South Africaners, mentioned that having worked for various universities was empowering as they were exposed to different ways of doing, which helped them take away best practices, thus shaping their academic journey.

[The] four institutions [I have worked at] have different institutional histories and have contributed in different ways to my academic and leadership development. . . Exposure to courses of empowerment like the HERS-SA Academy, stood me in good stead, as has been the exposure of studying and working in [two international countries]. P5

Three non-South Africaners had international exposure as students and academics, having had an opportunity to work and study at international universities, compared to only two African women who completed their post-graduate studies internationally. These experiences broadened their worldview on higher education, and empowered them to understand processes to be promoted, and allowed them to earn the National Research Funding (NRF) rating based on their research outputs.

Changing jobs is a faster way of advancing your career than rising within the same institution. Your loyalty should first be to yourself. P14

#### e. Attending women's development was also mentioned as empowering and having international footprints



Women shared that leadership capacity building was important for their journey of leadership and having an international footprint that exposed them to different opportunities.

I am thankful for the people who believed in me to develop my career and to receive formal training in leadership development and management in the Higher Education sector such as HERS-SA. P10

### **6.3 *I Am Not Alone***

Women shared that they received support from their social network, which made the journey lighter, yet cautioned that it is not everyone who is going to support you. African females shared that they were challenged by men who undermined them even still whilst in leadership positions. Whites mentioned getting support from their line managers. Collaborations locally and international was also stressed as critical, and funding support from the university and outside the university was critical for African women. Interestingly, two Africans had to go outside the university to get support, confirming the isolation and othering of Black academics.

I received PhD supervision, comradeship and mentorship. It is not common to get all of these in one institution and from one person. I did, and today I can safely say that I am a professor because fate had it that I met [name—white female Professor], and I listened to her. . . You will need collaborations in teaching, research and community engagement. These will enhance your work and afford you opportunities to contribute to the global academy. P1

My life's journey has been truly shaped by my family, friends, colleagues, peers, our executive and students, as well as indirectly by every individual who has crossed my path. I am very thankful for their inspiration towards my career, but, more importantly, their contribution towards life lessons I have learnt. They helped me as leader in assessing my specific strengths and weaknesses. P10

### **6.4 *I Want Better for Others***

All women shared that they were committed to being the change they wanted to see, mentoring and inspiring their colleagues. South Africans and non-South African Africans who were from the working class, and who were first graduates in their families and from villages with limited opportunities of encountering a role models, gladly mentored students and inspired young children to aspire to be anything. This reverberates the pastoral work done by African academics. Part of the lessons learnt is that, even though you can support others, you giving your support does not always translate to you getting support yourself from colleagues. Participants were also back stabbed and undermined, especially African academics.

Do not have expectations of being supported all the time. P9

The one thing, though, that was constant is that I wanted to tell a child (boy or girl) in my village that s/he can be anything that s/he wants to be irrespective of her/his/their background (s). P13

Always share with others and acknowledge their contributions—P8

One participant had an opportunity to study abroad. On coming back to South Africa, and despite having options of working in universities that were well resourced, she felt the need to work at a previously Black university based in the rural areas, as this is where there was the most need for development.

## 7 Discussion

The study sought to investigate and describe how women navigate to the top using an intersectional lens. The five themes intersect. The theme “I am challenged” shows the dark side of the academy that is toxic and creates an environment that disables women from thriving. Universities are a microcosm of society; therefore, women’s experiences reflect a patriarchal, racist and sexist society. This also confirms that universities are gendered, racialised and classed. This is consistent with the findings by DHET (2019) on the prevalence of racism and sexism in universities, a double jeopardy for African women. It further shows the psychological contract breach between the organisation and its employee. The fact that women encountered challenges with care work shows that society remains patriarchal and policies are not responsive to the needs of working mothers. Zulu (2013) confirms that there are challenges such as the demands of teaching loads, lack of time to do research, demands of family care work, and challenges connecting with helpful networks. These negatively affect women’s research output, which is critical for their promotion and leadership. It is for this reason that women stressed the need for doing research and finding collaborators; it enables them to thrive as it enables one to leverage on other’s strengths. Non-South Africans stressed the need to be intentional with research and for collaborations that open doors of opportunities. Despite all, women managed to rise above all challenges, illustrating that employees are less likely to resign when work gives meaning. Women used positive emotions to describe their journey such as hope, gratitude, love and inspiration (Seligman & Csikzentmihayi, 2000; Seligman, 2011). This are also consistent with Luthans et al. (2007) PsychCapital. Demonstrating self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. They further demonstrated full engagement as this was their purpose (Seligman, 2011). This is consistent with Wong (2011) that meaning gives a sense a purpose and order in life and resilience gives one power to bounce back despite the challenges.

The theme “I am able” demonstrates positive psychology’s four constructs of hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans et al., 2007). The importance of goal setting shows that when one has a purpose and looks forward to attaining one’s goals, it gives hope and optimism that things will improve. Consequently, goal

setting ensures resilience to face adversities. Women said they hoped for a better South Africa and remained in academia.

According to Seligman (2011) humans are social beings. The theme “I am not alone” stresses the power of social support, by forming relationships. The support was from an interpersonal, departmental, and organisational level, and, at macrosystem level, from family, friends and external academic networks. The findings confirm that personal and environmental factors influence women academics’ navigation to the top. Thus the social networks buffers the negative experiences. This is consistent with Mandleco’s (2010) argument that there should be departmental and organisational support for women to thrive. It also confirms Huis et al.’s (2017) model that women empowerment takes place at personal, relations and societal levels. In terms of spirituality, the women were helped because of the belief that God is with them, and because of their belief in the greater purpose of life. The act of feeling supported contributes to one’s wellbeing through flourishing and functioning optimally (Wong, 2011). The support from the organisation was in the form of empowerment opportunities and support from the line manager, which was echoed more by White women. African women found more support from external stakeholders, such as colleagues from outside their institutions.

The last theme, “I want better for others”, shows the characteristics of virtue, which is leadership that inspires and nurtures staff (Cameron & McNaughton, 2014). It is also about meaning, doing something bigger than themselves (Seligman, 2011). Wong (2011) ascribes this to the self-transcendent, allowing one to connect with humanity. While all women wanted to be the change they wanted to see, African women from the working class felt the need to encourage young people to pursue their dreams and not limit themselves. For them this was also the practice of religion—“to whom much is given much is expected”. It was also the act of social justice and showing compassion (Wong, 2011). The women’s behaviour can be attributed to the legacy of apartheid, where they had neither opportunity nor role models. The study showed that for white women, helping others could be ascribed to creating opportunities for future collaborations. At the same time, all women shared that helping others does not mean they will support you in return; in fact, it exposed them to more harassment. This shows the dialect of good and bad. This shows the principle of co-valance, demonstrating the presence of good and bad elements (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2015). The demonstration of kindness is not always returned with kindness.

## 8 Conclusion and Recommendations

Women’s academic progression is ingrained in their psychological capital, shaped by the multi-contexts to which they belong. Using an intersectional lens, it was found that women’s intersecting social identities influenced their experiences of navigating to the top, also representing the residues of apartheid history and education. Early childhood support plays a crucial role in shaping women leaders’ success.

These findings confirm the need for personal, relational and societal empowerment. To have gender transformed universities, individual interventions focusing on capacitating women should be created.

It is recommended that universities should look at women empowerment holistically, in order to include diverse staff and inclusive workplaces that contribute to a positive work-climate that is supportive. It is also recommended that the training interventions should not look at the gaps but also skill women with psycho-capital to be able to be self-reliant. It is further recommended to create a positive organisation that creates a culture that is zero tolerant of racism, sexism and all forms of oppressions that deprive women from thriving. Universities have to further review their policies so that they are gender sensitive. Future studies should explore the period it takes to move from one rank to the next using an intersectional lens. This will further deepen understanding on how intersecting social identities enable or disenable women from moving up the rungs.

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# Empowerment of Women Leaders in the Fourth Industrial Revolution



Rudolf M. Oosthuizen 

**Abstract** Leaders require a certain set of proficiencies to effectively lead organisations and to be aligned with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Research has shown that women leaders recognise the need to be empowered in a rapidly changing technological environment. Compared to previous industrial revolutions, the 4IR is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. It is important to shape the 4IR to ensure that it is empowering and life-centred instead of divisive and dehumanising. This is the work of leadership. To deal with the complex challenges of the twenty-first century, new ways of knowing and leading will be increasingly important. In the 4IR, leaders will need to be more agile, human-centric and adapted to a highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. Ultimately, the challenges of the 4IR may empower women leaders to connect more readily with the wisdom of knowledge and facilitate the change and transformation needed to ensure a sustainable future. The aim of the chapter is to explore the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. A qualitative approach was adopted and contemporary research on the competencies of women leaders and the 4IR has been systematically reviewed. This approach allowed the author to evaluate documented research on the topic. Empowered women leaders exhibit high levels of human intelligence, which are made up of the four types of intelligence (strategic, emotional, inspired, and somatic) that determine 4IR-Intelligence. Empowerment of women leaders in a VUCA world are highlighted that help build employees' psychological capital as a reliable source of competitive edge during the 4IR.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Leadership · Transformation · Women leaders · Fourth Industrial Revolution

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# 1 Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has caused a vortex of technology that obscures the lines between the digital and physical worlds (Schwab, 2016). These precipitous technological transformations require a major shift in the “how” and “what” of doing things (Hoque, 2019; Naidoo & Potokri, 2021). Although technologies continue to create and amplify each other in the natural, digital, and organic realms, leadership practice seems to lag behind the exponential progression of the 4IR. Several challenges on the macro-, mezzo- and microlevel are noticeable when women leadership is observed in the midst of the rapid changes across all businesses such as new corporate models, disorder in traditional sectors, and the modernisation of manufacturing, consumption, shipping, and distribution systems (Oosthuizen, 2016; Schwab, 2016).

The contrast between the two issues—women leadership and the 4IR—is striking. Propelled by the 4IR, the extraordinary innovation in artificial intelligence, for example, is gaining ground in decision-making conventionally associated with women leadership. With algorithms progressively able to make multiple decisions, the current capacity of women leadership is under pressure. According to Dewhurst and Willmott (2014, p. 76), machine learning has attained the vertical segment of the exponential curve: “Computers are replacing skilled practitioners in fields such as architecture, aviation, the law, medicine, and petroleum geology—and changing the nature of work in a broad range of other jobs and professions”.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

According to Schwab (2016), the 4IR, stemming from digital disorder, is progressing at an exponential rate rather than the linear speed typical of previous industrial revolutions. It is transforming not only the “what” and the “how” of doing things, but also the “who” of employees. Agility will depend as much on employee inspiration and communication as on situating corporate primacies and achieving perceptible outcomes. Organisations that intend to persist and even flourish, will have to acquire a pioneering advantage by fostering “an attitude of constant advance” (Schwab, 2016). It is imperative to influence the 4IR to guarantee that it is energising and life-centred instead of disruptive and degrading (Szelwach, 2020). This is the work of women leadership.

It is feared that employees’ dependence on technology such as computers, may affect their relational abilities and their competence to empathise. Even though employees are always linked, they may not take time to stop and contemplate, or participate in discussions that improve their abilities to listen well, make eye contact, and focus on nonverbal interactions (Szelwach, 2020). As a result, they may gradually become disengaged and even disembodied from encounters with other employees since they are continually connected through their digital devices. To



remedy this tendency, the 4IR will necessitate social and innovative skills, specifically decision-making in ambiguous circumstances and innovative viewpoints (Schwab, 2016).

Because of the increasing speed of disorder and innovation arising from new technologies, leaders will need to constantly learn, adapt, and challenge their own conceptual and managing models of achievement (Schwab, 2016). They will need to step back, take time to stop and contemplate, and reconnect with their own bodies to remain grounded in a digital realm that persistently demands their awareness (Szelwach, 2020). As the 4IR evolves, the need for new ways of managing will become progressively significant (World Economic Forum, 2019). Schwab (2016) highlights the need to make unequivocal the standards and moral principles that future systems must symbolise. This also holds true for leaders who manage organisations and systems.

This chapter proceeds on the assumption that, at the individual level of investigation grounded on Schwab's (2016) proposal, the demands of 4IR can be managed to a significant degree if leaders' thoughts, emotions, and passions are activated. It is therefore crucial that leaders understand the value of diverse groups across conventional boundaries and build their ability and willingness to connect with all employees regarding the 4IR matter at hand (Oosthuizen, 2016). To obtain an overview of the 4IR situation, leaders must practise a multi-stakeholder focus that transcends the counterproductive boundaries between organisations and professions. Furthermore, the competence to reframe psychological and theoretical models, and organisational philosophies is critical. Without these abilities, leaders will find it hard to adapt to the disruptions of the 4IR (Schwab, 2016).

## ***1.2 Objective of the Chapter***

The objective of this chapter is to conceptualise the empowerment of women leaders in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

## **2 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Key Theoretical Concepts***

#### **2.1.1 Leadership for the 4IR**

The momentum of the 4IR can no longer be disregarded. The 4IR has brought with its dissonance and changes in power together with a transfer in information, authority, and community activities. Xu et al. (2018) posit that the control of knowledge regarding the speed and incidence of these technological revolutions seems to

influence and advance everyone. But leaders, mainly within the framework of knowledge of technological design, are in short supply (Chiweshe, 2019).

Research indicates that women display the character traits of both the transformational and distributed leadership styles by acting as role models and earning the respect and support of their cohorts, and functioning collaboratively with employees (Wright, 2011; Larsson and Bjorklund 2020). Distributed leadership is mauled by Lumby (2013) who asserts that there is no appropriate method to evaluate its level of success in a digital epoch. Each leadership theory emphasises different facets of leadership such as the individual characteristics of leaders, their management styles, and control and power (Bush & Glover, 2014; Khan et al., 2016; Naidoo & Potokri, 2021). The focus on the characteristics of leadership gives rise to the postulation that most theories on leadership fail to address the women leadership style for the 4IR (Bush & Glover, 2014).

In traditional organisational settings, these theories of leadership have accomplished the anticipated effect, but leadership in the 4IR age requires a radical transformation that addresses the extremely unstable and ever-changing world of technological evolution (Richardson et al., 2013; Sheninger, 2014). While transformational leadership is preferred in current spheres, the disruptive nature of 4IR technologies calls for progressive, advanced approaches that will steer and prepare employees for the 4IR work context (Butler-Adam, 2018).

Leaders must rethink their roles considering the unprecedented impact of emerging technologies. The 4IR is characterised by emerging technologies that fuse the physical and digital worlds at a disconcerting rate and has led to stiff competition among global economies and businesses. Seven of the world's ten largest companies by market capitalisation are currently technology companies. Most of them have been around for less than a generation, and all of them are based in two countries: the US and China. The rise of these market-dominating, often technology-driven, companies seem inevitable. Their rise shatters old assumptions about how businesses create value and has unforeseeable economic and political repercussions. Innovators and political leaders will be affected by the uncertainties and opportunities created by major technological advances. To accomplish their strategic goals, generate value, and create a more inclusive economy, technology leaders must harness change (World Economic Forum, 2022a). The ability to be a technology leader encompasses not only the ability to operate in the space between technology innovation and traditional public and private structures, but also the ability to operate in both these realms. The Twitter CEO, for example, must understand not only the nuts and bolts of his platform, but also the impact it has on the dissemination of news and the promotion of free speech.

Approximately half of the global population is currently connected to the internet by means of an internet-enabled device according to the International Telecommunications Union. A persistent digital divide separates those with access to the internet and those who must make do without it. The world's least developed countries have seen connectivity growth moving in the right direction with internet penetration projected to reach 17.5% by 2017, up from 15.6% the previous year, according to an ITU report (World Economic Forum, 2022a). By removing parts of existing markets

from regulators' purview and creating new, unregulated sectors (traditional economic actors and workers also suffer), the spread of powerful tools such as internet access and artificial intelligence, makes existing divisions even more pronounced. Further, the blurring of traditional lines separating sectors places additional demands on leadership teams. Consequently, they must understand not only major technological advancements, but also their effect on traditional organisational structures.

In support of the call for a change in leadership styles, Naidoo and Potokri (2021) contend that leadership must progress as new inventions of technologies unfold. Shute and Becker (2010) postulate that novel opportunities for communication and articulateness present themselves and, therefore, innovative competencies are critical for leaders who must train employees to cope effectively with the pressures of the 4IR work context. Leaders must continuously explore new technologies and knowledges to grasp new styles and systems (Yusof et al., 2019).

As a result, traditional organisational planning is less relevant as 4IR opportunities can be fleeting and difficult to anticipate. Uber and Airbnb, two of the most successful platform companies driving the sharing economy, had a considerable impact with relatively little resources and in a relatively short time. Consequently, urban policymakers and traditional industries face new challenges. To effectively react to these challenges, both economic players and public officials need to monitor systemic change and emphasise agility (World Economic Forum, 2022b).

Adaptive leadership has to experiment with new ideas and designs. Deloitte published a study in 2017 that recommends fostering diverse and inclusive teams in which people feel empowered to speak up. Researchers found that this generated more and better ideas as well as innovative methods of working. Examples of agile corporate leadership include Careem, the most widely used ride-hailing app in the Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan. Careem has been able to distinguish itself from Uber by integrating community norms and needs. The organisation's leadership acknowledged both the need of women to feel safe when using the service and the prevalence of cash transactions in an under-banked region. Steering new ideas works most effectively when followed up with an accurate assessment of outcomes (World Economic Forum, 2022b). A systems mindset, which includes looking beyond the direct impact of decisions and considering all concerned stakeholders, can refine and sharpen preliminary ideas. The skill to self-correct is crucial. History is fraught with examples of leaders who failed to abandon a doomed strategy.

The 4IR presents organisations with significant opportunities for integrating technological innovations and strategies for women empowerment. Empowerment is achieved by a combination of circumstances, power, access, and an understanding of people's beliefs, ideals, and responsibilities that improve their access to opportunities and services (Edralin et al., 2015; Martínez et al., 2017). To achieve transformative empowerment for women leaders, Micheni et al. (2021) suggest that the government should prioritize the following areas to fulfil the objectives of the 4IR.

- (1) *Women's Legislative and Policy Framework*: Legislative and policy mechanisms must be developed to address the issues of women at all levels; women's representation and justice must be provided. Ensure innovation is in compliance

with privacy, security, and freedom of expression; break down barriers to strategic alliances. Women's access to ICT can also be made more equitable through policies, legislation, and programs that promote a sustainable climate.

- (2) *Women Leadership and Participation*: People have been marginalized in most developing countries due to politics, economics, and culture. Democracies, political growth, and political institutions are perceived as limiting women's participation. Governing bodies and stakeholders should develop strategies to foster inclusive, participatory, and interactive policies by supporting women's lobbying, advocacy, and free decision-making on all systemic and growth issues at all levels of government.
- (3) *Job creation and skills development*: There is a need to establish a favourable context that encourages entrepreneurship, training, and job creation, and facilitates a balance between labour demand and supply. Women in industry need support from work centres and information systems about the labour market. This aspect also deals with increasing the opportunity for women to work in the information technology sector.
- (4) *Technology, Creativity, and Talent*: To solve everyday problems, government agencies must produce and distribute Information, Communication, and 4IR technologies. The chances women have in adapting positively to life struggles are considered drivers for change.

Horwitch and Whipple (2014) emphasise the ability to invigorate employees; promote engagement and trust; and motivate a team and expanding it all the way to the front line. The discipline of women leadership endorses the impression that inspired intelligence instils a vision for the future that expresses the shared interests of a group (Molenberghs et al., 2017). Therefore, leaders need to represent a group-oriented vision for the future by connecting with a higher-order group identity in themselves and in their employees. Schwab (2016) contends that sharing is key, and women leaders need to shift the focus from the self to a collective sense of purpose. Unless a sense of collective purpose is developed, managing the challenges, and reaping the full benefits of the 4IR will not be viable.

### 2.1.2 Women Leadership for the 4IR

Women leadership in an instable, ambiguous, and changing environment gives rise to invention and creativeness, to doing business in a way that produces success and revolution within an organisation (Gfrerer et al., 2019; Miles-Cohen et al., 2020). Research shows that describing 4IR women leadership is a complex matter. It is explained by Domeny (2017, p. vi) as "a new construction of leadership that connects women leaders with 4IR technology". Sheninger (2014, p. xxi) provides a more comprehensive description and defines 4IR women leadership as "establishing direction, influencing others, and initiating sustainable change through the access of information, and establishing relationships in order to anticipate changes pivotal to organisational success in the 4IR". Sheninger (2014) postulates

that it includes a combination of actions, reasoning, and abilities to revolutionise business operations with the aid of technology in the 4IR (Naidoo & Potokri, 2021).

Jamieson et al. (2010) argue that 4IR women leadership relies on the use of the self in terms of three core abilities. (1) *Seeing*. This includes an awareness of the 4IR situation and the ability to take in as much data as possible through the six senses. A women leader can do it by remaining free of bias, seeing 4IR reality as others see it, and maintaining a spirit of curiosity and openness. This attribute is honed through reflection, meditation, or other centring practices. (2) *Knowing*. This includes using women's 4IR knowledge and life experience to organise information gathered through effective seeing, making meaning, and drawing hunches, conclusions, and interpretations. At higher levels of multiple ways of knowing, knowing may take the form of internalised knowledge operating as intuition. (3) *Doing*. This includes the courage and will to demonstrate behavioural flexibility for a given 4IR situation, based on what is seen and known (Szelwach, 2020).

### **3 Method**

#### ***3.1 Study Design***

The critical review of the research literature entailed a broad systematic review of contemporary research on the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. This approach enabled the author to evaluate documented research on their empowerment.

#### ***3.2 Study Eligibility Criteria***

The boundaries of the systematic review were set to include only documented contemporary research in the field of human resources and industrial and organisational psychology published between 2017 and 2022. A search was conducted by means of an online information technology service, including search engines such as the EBSCOhost/Academic Search Premier and Google Scholar academic databases. The terms "4IR, Future-Ready, Leadership, Empowerment, and Women leaders" were used in the search. The full texts of publications were downloaded to select suitable articles for the systematic review. The inclusion criterion for articles reviewed for the purpose of this chapter was studies exploring the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. The research articles were treated as the sources of data. The methodological challenge should be noted that presents itself when treating research articles as sources of data. The Methodology-created ignorance might result from authors choice of methodology (Proctor, 2008).

### **3.3 *Data Analysis***

A qualitative approach was followed in exploring the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. In the first stage, the author studied the studies carefully to form an understanding of empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. In the second stage, the author formed an overall impression of them to account for relations or linkages among its aspects. Stage 3 consisted of theorising about how and why the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR relations appear as they do. Stage 4 consisted of re-contextualising the new knowledge about the empowerment of women leaders and framing these phenomena and relations in the context of how other authors have articulated the evolving knowledge. In the systematic search for relevant research published between January 2017 and July 2022, some 34 studies were identified in the following electronic databases: EBSCOhost/Academic Search Premier and Google Scholar Academic. Publications were evaluated for quality and eight studies were identified as the primary sources for exploration.

### **3.4 *Strategies Used to Ensure Data Quality***

Systematic, rigorous, and auditable analytical processes are among the most significant factors distinguishing good from poor research. The researcher therefore articulated the findings in such a manner that the logical processes by which they were developed are accessible to a critical reader. The link between and the conclusions about the data are explicit and the claims made about the data set are credible and valid. Potential publication bias (for example the assumption that all research on the topic may not have been published); trustworthiness or credibility; true value and quality; appropriateness; reflection on the research endeavour in its entirety; and best practices were also considered. Value and quality were assured by reviewing each article in terms of scientific and methodological rigour in exploring the empowerment of women leaders in the 4IR. All data was retained for possible future scrutiny.

## **4 Discussion and Practical Implications**

### **4.1 *Empowerment of Women Leaders in the 4IR***

Mukherjee (2020) astutely states “[. . .] mastering digital technologies won’t determine winners, making the necessary organizational and leadership changes will” (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 63). Over the past decade, the VUCA world has been reflected in leadership development. People lead and live in an uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and volatile world. Four hallmarks of the 4IR are digitalisation, virtual worlds, intelligent automation, and the synthesis of physical, digital, and biological domains.

VUCA should be revised to include Artificial Intelligence and Disruption, expanding the acronym to VUCA-AID (Daniels, 2019).

The question can be asked: What are the implications for the empowerment of women leaders? In a disruptive and ever-changing environment, it's clear that AI will learn iteratively (at speed), process faster, and execute more effectively than humans in the short term. This means that to empower women leaders, they will have to rethink their roles. In the 4IR, women leadership must be authentic, and values based. A steady, dominating presence with a wide range of perspectives and strong emotional intelligence, agile and creative with nimble thinking and agile actions. Daniels (2019) suggests that this ability to connect and engage is not just a predictor of the empowerment of women leaders and organisational effectiveness, but it could even be the leader's competitive advantage.

According to Alade and Windapo (2020), the effective 4IR leadership framework proposed by Alade and Windapo (2020) is validated by empirically examining correlations between leadership styles, leadership traits, and leadership intelligence. According to the findings of this study, 4IR leadership is positively correlated with leadership styles, leadership traits, and leadership intelligence. Therefore, an empowered and effective 4IR women leader spreads knowledge and understanding of the 4IR opportunities and threats within her organization. Women leaders need to ensure that the executives of their organizations become change-savvy and that their employees acquire 4IR skills.

To empower women for effective 4IR leadership, multiple leadership intelligence (strategic, emotional, inspired, and somatic) is essential. These multiple intelligences include the ability to adapt knowledge and skills to varied environments, the ability to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously, a high level of understanding, the ability to process and analyse information, and the ability to draw upon knowledge from multiple disciplines. Wiatr (2022) indicates that trust in leaders is a critical component of organizational change. Recent studies have also found that perceived justice, communication, and psychological empowerment play a key role between women leadership and positive employee responses to change, along with trust.

Employees' affective, behavioural, and cognitive reactions to organisational change are determined by the extent to which trust plays a dominant role. According to the recent research, perceived justice, communication, and psychological empowerment all play a significant role between leadership and positive employee responses to change. Transformational, authentic, and ethical leadership empower women to foster the afore-mentioned aspects (Wiatr, 2022).

The disruptive change of the VUCA world in the 4IR cannot be over-emphasised. It has an awe-inspiring impact on an organisation's change, and the quality of the employment relationship. Psychological empowerment and trust are primarily a function of the 4IR circumstances prior to the introduction of the organizational change. It is important, therefore, that women leaders be empowered to carefully considers it when planning and designing change for an organisation to adapt to the VUCA world in the 4IR. According to Herold et al. (2007, p. 949), organizations cannot "roll out change after change assuming that each change is independent event" without a thoughtful evaluation of "extra change factors, such as the 4IR

environment in which change takes place.” If change is integrated with communication practices, as well as procedural and distributive justice, the likelihood of positive change attitudes is increased. Women leaders are empowered by long-lasting support based on their understanding of change to build employee approval for the entire transformation process rather than focusing on specific change initiatives (Wiatr, 2022).

The empowerment of women leaders in a digital VUCA contexts could be perceived as a bio-cultural paradox: a women leader being happy to embrace uncertainty, venturing into complex territories, inspiring employees to follow when creating change for the ‘common good’. Thus, this aspect of women leadership demonstrates the complexity of what is needed in the 4IR: embracing the unfamiliar by recognizing as well as acknowledging the value of difference (for example genuinely practising inclusiveness and respect) and extending trust in virtual and non-virtual contexts. In the succeeding section, multiple leadership intelligence (strategic, emotional, inspired, and somatic) is discussed that empower women for effective 4IR leadership.

## 4.2 4IR-Intelligence for Women Leaders

Schwab (2016) advocates the necessity to change, form and connect the capacity of disruption by fostering and employing four distinctive types of intelligence. Oosthuizen (2016) suggests a theory of digital leadership for women, which he terms “4IR-Intelligence”. Expanding on Schwab’s (2016) reasoning of adjusting to the 4IR context by utilising four types of intelligence, Oosthuizen (2016) elucidates the four types of intelligence that empower women for effective 4IR leadership. These are: (1) *strategic* intelligence, which involves the mind and the way women leaders comprehend, processes and utilises knowledge; (2) *emotional* intelligence, which refers to the heart and their processing of judgements and emotions as well as the extent to which women leaders relate to employees; (3) *inspired* intelligence, which relates to the soul and the ability of women leaders to share with and trust employees; and (4) *somatic* intelligence, which is associated with the body and how women leaders follow healthy lifestyles and maintain their wellbeing.

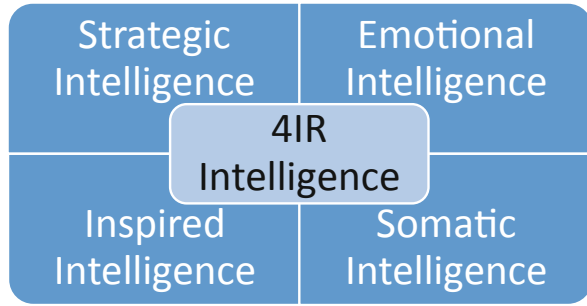
In Fig. 1, Schwab’s (2016) four types of intelligence determining the 4IR-Intelligence for women leaders is depicted. The theory proposes that the four types of intelligence combined determine 4IR-Intelligence.

### 4.2.1 Strategic Intelligence

From the perspective of a strategic sub-theory of intelligence, Sternberg (1985) describes intelligence as the act of deliberately adapting to, selecting, and shaping the physical world relevant to one’s existence. The importance of taking purposeful action is thus stressed (Whitford, 2022). Brown et al. (2005) suggest that strategic



**Fig. 1** 4IR-Intelligence for women leaders



intelligence is a practical competence that goes beyond what is formally described or directly taught and, considering the context in which women leaders' function, involves not only knowing what to do, but also knowing how to achieve it (Oosthuizen, 2016).

Companies and organisations make decisions based on strategic intelligence. Information is gathered, analysed, shared, compiled, and then disseminated. Planning, collecting, and processing intelligence, analysing, disseminating, and evaluating it, and control over it are the five components of strategic intelligence (Fleisher & Bensoussan, 2007, p. 117). Strategic intelligence, then, is the process of transforming information or knowledge into knowledge or information that can be applied to decision-making at the highest level. The objective is to position the organisation for future 4IR challenges and opportunities to maximise its success (Liebowitz, 2006).

The definition of strategic intelligence given by Kutz (2008, p. 23) is the ability to recognise and diagnose the context-specific variables inherent to an event or circumstance quickly and intuitively. This can result in intentional changes in behaviour to exert the appropriate influence. The context refers to the nature of relationships between agents (for example individuals, ideas, values, experiences, and cultures) as well as political alliances and organisations, religious alignments, and social and private contexts (Oosthuizen, 2016). Therefore, strategic intelligence refers to women leaders' awareness of the interactions among agents that fundamentally affect their behaviour in a socially complex environment (Kutz & Bamford-Wade, 2013).

Tarun (2014) argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the strategic role of women in the field of management and adds that strategic intelligence is their ability to adapt their knowledge to an environment that is different from the one in which it was developed. According to Schwab (2016), women leaders' sense of context is defined as their ability and willingness to anticipate emerging 4IR trends and link the dots. For generations women leaders have exhibited these traits, which are prerequisites for adapting to the 4IR (Oosthuizen, 2016).

### 4.2.2 Emotional Intelligence

According to Goleman (2004), high levels of emotional intelligence characterise most successful women leaders. As a matter of fact, this quality is seen as the *sine qua non* of women leadership. Without it, the best training, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of clever ideas will not make for a good woman leader (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's own feelings and emotions as well as those of others, to discriminate between them, and to use this information to guide decisions.

Goleman (2004) contends that women leaders' emotional intelligence consists of five elements, namely (1) self-consciousness (the capacity to recognise and understand their moods, emotions, and drives as well as their effect on others); (2) self-control (the capacity to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods besides the inclination to suspend judgment—to think before they act); (3) motivation (a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status in addition to an inclination to pursue goals with energy and persistence); (4) compassion (the capacity to understand the emotional make-up of other people and the skill to treat people according to their emotional reactions); and (5) social skills (the ability to manage relationships and build networks and the capacity to find common ground and build rapport) (Ramesar et al., 2009).

Regarding women leadership, Lazovic (2012) postulates that a high degree of emotional intelligence is crucial for building positive relationships and attaining the emotional commitment of employees, which strengthens organisational culture, improves its resilience, and fosters its flexibility (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). An ethos of trust boosts synergy among employees, which stimulates innovation critical for developing inventive solutions and influencing innovative responses to the increasingly complex demands of society characterised by the 4IR.

### 4.2.3 Inspired Intelligence

According to Schwab (2016), the word “inspired” derives from the Latin word “spirare”, which means to breathe. Inspired intelligence focuses on nurturing the creative impulse and bringing humanity to a new collective and moral consciousness founded on a shared destiny (Klussman et al., 2021).

Research identifies the ability to articulate a vision as an essential leadership function (Gupta et al., 2004; Stopper, 2005). It is vital to envision the future by imagining exciting and worthwhile possibilities according to Sumner et al. (2006). Their forward-looking abilities distinguish women leaders from non-leaders and involves envisioning exciting opportunities for 4IR and bringing others onboard for a shared outlook on the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2009). Also, women leaders gain their followers' trust by showing an appealing vision of the future to encourage them to believe in their own prospects. Furthermore, Sumner et al. (2006) affirm that organisations are not successful because of the effort of the individual; they need

trust and relationships, competence, confidence, and collaboration (Lungeanu et al., 2022).

Molenberghs et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of energising people, fostering engagement, and building trust to inspire a team all the way to the front lines. Several studies on women leaders have demonstrated that inspired intelligence can infuse a vision for the future that addresses the shared concerns of the collective. By engaging in a higher-order collective identity between themselves and their followers, women leaders can present a collective vision for the future (Molenberghs et al. 2017). According to Schwab (2016), sharing is key. Women leaders need to shift their focus from themselves to collective goals (Oosthuizen, 2016). The challenges of 4IR cannot be resolved unless they develop a sense of shared purpose (Losada-Vazquez, 2022).

#### 4.2.4 Somatic Intelligence

Somatic intelligence is defined by Postle as fitness and health, pride in manual skill and dexterity, a sensible diet, a love of the outdoors, and the ability to do household chores. The accelerated pace of change, increased complexity, and increased number of stakeholders contributing to decision-making processes make Schwab's (2016) assertion that somatic intelligence involves supporting and nurturing personal health and well-being critical for women leaders. As a result, leaders need to maintain their fitness and stay calm under stress (Oosthuizen, 2016). The relation between the body (somatic), the mind (cognitive) and the heart (emotions) is increasingly evident in laboratory studies, as Covey points out. A study by Singh-Manoux et al. (2005) on the effects of physical activity on a person's cognitive functioning in middle age proves that physical activity benefit's cognitive function.

Schiller (2013) states that somatic intelligence refers not only to a high level of fitness, such as muscular strength and endurance or anaerobic threshold and nutrition, but also to a high level of intelligence. It is Schiller's (2013) contention that the intent of boosting women leaders' somatic intelligence is to enhance their self-mastery, which Majer et al. (2004) define as the control women leaders have over 4IR outcomes. Epigenetics, a field of study in biology, confirms the vital importance of sleep, nutrition, and exercise. Understanding the ways that women leaders can keep their physical bodies in harmony with their minds, emotions, and the 4IR at large is imperative (McEwen, 2022).

According to Choinière (2018), a contemporary performance employing 4IR technologies is characterised by new and multiple relationships of the senses and related perceptual and cognitive processes. In this study, the focus was on the effect of technology on embodiment and performance, as well as sensory-perceptual re-creations, reconfigurations, deconstructions, and reconstructions when the body interacts with, is touched by, and incorporates technology. The study examines technological intervention from the perspective of its encounters with the sensate, somatic body in the current context of research-creation and its conceptual prerogatives.

The author redefined a contemporary status of the body in relation to the mediated body through an analysis of the artistic strategies employed to define and inscribe the mediated body within a contemporary artistic production on the premise that the body is a living, breathing organism and an adaptive biological phenomenon. In conclusion, the study proposes that the phenomenological mediation of the performative body could lead to another form of embodiment or even a new form of dance, geared specifically to the twenty-first century, as a possible alternative to the concept of the post-human woman leader in the 4IR.

### ***4.3 Practical Recommendations for Empowerment of Women Leaders in the 4IR***

Aderibigbe (2021) postulates the importance of empowerment of women leaders in a VUCA world that assist employees' psychological capital as a reliable source of competitive edge during the 4IR:

- *Focus on employee strength:* It is recommended that women leaders focus on their employees' strengths. Women leaders can serve as catalysts for a chain reaction of positive feelings and action when they take the initiative to focus on the strengths, successes, opportunities, and solutions of their subordinates. It promotes a feeling of greatness, efficacy, and optimism that boosts their performance at work.
- *Help employees shine in areas of standout strength:* Women leaders who are strengths coaches and who inspire their subordinates to discover and develop their strengths will inspire employees to pursue their goals tenaciously. Rather than being balanced, employees are expected to stretch themselves and exceed expectations in areas of strong performance. Although employees should be encouraged to reach out to their colleagues for assistance in areas that are more fragile, giving them a chance to collaborate and coordinate efforts.
- *Empower employees:* To achieve their best work, women leaders must release employees' strengths, ideas, and passion. In addition, they should allow frontline employees to make significant choices and support them by training, coaching, and guiding them to manage difficult choices and overcome obstacles. The Human Resources professionals that work for 4IR operate more independently as experts in their fields, and as such, they appreciate autonomy, freedom, and trust as they carry out their tasks. A manager who micromanages and supervises their employees is unappreciated by employees. They also value discretion regarding how work is completed so they can do things their way and build hopes, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism in the process.
- *Control work stress and pressure:* Moreover, female leaders should understand the need to control job stress and pressure as well as ensure individuals have the time to rest, recover, and reflect. Subordinates can disengage while away during break periods by encouraging them to their actual or virtual office. It is possible to

organize work so that employees are not continuously engaged at full pace, as well as provide on- and offline support. They are also helpful in fostering psychological resilience and balancing performance (Brook, 2017).

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter sought to explore the empowerment of women leaders that organisations require in view of the 4IR. Owing to the ever-changing VUCA environment and evolving 4IR technologies, a creative approach to leadership is crucial. The chapter highlights the empowerment of women leaders that embrace 4IR leadership essential for success in this 4IR world. This necessitates the incorporation of the principal concepts of a transformation attitude. Applying 4IR intelligence in their day-to-day operational tasks is a key competence to deliver results and promote advancement in addition to the competence to motivate employees to aspire to the vision and mission of an organisation. Aderibigbe (2021) postulates the importance of empowerment of women leaders in a VUCA world that assist employees' psychological capital as a reliable source of competitive edge during the 4IR. Future research could focus on the narratives of successful empowered women that navigated this arduous journey in a VUCA world that requires certain mindsets and behaviours from women leaders that are different from those required in the past.

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# Wisdom Lies in the Eye of the Perceiver: Tracking the Architecture of Perceptual Leadership Wisdom



**Birgit Breninger and Thomas Kaltenbacher**

**Abstract** The ability of leaders to thrive in current VUCA environments is pivotal for acting in fast moving, global settings. We introduce the idea of ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ as one of the relevant bio-cultural strategies to thrive in uncertain, multicultural settings. In this framework wisdom is approached from a perceptual stance for it must be built into the individual’s neurological wiring. It is suggested that the relevant perceptual architecture has to be functionally set up via the integration of cultural differences by the respective individual acting in multiple professional situations and contexts. The convergence of several sets of expertise that have fully been integrated across the axis of cultural differences will then give rise to ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’. Gender sensitivity is considered to be one such set of expertise. In order to eliminate gender bias in wisdom measures, gender sensitivity is conceived as a value-informed process that has to suffuse the perception, affect, cognition and action systems of the respective individual. It is further proposed that ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ as a specific kind of wisdom, is not only culturalized but profession-specific and has to be developed for today’s multi-cultural business realms in order to be able to act successfully on uncertainty for the ‘common good’. An experimental pilot (n = 34) was designed by combining eye tracking and questionnaire with expert wisdom ratings. Selected initial protocols from the perceptuo-cognitive experimental pilot are introduced and show promising avenues for using visual analysis in future multi-methodological designs when analysing leadership in real-life contexts.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Leadership · Wisdom · Gender · Perception · Culture · Bio-social framework

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## 1 Introduction

In the twenty-first century highly diverse present-day societies and the need to compete in a global world pose multiple new challenges for leadership. As part of the ‘New Leadership paradigm’, human-centred, authentic and adaptive leadership require a leader to pay more attention to the affective, moral and socio-cultural aspects of leadership (for an overview with discussion see: Mukherjee, 2020; Northouse, 2018). Thereby leadership is often regarded to be a process that changes environments and transforms not only the followers but also the leaders to accomplish more than expected by transcending their own interests for the sake of a ‘common good’. Novel ideas and approaches have completely altered what it means to be a ‘successful’ leader take for example, Hamdi Ulukaya’s call for writing a new, anti-CEO-playbook, that puts people over profits; or the ‘disruptive imperative’, i.e. the need to think disruptively and disorganize organizational ‘normality’ to thrive on uncertainty; or Tristan Harris’s appeal to shift to humane technology and stop tech companies ‘downgrading’ humanity. Against this backdrop, it is suggested here to rethink long-trusted theoretical concepts and assessments of leadership in order to remain relevant in VUCA<sup>1</sup> contexts (for an extensive review of leadership instruments see: Nickels & Ford, 2017).

People with an agile mind and a high level of resilience, who are flexible, and open to changes and new experiences are believed to be best equipped for succeeding in VUCA contexts. Hence the ability of individuals to thrive in such environments is pivotal for acting in fast moving, diverse societies. Several aspects of the multidimensional construct of wisdom are central for this very ‘agility and resilience of the mind’, as, for example: ‘rich knowledge of life, emotional regulation, acknowledgement of and appropriate action in the face of uncertainty, personal well-being and seeking the common good’ (cf. Jeste & Vahia, 2008). The plurality of wisdom definitions, however, has made it necessary to clarify one’s own stance in regard to this concept and its related constructs. Instead of the popular consideration of wisdom as a multi-component trait that includes cognitive, reflective and affective dimensions (Ardelt, 2003), it is suggested here to take an enactive approach towards wisdom. An enactive view considers lived experiences and reflexivity by trying to provide an all-inclusive framework to articulate the numerous domains and levels of organization involved and interacting in wisdom. Often wisdom is attributed to direct and indirect learning (Grossmann et al., 2020) whereby the main source of indirect learning is life experiences. In enactive paradigms cognition is approached as “[...] continuous coevolution of acting, perceiving, imagining, feeling, and thinking” (Thompson, 2007, p. 43). The purpose of cognitive processing is the guidance of action (Engel, 2010, p. 221) and the dynamic interaction that it unravels. It is argued here that for effective leadership in VUCA environments ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ has to be developed. This special kind of wisdom is referred to as ‘perceptual’ since it is supposed to emerge from a unique perceptual

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<sup>1</sup>VUCA is short for volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous environments.

architecture. 'Seeing' different possibilities goes beyond mere perception: a new way of 'seeing' is value-infused and necessitates novel perceptions emerging from an architecture of dynamic interactions of complexly interlinked systems: perception, affect, cognition and action systems (Breninger, 2021).

It is further argued that since new leadership paradigms are trying to promote a good life for all in multicultural societies (Rooney & McKenna, 2022), the respective architecture has to be suffused with cultural difference being a core value of the individual. Therefore it is claimed that the development of this perceptual architecture is based on the extent of successful integration of experiences of cultural differences. In short, the idea of 'perceptual leadership wisdom' (PLW) is that a specific, functional architecture has been set up by the respective individual over time and situations. This functional architecture is supported by various value-informed processes that have led to 'new ways of seeing'. Such processes are referred to as 'sets of expertise', as, for example: 'gender sensitivity' or 'ethical creativity'. Since the respective architecture is dependent on the integration level of cultural differences for the relevant sets of expertise to become functional, we draw on the bio-cultural framework: Intercultural Competence® (Breninger, 2021) arguing that 'perceptual leadership wisdom (PWL)' is necessary for acting happily on uncertainty for the 'common good' in multicultural environments.

This article sets out to frame 'perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)' as an innovative, enactive construct that has to be developed for today's multicultural business realms in order to act wisely on uncertainty for the 'common good'. Thereafter, the concept of 'perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)' is outlined as reflective, enacted understanding emergent from the convergence of several sets of expertise for which the full integration of cultural difference is necessary. Thereby gender sensitivity is considered as one pivotal set of expertise that is needed for PLW to emerge and is addressed as a value-informed process in order to avoid gender bias in wisdom assessments.

After laying out the theoretical foundations for 'perceptual leadership wisdom (PWL)', a novel perceptuo-cognitive experiment is piloted to assess the individual level of integration of cultural otherness (i.e. level of cultural expertise) intersectionally with gender sensitivity, moral competence and ethical creativity in tandem with wisdom. The uniquely designed pilot experiment tries to assess wisdom as a dynamic, culturalized and contextualized as well as situation-dependant construct. Initial protocols for the perceptual architecture of leadership wisdom are presented, documenting different levels of expertise together with wisdom ratings. Based on these findings a larger 'strategy-situation fit' study will be conducted in order to create the Bias in Business Assessment (BIBA) assessing various culturalized sets of expertise intersectionally with wisdom.

## 2 Perceptual Leadership Wisdom: A Culturalized, Profession-Specific and Gender-Sensitive Kind of Wisdom

Wisdom has often been portrayed in rather elusive ways as, for example, a multidimensional construct that is defined differently across various populations (gender, age, occupational groups, etc.) and cultural contexts (cf. Ferrari & Alhosseini, 2019; Takahashi & Overton, 2002). Hence wisdom as this volatile construct is incredibly hard to capture empirically (Baltes & Smith, 1990). Nevertheless, wisdom seems to involve “[. . .] good judgment and advice about important but uncertain matters of life” (Baltes & Smith, 1990, p. 95). As wisdom implies knowledge about the uncertainties of life and how to deal with them (R. Sternberg & Jordan, 2005; R. J. Sternberg, 1990) we regard wisdom to be pivotal for leadership in twenty-first century-VUCA environments. Sternberg (1990, p. 155), for example, argues that the wise person is comfortable with ambiguity and “[. . .] can be serene in the face of challenges that would distress the less wise”. As a multicomponent construct, wisdom has been suggested to require the interactions of neurobiology, behaviour and environment. Wisdom has, for example, been defined to include nine common themes: “[. . .] social decision-making and pragmatic knowledge of life; prosocial attitudes and behaviors; emotional homeostasis (with a tendency to favour positive emotions); reflection and self-understanding; acknowledgment of and coping effectively with uncertainty; value relativism and tolerance; spirituality; openness to new experience; and a sense of humor” (Bangen et al., 2013; Lee & Jeste, 2019, p. 70). The manifold traits and states that have been forwarded to be involved in the complex construct of wisdom over the years have often led to conceptual confusions with closely related constructs. Grossmann et al. (2020, p. 123) have pointed out such *jingle-jangle fallacies* in wisdom research.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike dominant research traditions in psychology, wisdom is not divided here into studies of general wisdom (i.e. what an individual knows about life from an observational stance) and studies of personal wisdom (i.e. outlining the character of a wise person) (for an overview see: Staudinger, 2008). Instead we propose an enactive (i.e. action-oriented) approach towards wisdom regarding sociocultural and biological factors to be intertwined and of significance. For this purpose the authors draw on the bio-cultural framework of Intercultural Competence® (Breninger, 2021). This enactive approach towards the development of cultural expertise is based on the theory of sensorimotor contingencies (SMCs; O’Regan & Noë, 2001) that prominently links perception and action systems. SMCs also claim that the cognitive processing of a living organism does not originate from a stimulus but rather from an action (usually an intention). Since the proposed ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ relies heavily on perception, it is pivotal to acknowledge that in

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<sup>2</sup>*Jingle* means that two constructs have the same label but are of different meaning and *jangle* denotes that they have different labels but mean the same.

SMCs the perceptual experience is not simply considered a state of brain, but a skilful activity. Social understanding is understood as something that is enacted—co-constructed—in the interaction whereby participatory sense-making is one of the relevant notions of sense-making and forms a continuum from less to highly participatory sense-making (E. A. Di Paolo et al., 2010, p. 71). In line with the Interactive Brain Hypothesis, it is further argued, that interactive experience plays a ‘forging, enabling role’ when it comes to shaping the functionality of socio-cognitive neural mechanisms (E. A. Di Paolo & De Jaegher, 2012, p. 8). Hence the visual system is claimed to involve a lot more than ‘simply recognizing objects.’ It also needs to support the brain’s goal of attaching significance to certain objects but not to others in order to develop strategies for interacting ‘successfully’ with a specific environment—not to mention the social realm and the tremendously complex interaction patterns necessary when interacting with other people.

Another important link tying perception and action together comes from expert research: expertise substantially relies on perception (cf. Gobet, 2015). It is perception that allows experts to rapidly categorise a problem and therefore ‘see’ more or different cues than a novice (De Groot et al., 1996). According to the Intercultural Competence® framework (Breninger, 2021), cultural expertise requires a functional architecture of the PACA-system (i.e. highly interlinked perceptive-affective-cognitive-action systems) in regard to the integration of cultural difference in order to develop the relevant neurobiological underpinnings for truly value-informed mental and social processes. It is further proposed that if a fully functional PACA-system regarding the integration of cultural otherness (i.e. people and objects/events/etc.) is in place, the actions by the individual will be informed by pro-sociality since processing is value-infused on a neurological level as well. Hence it is claimed that for the respective architecture (PWL) to be functional, the neural interconnections need to be set up and ‘running’ through the habitualisation of certain actions (as, for example: generally making gender-sensitive decisions in multicultural contexts). Robert L. Goldstone claims that wisdom can’t be simply told but has to be lived, since it is frequently perceptual and therefore has to be built into the individual’s neurological wiring (Foreword; Gauthier et al., 2010, p. vi). The idea of a specific ‘perceptual architecture’ underlying leadership wisdom here builds on this, proposing that such a complex neuronal architecture ensues from enacted experiences and knowledge in various situations and contexts over time. Since we have to act in the world in order to understand it (Lotto, 2017, p. 16) it is argued that only enacted understanding that has become embodied will give rise to ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ (PLW).

In short, it is argued that in order to be an effective and valued leader in multicultural VUCA environments an integrated perceptual architecture, referred to as ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PWL)’, has to be functional in the individual. The respective architecture is supported by various value-informed processes and allows for ‘chronically’ wise acts in VUCA environments. What processes, or better, which ‘specific sets of expertise’ are considered relevant for ‘wise acts’, is, to a certain extent, culturalized. This means, that an understanding of wisdom is culturally grounded since different sets of expertise are weighed differently in respective

cultures. For example, gender sensitivity may not necessarily be an important aspect of wisdom in all cultures. This different ‘weighing’, results from the attribution of value to specific sets of expertise which again is based on an embrainment of culture (Northoff, 2016), i.e. a ‘cultural conditioning’ of the brain established by the repeated engagement in specific cultural acts, tasks, events, etc., such as indirect ways to manage and resolve conflicts, gendered communication styles, relational (inter)dependencies, moral commitments, etc. Regarding gender differences, for example, how people conceive of and develop wisdom by gender (sociocultural causes based on gender norms) may have a strong impact on the empirical results, which currently are at best inconclusive: wisdom has been viewed as an androgynous construct (Aldwin, 2009) to avoid gender bias (Levenson, 2009), small gender differences have been detected in abstract conceptions of wisdom and larger ones in real-life contexts (Glück et al., 2009), gender effects have been considered dependent on situation (Brienza et al., 2018) and a meta-analytic estimate has suggested that gender does not at all impact the relationship of wisdom and other individual differences (Dong & Fournier, 2022). Studies have found, depending very much on the type of assessment used, either that women score higher on overall wisdom (Bang & Zhou, 2014; Singh & Dahiya, 2013; Webster, 2003) or no overall patterns have been found, rather differences in subdomains, e.g. that women scored higher on the affective or compassionate subscale (Ardelt, 2009). Then again, others found that men scored higher on the very same subscale (Maroof et al., 2015). Based on these findings one might suspect a gender bias in current measures of wisdom, this is why we have tried to pilot a new type of assessment trying to eliminate socio-cultural gender bias by considering wisdom as an emergent construct informed by value-infused processes. In order not to replicate any bias by using a specific scale we designed a novel experimental pilot trying to yield more complex data combining explicit (questionnaire) and implicit (eye-tracking) measures and taking situations and real-life contexts into account.

The crucial role of gender in regard to wisdom is addressed in a unique way here: gender sensitivity as a culturally relevant value-informed process that has to suffuse perception, affect, cognition and action in order for acts (e.g. decision making) to be considered as wise. For this purpose we draw on the enactive idea of ‘emergence’. Emergence denotes the formation of a ‘novel property or process’ (Di Paolo et al., 2010; Thompson, 2007), in our case ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’, that arises from the dynamical convergence of different processes (i.e. various sets of expertise as, for example, gender sensitivity). Respective sets of expertise emerge from the integration of various contextually and situationally relevant as well as ‘irrelevant’ experiences in the certain field (e.g. gender matters) across the axis of cultural difference over time. Hence ‘gender sensitivity’ is considered as one pivotal set of expertise, that has to ‘naturally’ inform every single act and decision of the respective leader. This means, that gender equity is not only an explicit, wilfully generated cognitive repertoire that an individual applies to people and situations but also an implicit mind-body-perception-emotion tendency including positive valence, selective perception, interpretative framing and actions that one embraces more habitually on an unconscious level.

Nevertheless, what sets of expertise are considered as specifically relevant is not only a culturalized but also a profession-specific agreement negotiated by individual minds, certain (expert) groups and societies through discourse.<sup>3</sup> This is why ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ is considered to be a specific kind of wisdom. An individual’s history of perceptions, for example, gives one a socio-cultural database, a kind of foundational bias, on which one builds assumptions, makes decisions, acts, etc. The bulk of experiences for the socio-cultural database informing ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ has to be obtained in specific and culturalized, professional situations and contexts unlike ‘wisdom’ in general. Hence ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ is defined as a certain kind of wisdom that emerges from integrated experiences in predominantly profession-oriented contexts and situations. So instead of drawing on a domain-general and domain-specific differentiation when it comes to sketching different ‘kinds’ of wisdom, we rely on the extent of successful integration regarding experiences from specific situations and contexts in terms of frequency and quality (i.e. valence and intensity) of experiences. In short, ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ is outlined to be the reflective, enacted understanding emergent from the convergence of selected sets of expertise that have developed over the full integration of cultural otherness in predominantly contextually and situationally ‘relevant’ experiences (i.e. from the business realm) over time. This is pivotal, since an understanding of the general concept of ‘wisdom’ would also necessitate full integration of a large amount of contextually and situationally ‘irrelevant’ experiences. There are, of course, various sets of expertise considered relevant in the leadership context, differently weighed in different cultures at different points in time. Nevertheless, for a multicultural environment, they all need to ‘emerge’ from the full integration involving positive valence of cultural otherness in various situations and contexts over time into the dynamical PACA-system (perceptive-affective-cognitive-action systems).

Since ‘cultural expertise’ is regarded as the necessary scaffold for ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’, the three basic levels of cultural expertise in regard to perceptual change from the integrative Intercultural Competence® framework (Breninger, 2021) are used:

1. ethnocentric (EC)—one’s own culturalized view is perceived to be the only viable and ‘normal’ one
2. ethnorelative (ER)—one does accept the existence of other viable perspectives
3. intercultural (IC)—one is able to integrate various perspectives into a novel way of seeing and meaning making

In addition to the three ‘phases’ (EC, ER, IC), the Intercultural Competence® framework conceives two transitory positions (T1 & T2) emerging between the three overlapping phases (see Fig. 1). Such transitory ‘stages’ are the realm of

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<sup>3</sup>We understand ‘discourse’ in the Foucauldian way here, referring to a group of statements which provide a language (visual and non-visual) for talking (i.e. representing) about a particular topic at a particular historical moment.





**Fig. 1** The Intercultural Competence® Framework (taken from: Breninger, 2021, p. 59)

‘positions in transitions’ in which integration of perception, affect, cognition and behaviour has not yet fully been achieved for a large amount of cultural otherness in a significant number of situative contexts.

Achieving the goal of a ‘common good’, i.e. a ‘good life’ for everyone in multicultural societies inevitably involves the ‘immersion’ of acts with certain values. We argue that being interculturally competent (i.e. having accumulated and positively integrated a significant amount of lived experiences over time) has to be a core value structure for ‘perceived leadership wisdom’ to emerge. Specific value-informed processes (i.e. certain sets of expertise, as, for example: gender sensitivity) necessitate the full integration of this value over the axis of cultural otherness. The respective architecture (PLW) enables the individual to chronically act wisely for the common good in multicultural environments. Hence our idea of ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ is based on the successful integration of cultural otherness. It is suggested that ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ in multicultural environments depends on this double bind: being interculturally competent inevitably entails (i.e. requires and should predominantly lead to) wise acts and being wise necessarily encompasses acting in interculturally sensitive ways. Therefore being wise necessitates the full integration of cultural otherness into the PACA-system (i.e. highly interlinked perceptive-affective-cognitive-action systems). Assuming that an intercultural individual has been highly motivated to act and has a long history of acting in interculturally competent ways (i.e. habitualization), s/he is able and intrinsically motivated to ‘deviate into new perceptions’ (Lotto, 2017, p. 15) and act, for example, in truly gender sensitive ways when it comes to decision making and problem-solving in global settings: e.g. designing meaningful business strategies for the development and retainment of women in *SHEcession*. Since people have different values mediating their utilization of competencies it is important to analyse the central processes intersectionally (as, for example: gender sensitivity, ethical creativity, moral competence, etc.) to determine to what extent integration has happened.

Since the idea of ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ does not readily avail itself to empirical enquiry, we piloted an intersectional, perceptuo-cognitive experiment designed to document the relevant perceptual architecture.



### 3 Designing a Perceptuo-Cognitive Experimental Pilot

In order to test the idea of ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ and find the individuals who are able to adapt to uncertainty and act wisely for the common good in multicultural settings, it is inevitable to add visual assessments to the established ‘cognitive canon’ of wisdom assessments (for an overview of measures of wisdom see: Glück et al., 2013). For this purpose a unique experimental design was created, capable of intersectionally assessing the respective kind of wisdom as situated and in real-life contexts.

The entire perceptuo-cognitive experiment consists of 40 visual items (affectively charged and culturalized): 16 main stimuli and 24 distractors. All 40 naturalistic and situated visual test items (comprising mainly real-life photographs of events and people in certain situations) were designed with culturalized affective value. ‘Affective items’, as we call them, have acquired their affective meaning by their association with some degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness and some degree of arousal in a culturalized individual’s experience. Hence when we talk about ‘affective items’, we refer to the meaning that has been acquired by an object or event through culturalized experience and iterative encounter judgments (cf. affect-laden images Slovic et al., 2007). Through extensive pilot testing with different leadership and non-leadership samples (cf. Breninger & Kaltenbacher, 2008, 2012, 2014) and several ratings by subject-matter experts, a large sample of culturalized stimuli was narrowed down to 16 main stimuli which are all culturally relevant and have an additional focus either on gender (4 items), morality (4 items), ethical creativity (4 items) or general culture relevant matters (4 items). The Intercultural Competence® framework (Breninger, 2021) assumes that individuals code information about cultural otherness alongside a continuum of familiarity between the self and the unfamiliar Other (see Fig. 2 below):

- very close familiar other (perceived as similar; interaffect: empathy)
- close familiar other (perceived as similar; interaffect: predominantly empathy)

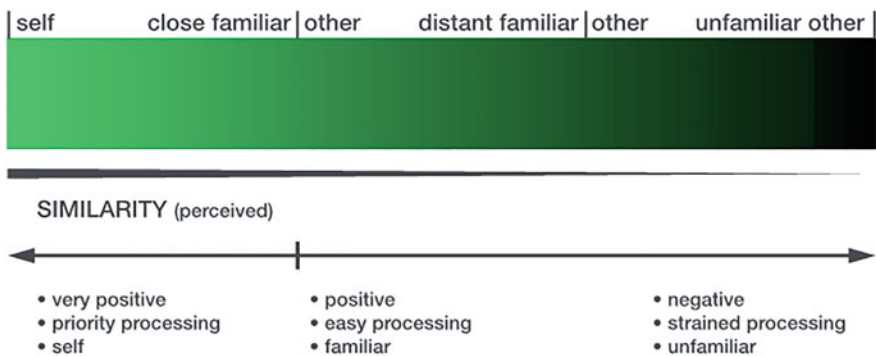


Fig. 2 Spectrum of processing cultural otherness in the Intercultural Competence® Framework (taken from: Breninger, 2021, p. 102)

- distant familiar other (partly known; interaffect: predominantly sympathy)
- unfamiliar Other (unknown; no interaffect).

Therefore, each of the four focus clusters (i.e.: the selected sets of expertise for this experimental pilot: gender, moral competence, creativity and culture general) consists of 4 stimuli, featuring the following situations to assess the integration level in terms of familiarity:

SIT\_1\_private sphere (private: close familiar other)

SIT\_2\_workplace related (public/in-group: close familiar other)

SIT\_3\_society related (public/in-group: distant familiar other)

SIT\_4\_globally related (public/out-group: unfamiliar Other)

Since ‘perceptual leadership wisdom PLW’ is defined as a certain kind of wisdom that is predominantly established via profession-oriented experiences (i.e. the majority of integrated experiences has occurred in specific professional contexts and situations), we have analysed a sub-data set: SIT\_2–4 (i.e. workplace-, society- and globally related). All the visual stimuli were designed to function with an SR Research, Eyelink 1000 desktop eyetracker. Stimuli were programmed in Visual Studio C++ to run with SR Research’s Eyelink Display software (SR-Research, 2011b). Upon presentation of the eyetracking stimuli, participants were asked questions from the questionnaire and their responses were recorded with a Sony ICD-SX712 audio-recorder. The eyetracking data were analysed with SR Research’s Data Viewer software (SR-Research, 2011a). All relevant eyetracking data (dwell time on AIs (areas of interest in ms), cumulated dwell time (%), fixation count, presence and absence of saccades to and from AIs) were translated into excel. The categories for the gaze types (1. saccades; 2. fixations: duration and frequency; 3. reading and scan paths; 4. reaction time; 5. gaze cascade effects) were modelled on two insights from pertinent literature concerning eye movements and visual expertise (for an overview see Gobet, 2016, Chap. 2; E. Reingold & Sheridan, 2011, Chap. 29): the idea of an encoding advantage of ‘cultural experts’, which is significantly related to experience (cf. E. M. Reingold et al., 2001) and to superior encoding (cf. E. Reingold & Sheridan, 2011). In regard to the gaze cascade effect, we expected that subjects would look longer at the stimulus they ultimately chose (Shimojo et al., 2003). Shinsuke Shimojo et al. (2003) referred to this phenomenon as the ‘gaze bias effect’. They further claimed that the gaze cascade effect is an exaggerated gaze bias in ‘like decisions.’ Therefore, it is hypothesized in the Intercultural Competence® framework that ‘truly’ intercultural subjects (i.e. IC in gaze types and IC in response types) would have to ‘overrule’ this effect in order not to make familiarity preference decisions.

Interpreting the eye-tracking data in tandem with the verbal reports enables the unravelling of interlinked ‘textures’ of cognitions, perceptions, affects and behaviours in specific situations. After correlating the two data sets (verbal reports and eye-tracking data), the questionnaire responses from the four sets of the perceptuo-cognitive experiment (i.e. gender, moral, creativity, culture) were transcribed and rated by experts as wise or not (Y/N). The raters were given some ‘guidelines’ prior

to the rating of answers. These guidelines were roughly based on Sternberg's seven sources of differences that directly affect the balance processes in his balance theory of wisdom (Sternberg, 1990: 155–57). The instructions were that individual answers should be considered wise according to:

1. Goals: whether they aim for the essential goal of a 'common good' regarding society and business
2. Contexts and Situations: whether they balance their responses to the socio-cultural and environmental contexts at hand
3. Interests: whether they balance their interests for the essential goal of a 'common good' regarding society and business
4. Long Terms: whether they aim for the essential goal of a 'common good' regarding society and businesses in the long run
5. Utilization of Tacit Knowledge: to what extent they utilize the tacit knowledge they have acquired
6. Taking perspective: whether one is motivated enough to take up a 'different perspective'
7. Values: what kind of values mediate their utilization of intelligence.

For the assessment of 'perceptual leadership wisdom' the responses and gaze protocols of the subjects were analysed in situations 2–4 (excluding the private situations due to the predominantly profession-specific kind of wisdom) and matched against the ratings to see whether the subjects, that have subjectively been rated as 'wise' were also clustered as interculturally competent (i.e., as IC individuals, presenting with an intercultural gaze as well as an intercultural response pattern consistently across all 4 situations). However, the preliminary results from the perceptuo-cognitive experimental pilot yielded too few IC individuals to support our hypothesis (i.e. intercultural gaze and intercultural responses across all three situations). From the entire sample ( $n = 34$ ) only 2 subjects (female leaders) presented with an IC gaze pattern and IC response style, however, none of them presented with a fully integrated IC gaze and IC response pattern across all 3 situations. According to our hypothesis, only IC subjects who have fully integrated cultural otherness over the relevant situations can be considered as presenting with 'perceptual leadership wisdom'. Nevertheless, we were able to explore promising visual avenues regarding the idea of analysing various levels of integration of cultural otherness and are going to present the differences in the perceptual architecture next.

The fixation protocol below in Fig. 3 from the focus cluster 'culture general' depicts what we call an ethnocentric gaze (EC): no fixations on culturally relevant symbols (as e.g. in stimulus 22, on the Christian crucifix), shorter and very few fixations on racially and/or religiously coded items (as e.g. the headscarf) and resulting in very fast preference decisions (decision time: 4.98 s). Upon display the subject was asked: "After recruiting for the position of receptionist in an Austrian hospital, these four candidates are left from a large pool of applicants. They all present with the same qualifications, competencies and skills, whom do you give the job to?" And upon decision: "Why have you decided this way?" As elicited by the



**Fig. 3** Stimulus 22 Receptionist: Ethnocentric (EC) Gaze



**Fig. 4** Stimulus 22 Receptionist: Ethnorelative (ER) Gaze

question accompanying the stimulus presentation, the answer provided by this EC subject was: “She fits the working context best” (use of system justification motives and familiarity preference decision). In all EC subjects the displayed preferences were exclusively made in favour of the prototypical ‘mousy personality type’ top row left. According to more implicit cultural knowledge shared by some Austrians, she seems to ‘fit’ the set of culturalized (Austrian) expectations associated with this particular position best. The cultural knowledge underpinning this decision is that up to very recently, the majority of Austrian hospitals was exclusively Christian in denomination, therefore certain ‘untraditional’ candidates (e.g. the ‘dolloed up’ blonde and the woman wearing a headscarf) are considered unfit. This answer was also rated as ‘unwise’ by all expert raters.

In Fig. 4 one can see a prototypical example of what we have termed an ethnorelative (ER) gaze. As hypothesized, the ER gaze had fixations on culturally relevant symbols (in stimulus 22: the Christian crucifix), had longer and more fixations on all faces which were more or less equally distributed: cumulative fixation duration within the Areas of Interest (AIs) was distributed equally across the four face AIs. Decision making time was insignificantly longer (7.12 s) but not biased towards the prototypical ‘mousy person’, who, interestingly enough, was not



**Fig. 5** Stimulus 22 Receptionist: Intercultural (IC) Gaze

once chosen by any of the ER subjects. The ER subjects did not present with system justification motives, but stereotypical thinking was still employed (although not with all stimuli). The ER subject below chose the Asian woman: “The Asian girl is young, competent and efficient”. This is a commonly held stereotype of Asian people in the health profession in Austria. The expert raters predominantly rated this answer as ‘unwise’, often referring to it as ‘smart’ or ‘business savvy’.

In Fig. 5 below we can see a gaze protocol which has been clustered as an intercultural (IC) gaze. As expected, the IC subjects did not only consider culturally relevant symbols, but had significantly longer and more fixations on all the candidates (equally distributed) and preference decisions took significantly longer (26.34 s). The answer of the IC subject accompanying the gaze depicted below was: “I choose the woman wearing the headscarf, because Muslim women are underrepresented in such public positions. And since Austria considers itself a very ‘homogenous’ society, it is time to disrupt the convenience and complacency of the ‘normal’ and accustom the public eye to diversity in key positions. This would also empower the Muslim community, since the job offers the opportunity to create a competent, public image for the Muslim woman”. This answer was rated as ‘wise’ by all of the expert raters.

For wise leadership decisions in multicultural environments we expected that also gender sensitivity has to be developed intersectionally with cultural competence for ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ (PLW) to emerge. In order to intersectionally assess various forms of sexism and gender sensitivity, the Integrative Sexism Framework (ISF) (see: Breninger, 2021, p. 306) was used and its four forms of belief systems (old-fashioned sexism, modern sexism, aversive sexism and gender sensitivity) were assessed and correlated with the three differing phases of ethnocentrism, ethnorelativism and interculturality (as outlined in the Intercultural Competence® framework). The Integrative Sexism Framework (ISF) aims to explicitly and implicitly analyse direct and indirect forms of sexism. This model distinguishes between affective reactions (conscious and unconscious) and evaluative judgements as well as resultant action tendencies. For example, unconscious residual negative feelings can result in certain conscious action-tendencies, as well as in unconscious action-tendencies or in non-action in specific situations (cf. Morsella & Bargh, 2011). It is



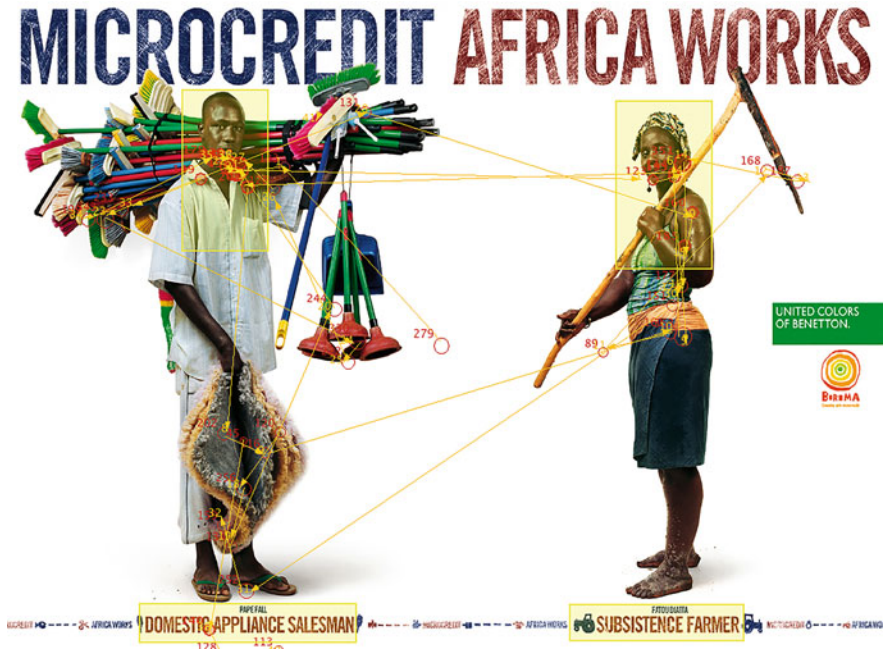


Fig. 6 Stimulus 28 Microcredit: Ethnocentric (EC) Gaze

vital to understand the socio-cultural consequences of various forms of biases being culturally available in a specific context, since thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are affected by stereotypes at an unconscious level even in the absence of conscious endorsement (Jost & Kay, 2005, p. 498). In the ISF an action-oriented mindset, defined as “one in which plans are made to effectively execute behaviors associated with the decision” (Gollowitzer & Bayer 1999), is crucial for ‘true’ gender sensitivity and can only be achieved across all situations by the ‘positive’ interaction of cognition, perception, emotion and motivation (Chaiken & Trope, 1999). Hence, when it comes to gender sensitivity, answers should explicitly refer to power issues, system changing motivations and empowerment. The three selected protocols below give an idea about the complex interaction of culture and gender from which ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ is to emerge.

The fixation protocol below in Fig. 6 from the focus cluster ‘gender sensitivity’ depicts what we call an ethnocentric gaze (EC) and yielded an ethnocentric answer suffused in ‘modern sexism’ (i.e. modern sexists hold negative emotions despite disavowing to do so, hence individuals tend to find ‘logical’ and ‘plausible’ reasons for their sexist decisions). After displaying the microcredit stimulus (no. 28), subjects were asked whom they would grant a microcredit. Answers that were clustered as ‘modern sexist’ correlated most often with ‘ethnocentrism’ (EC gaze and EC answer), as, for example, the answer obtained from an EC subject (see Fig. 6 below for gaze protocol): “The black guy—he has to support a family”.

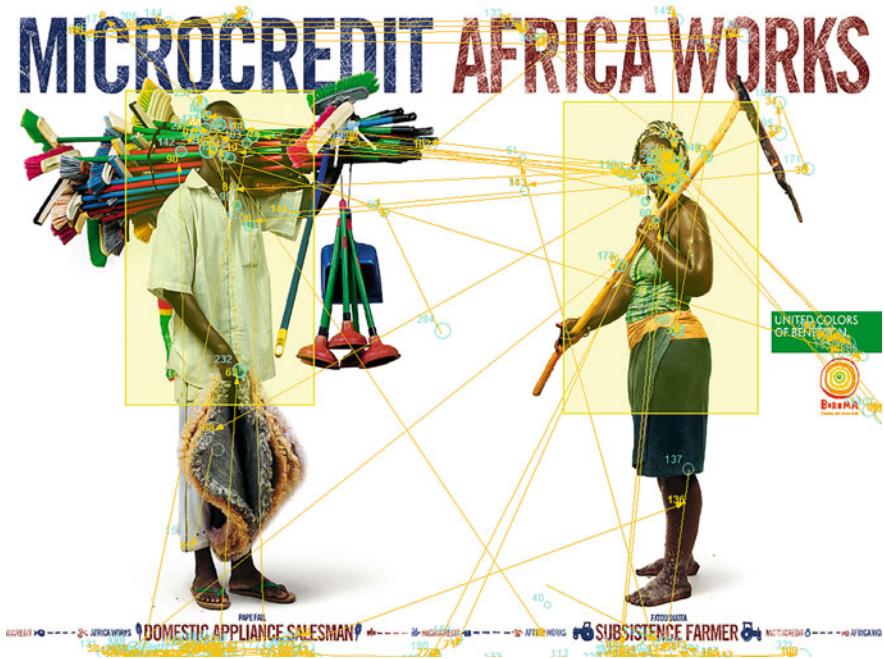


Fig. 7 Stimulus 28 Microcredit: Ethnorelative (ER) Gaze

The ethnorelative fixation protocol below in Fig. 7 was accompanied by an answer pattern termed ‘aversive sexism’. In ‘aversive sexism’ residual negative feelings are harboured but only unconsciously experienced by the individual—the ISF claims that one does, however, need positive affect to take effective action. The answer yielded by the respective ER subject: “I would give it to the African woman. She has to take care of her children and unfortunately many African men tend to spend their money on booze instead of supporting the household”.

The intercultural fixation protocol below in Fig. 8 yielded an intercultural, gender-sensitive answer and was rated wise by the experts: “It is difficult to generalize over a great number of different countries that make up Africa, I would need more information about the specific situation of women and men in the respective country. Generally speaking microfinance is a bit of a band-aid solution because it neither challenges systems in power nor the idea of a formal economy. Women’s access to microfinance, however, tends to be more restricted, so I would microfinance the female farmer, ensuring that she also gets ‘leadership/entrepreneurial training’ and receives important info that might help her acquiring property of her own—hoping that this will lead to more freedom in her household’s financial decisions and enhance her socio-economic status”.

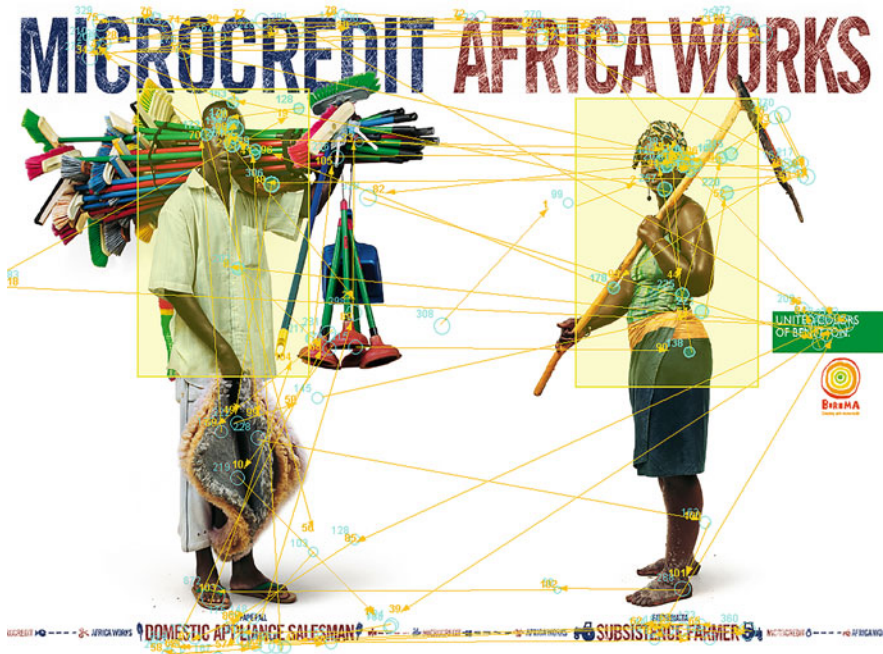


Fig. 8 Stimulus 28 Microcredit: Intercultural (IC) Gaze

## 4 Conclusion

The development of a specific kind of wisdom, namely ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’, is proposed to be important for thriving on uncertainty and acting for the common good in multicultural environments. It is argued that ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ emerges on an individual basis from the convergence of selected value-infused processes for which the full integration of cultural otherness in various contextually and situationally ‘relevant’ experiences over time has been necessary. Such processes are here referred to as ‘sets of expertise’, as, for example, ‘gender sensitivity’. To avoid bias, the respective perceptual architecture addresses gender sensitivity in a unique way, namely as a culturally relevant value-informed process that has to suffuse perception, affect, cognition and action systems in order for actions to be considered as wise. Hence ‘perceptual leadership wisdom’ is claimed to enable the individual to ‘novel ways of seeing and doing’, as, for example, executing strategies for gender equity in meaningful and empowering ways.

It has further been claimed that cultural differences in the conceptualization of wisdom occur due to the culturalized consideration of what the ‘relevant’ sets of expertise for leadership are (e.g. gender sensitivity, moral competence, creativity, etc.). What specific sets of expertise have to converge for the respective culturalized concept of ‘perceived leadership wisdom’ lies in the ‘eyes of the beholders’ (i.e. the



culturalized subject and her relevant communities). Therefore the experimental design to assess perceptual leadership wisdom has to be fluid and non-reductive: ‘culture’ must not be conflated with ‘nation’. Hence we needed to anchor culture in specific ‘culturalized’ situations of certain socio-economic contexts in which shared cultural ‘knowledge’ brings about certain affective, cognitive, and behavioural consequences—an enormous challenge for experimental designs. It is also pivotal to design the experiment in regard to the respective cultural context to make the idea of ‘wise leadership’ meaningful to the individuals. Furthermore, an intersectional analysis of the relevant value-informed processes has to be attempted. We claimed that existing research designs have to be expanded in order to be able to embrace the fluidity and intersectionality needed to overcome biases in research and bring about social change regarding leadership.

Since the respective kind of leadership wisdom is conceived to be perceptual, we suggested combining various methods (i.e. implicit and explicit ones) for an innovative experimental pilot that might be able to capture the complexity of interrelated processes and hence hold the potential of eliminating gender bias in current wisdom assessments. When ‘perceptual leadership wisdom (PLW)’ is approached from an enactive stance it is pivotal to create novel experiments able to document the interacting processes that give rise to various phenomena. In order to depict ‘leadership wisdom’ in perception we have supplemented the more traditionally cognitively-oriented method (questionnaire) with a visual assessment (eye-tracking methodology). The perceptuo-cognitive experimental pilot revealed promising initial avenues for documenting differing perceptual architectures and is a first attempt to deal with complex real-life data. Future innovative experiments need to address the complexity of human agents in ambiguous environments by analysing culture, context and situatedness of wise acts. We have to try and grasp the complexity of living beings, their actions and mindsets in real-life situations if we want to unravel the phenomenon of wisdom and encourage wise acts in multicultural environments.

### **Consent to Publish**

The authors confirm that consent to publish has been obtained from the participants to report individual data and that copyright has been obtained for the figures and pictures used as stimuli in the experiment.

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# Female Representation in Technical Roles Within the Performing Arts Industry



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**Abstract** The goal of this study was to highlight measures taken to address female representation in technical roles within a performing arts entity, and to identify the gaps around resolving female underrepresentation in technical roles. To conceptualise the research phenomenon and examine the findings in this study, feminist theory was applied. A qualitative research approach was used to collect data for the study. The researchers gathered qualitative data from 17 participants of a performing arts entity in the Western Cape, South Africa using semi-structured interview questionnaires. The analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using thematic analysis. The research findings indicated that there was an unequal representation of females in technical roles, thus stifling the successful empowerment of women within the entity. The barriers to female representation as found by the study included career trajectory and growth. Leadership was viewed to be important when it came to drive the required change. Furthermore, COVID-19 impacted female representation, as vacant posts could no longer be filled. However, some lessons could be learnt from the pandemic that would create an environment conducive for female participation in the workplace, enabling the entity to attract and retain them.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Female representation · Arts industry · Gender equality · Internalised discrimination

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## 1 Introduction and Background

Female representation has been a challenge for the performing arts business, which is centred on theatre, particularly state-funded theatres. Females were not appointed to key positions in state-funded theatres. This may be explained by the fact that theatre was a public and political venue where men could speak out against apartheid. In contrast, those who were fortunate enough to be appointed had only limited authority over the system (Hutchison, 2018). The lack of equitable and sustainable empowerment of women in theatrical performances in the South African context is one of the less explored facts about this (Plaatjie, 2020). Hutchison (2018) goes on to say that, while the transition to democracy in South Africa has resulted in females occupying positions of power, such as in parliament, this is not the case.

This tardiness occurred even though the appointment of females in contexts such as parliament involved large-scale law reforms that created female-friendly legislation so to promote gender equality and particularly, the empowerment of women. The importance of this study can be appreciated considering the mandate of the public performing arts institutions (PAIs). The 2019/2020 annual reports of four of the main state-funded performing arts institutions, the State Theatre, Pacofs, Artscape Theatre, and the Durban Playhouse, confirmed that they were Schedule 3A Public Entities and agencies of the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, and were declared to be cultural institutions in terms of Sect. 3 of the Cultural Institutions Act, Act 119 of 1998, and that they were governed by the Public Finance Management Act, Act 1 of 1999. Unlike the private performing arts institutions, which have the freedom to operate as both receiving and producing houses, public performing arts institutions are mainly receiving houses.

There is currently poor representation and sustainable empowerment of females in the entity explored in this study, with only very few females in the technical roles. The devastating effects of the Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19), a global pandemic, had a massive negative impact on employment and livelihoods. According to the South African Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) report on the theatre industry and the impact of COVID-19 on the performing arts sector released on 10 October 2020, inequalities have been experienced in South Africa and throughout the performing arts sector (2020). This finding was reinforced by the South African Cultural Observatory (SACO) report of 30 May 2020, which stated that the pandemic came at a time when the sector was faced with an already higher male representation (of 58.7%) as opposed to the one for females (SACO, 2020). Considering these facts centred on the impact of COVID-19 on the sector, the present research also explored the effect of the pandemic on female representation and empowerment in technical roles within the performing arts industry, learnings from this experience, and suggested recommendations on this basis.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *The Feminist Theory*

Feminism dates back centuries, and pertinently to the 18th and 19th centuries, as established by the works of early feminists including Mary Wollstonecraft, John Steward Mill, Sojourner Truth, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who addressed topical issues of female status in economic, political, and educational realms (Amarasekera & London, 2018). These authors maintained that disparities in opportunities offered by society were influenced by societal restrictions that prevented the full empowerment of women as people and citizens. Wollstonecraft strongly emphasised the importance of female independence, expressing how domination and social oppression hindered females from achieving independence, while she argued against docile blind obedience and male domination, and demanded female participation in civic life (Gibbels, 2020). Wollstonecraft is sometimes called the “Mother of Feminism,” because her work canvassed females’ rights as contained in her book entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Females*, and she is acknowledged for having established thus a classic of feminist history and feminist theory (Menig, 2018). This later became known as the first wave of feminism, which paved the way for discussion on matters of disparities in society that led to observable inequalities between men and females, partly motivated by a growing awareness of the real inequalities between men and females, including associated legal and social restrictions as well as prohibitions (Amarasekera & London, 2018).

Kabeer (2021) explains that feminist economists view market gender inequality as a phenomenon that forms an intrinsic structural part of market forces through the maintenance of discriminatory practices, as inherited from the past, and as continued in the present by bargaining powers of different groups who pursue self-interest. Linked to the above, literature and research confirm that female underrepresentation and their lack of empowerment, especially in critical positions, is a result of social norms that have limited females from access to power and associated privileges, while allowing these to be enjoyed only by their male counterparts (Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022a, b). Discriminatory practices were enforced in the workplace, creating an environment not conducive for females to occupy critical positions that carry meaningful responsibilities and benefits. The current workplace demographics, where fewer females are present to begin with and, once they are, having to occupy inferior positions is not natural, but a consequence of man-made norms, beliefs, policies, and discriminatory practices towards females. Organisations looking towards future sustainability will have to perform self-introspection and learn from the feminist theory to ensure equal opportunities and the sustainable empowerment of women within the workplace.

### **3 Methodology**

The research philosophy of this study was grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm (Ngulube, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative case study approach was used, as it assisted the researchers in obtaining an in-depth understanding of participants' views through direct engagement with them (Saunders et al., 2016). The research participants were selected based on the perception of their ability to contribute substantive insights to the subject that was explored. Particularly, participants were expected to be in a highly skilled or management-level position and have a minimum of 4 years work experience.

#### ***3.1 Sampling***

In this study, dovetailing with the qualitative research approach adopted, data were collected by utilising non-probability sampling (Etikan, 2016). Non-probability research focuses on volunteer participants who are readily available or present when the research is conducted (Bhardwaj, 2019). The present researchers chose non-probability convenience sampling in view of its advantages around expenses and time constraints (Bhardwaj, 2019). This proved helpful, as the present project is of an academic nature with tight timeframes prevailing in the academic community. The researchers worked with an acceptable sample size of 17 participants (Guest et al., 2006) from one of the performing arts entities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. They were readily available and willing to participate.

The management and skilled employees within the operations department of the performing arts entity were interviewed. These participants formed part of the group of employees who were performing core functions in the business and management of the entity. For the sake of the achievement of a balanced view in the project, the participants included both male and female participants in the technical business unit. The chief executive officer, who was the vision holder of the entity, was also interviewed to fathom an in-depth understanding of the strategic position of the entity around female representation, women empowerment, and the challenges faced in this respect.

#### ***3.2 Data Collection***

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The interview guide was self-developed and based on the research questions and the objectives of the study as underpinned by the relevant extant literature (Longhurst, 2003). The latter mainly informed the researchers in terms of developing the interview questions.



Interviews afford the interviewer the most direct and straightforward approach to gathering rich data and the type of interview questions to collect data must be tailored to the research question(s) (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The initial plan in the present case was to conduct face-to-face interviews. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and South African national lockdown regulations at the time of data collection, most of the interviews were conducted telephonically and on Microsoft Teams (Zinatsa & Saurombe, 2022b). Some interviews were conducted face-to-face. The interviews were of a one-on-one nature and were all conducted in English. A recording machine was used to record the interviews, and these were downloaded and stored on password-protected files on a cloud.

As depicted in Table 1 below, most participants (65%) were male, and fewer were female (35%). Coloured participants dominated the sample at 82%, while 12% of the participants were white and 6% were African. Majority (41%) of the sample were between the age of 40–49 years, followed by 35% who were between 50–59 years, while 18% were between 60–69 years and those between 30–39 years least constituted the sample at 6%. Most of the participants (29%) occupied middle management positions and skilled technician positions (also 29%), followed by top management participants who made up 18% of the sample, senior management who least made up the sample at 12%, alongside junior management who also constituted 12% of the sample. Further, 70% of the sample had 15 or more years of work experience, 12% had over 10 but less than 15 years of work experience, and 18% had less than 10 years of work experience. Overall, the sample demonstrates a good representation across all sections of the demographics, which arguably contributed to the credibility of the findings, as posited by the authors of this study.

## 4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the data collected from the interviews through an initial process of coding and the subsequent generation and grouping of themes and sub-themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis was done manually by printing interview transcripts on which the researchers used different colours to highlight similar codes which were later grouped into the main and sub-themes. Whilst the researchers used the deductive approach centred on designing the semi-structured interview guide (by using the challenges currently faced by the institution that was explored, and prevalent themes extrapolated from the literature), the researchers applied the inductive approach when analysing data, where codes were allowed to emerge organically outside of the confinements of the study's theoretical framework (Eger & Hjerm, 2022; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The codes and their frequencies were recorded, and these were later grouped into the mentioned themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While many of the insights that emerged were aligned with the theory delineated in the literature review, other sub-themes emerged outside of this, thus contributing to the significance and uniqueness of the study.

**Table 1** Participants' demographic details

Participant No	Interview date	Gender	Race	Age	Occupational level	Years of work experience
Participant 1	17/02/2022	M	Coloured	44 years	Mid-management	18
Participant 2	21/02/2022	M	White	63 years	Skilled technician	30
Participant 3	07/03/2022	M	Coloured	57 years	Top management	37
Participant 4	07/03/2022	F	Coloured	49 years	Mid-management	16
Participant 5	08/03/2022	F	Coloured	55 years	Top management	22
Participant 6	08/03/2022	M	Coloured	43 years	Skilled technician	21
Participant 7	08/03/2022	M	Coloured	63 years	Top management	30
Participant 8	09/03/2022	M	Coloured	42 years	Senior management	4
Participant 9	09/03/2022	M	Coloured	52 years	Junior management	8
Participant 10	09/03/2022	F	Coloured	51 years	Mid-management	29
Participant 11	09/03/2022	F	White	54 years	Skilled technician	22
Participant 12	08/03/2022	M	Coloured	51 years	Senior management	13
Participant 13	09/03/2022	F	Coloured	31 years	Skilled technician	4
Participant 14	10/03/2022	M	Coloured	47 years	Mid-management	26
Participant 15	10/03/2022	M	Coloured	43 years	Mid-management	13
Participant 16	10/03/2022	M	African	61 years	Skilled technician	29
Participant 17	11/03/2022	F	Coloured	46 years	Junior management	15

Source: Authors own compilation

#### ***4.1 Ethics and Authorisation***

Ethical clearance was sought from and granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business and Economics at the University of Johannesburg: ethical clearance reference number: IPPM-2021-586(M). In conducting this research, the researchers were considerate of both the values endorsed by the committee and those of the research participants in the study. The researchers fully adhered to the

university's ethical clearance processes ensuring that the research was conducted ethically without harming the participants.

#### **4.1.1 Findings**

The findings of this study were centred on the following: unequal representation, leadership, career trajectory and growth, as well as the impact of COVID-19. Several codes emerged during the data analysis process engendering the sub-themes of this study, which were later grouped under main themes. Mostly similar sentiments prevailed across all themes between both male and female participants, except in one instance where the experience was idiosyncratic to females (i.e., the experience of how females relate to a fellow female manager versus a male manager).

### ***4.2 Theme 1: Unequal Representation***

The theme of the unequal representation of females which specifically related to the empowerment of women in roles and management in the technical business unit was the one that was found to be most prevalent by the present study. Some of the participants date this back to the history of South Africa and the history of stagecraft within the performing arts industry. Some of the research participants' expressions are noted below in terms of the sub-themes identified.

#### **4.2.1 Sub-theme: Fewer Females in Technical Roles and in Managerial Positions in the Technical Business Unit**

The two sub-themes have been combined to avoid the repetition of identical comments that could be read together. It was found that, whilst there was an acknowledgment that there had been improvement in the numbers of females in general, especially in support services, there were still fewer females in technical roles and management positions in the technical business unit. Some of the participants said the following:

“As a former intern, I can say there have been efforts to bring a female into the space, but there are still fewer females in technical roles and management positions in our business unit. Of around twenty-three (23) technical staff in our business unit, we are only three (3) females with one being in props, so the female that is at the centre of the daily technical work are two (2) out of the whole male component and all of us are junior” (Participant 13, female, aged 31, skilled technician, four years of work experience).

In addition:

“There are certainly few females in technical roles here. It was like that when I joined as an intern, but with years the internship programme enrolled more females and we saw an improvement when some females were appointed. They are still few and when you come to

our business unit, you will still see more males. However, it's good to have females amongst us" (Participant 6, male, age 41 years, experienced specialist, 21 years of work experience).

#### **4.2.2 Sub-theme: History of the Industry and Stagecraft**

Most participants agreed that there was an underrepresentation of females in technical roles of the performing arts entity because of the history of the industry and stagecraft.

"My perception of woman representation within the workplace in South Africa and that of females, in general, is historical, if we look in all spheres of either the public sector or the private sector, men have always occupied top positions and since we have moved into the new dispensation after 1994, a change, though slow has been witnessed. The same has happened with our entity" (Participant 1, male, aged 44, mid-management, 18 years of work experience).

And:

"When one looks at the history of South Africa and the history of female representation in key roles of any entity, e.g., in the IT space, fewer females are represented there. Whilst we have experienced an improvement in our entity in terms of their numbers, it is a fact that we still have few females in technical roles and in management positions in that space. The technical internship helped to increase females in technical roles, but that is still not enough" (Participant 7, male, aged 63, top management, 30 years of work experience).

#### **4.2.3 Sub-theme: Legislation Supporting Female Representation**

Some of the participants noted the influence of the Employment Equity (EE) legislation on the changing demographics in the South African landscape, which also had a direct influence on the industry.

"We are guided by the employment equity act, which informs our employment equity policy. We have targets and report to the department of labour every year" (Participant 5, female, aged 55, top management, 22 years of work experience).

This was supported by another participant, who stated:

Like all South African employers, we also report our EE targets to the department of labour. We are looking at our targets across all occupational levels and this will assist us to improve female presence in technical roles" (Participant 1, male, aged 44, mid-management, 15 years of work experience).

#### **4.2.4 Sub-theme: Male Attitudes Towards Females**

If not monitored, male attitudes may adversely affect females within the technical business unit. Perceptions that certain jobs were not for females influenced some males' engagement with females. This was ranked low in the interviews, but it was

found to be a critical factor to consider for an entity seriously committing itself to equal female representation in its staff complement.

The issue of male attitudes was highlighted strongly by the following participant:

“When I was a production manager, I could see resistance, there wasn’t a belief that a female can be a production manager, calling the shots in a production. You must work with a team that doubts your ability and prove yourself worthy before there is confidence. This can kill your appetite for work and [cause you to] live a frustrated work-life” (Participant 16, female, aged 46, junior management, 15 years of work experience).

And:

“There is a general tendency of people [males] in those roles and even people from within the organisations, when they see that a female has taken over a technical role, they often ask questions of whether she is able? Can she do that job? So, this is not a job for a female, that is the male view” (Participant 12, male, aged 51, senior management, 13 years of work experience).

#### **4.2.5 Sub-theme: Male Language Behind the Scenes**

The technical side of the business had been dominated by males in the past. This had by default developed a male-dominant culture, expressed through the language behind the scenes and the male attitudes in the space.

“Remember I have just said also that the place was mainly males only, we have our language, jokes, we tease each other, now a woman joins you in the space, you must all of a sudden behave, change your language, it’s a bit of a shock I think” (Participant 15, male, aged 43, mid-management, 26 years of work experience).

Another participant said:

“The culture, also, the jokes, the language that the males might use backstage. . .whilst we have policies against harassment and bullying, but also in the environment of one or two females with more males, they could be bullied as well” (Participant 4, female, aged 49, mid-management, 16 years of work experience).

### **4.3 Theme 2: Leadership**

There was a strong view that leadership played a major role in the transformation of the entity as well as in its effort to ensure that those areas still experiencing female underrepresentation could improve their status.

#### **4.3.1 Sub-theme: Leadership Influence**

The participants indicated how leadership overall influenced the attitude and climate regarding the empowerment of women in technical roles within the arts entity. This sub-theme was engendered by responses such as:

“When I started working here there were not many females in the technical department. There were so many excuses because females never went on technical training courses. So automatically there was this whole mindset that females were not interested in the technical aspects. For this [reason], I started the technical internship programme so that females could also apply. I was very clear that 50% of the applicants needed to be female for the internship program.” (Participant 5, female, aged 55, top management, 22 years of work experience).

And:

“... the leadership firmly stands behind that policy or approach for females to be appointed in these roles... roles previously dominated by men, can now be filled by women. So, I can certainly say from my perspective the leadership is quite uhm, strongly in favour of promoting these jobs for females as well, not just keeping them for men, but also the female gets the same support as everybody else in those positions and they certainly are encouraged” (Participant 12, male, aged 51, senior management, 13 years of work experience).

### **4.3.2 Sub-theme: The Need for Female Leadership in the Technical Business Unit**

The participants expressed their concern about the lack of females in leadership positions in the technical business unit.

“I inherited a business unit which had no females in management position, I am aware of that and in my engagement with the CEO, this is one of my performance targets” (Participant 3, male, aged 57 years, top management, 37 years of work experience).

Female participants particularly posited that this lack of women empowerment in technical business unit leadership roles meant that females had no safe space to discuss openly the female challenges that affected them and their work.

“As a woman, there are certain things that I cannot express freely with my male manager, hence I always say, I will go to my next female line manager in the structure of the organisation, that is our CEO, and she is a woman. I prefer to talk to her on my personal challenges as a female, she will relate with me on those matters. Just imagine if we had also female representation in middle to senior and top management in our business unit, instead of going to the CEO, one would go to any of them.” (Participant 13, female, aged 31, skilled technician, 4 years of work experience).

## **4.4 Theme 3: Career Trajectory and Growth**

The entity had a low staff turnover and that was perceived to be stifling career growth and might have discourage females from joining the profession, while those already there might have decided to leave. In a male-dominated environment where there was low staff turnover, the speed of transforming the staff profile would be slow if the same old methods were used.

#### **4.4.1 Sub-theme: Perception and Lack of Knowledge of Stagecraft as a Career**

The study unravelled how general perceptions regarding the arts industry influenced the extent to which women are attracted and empowered to pursue successful careers within the sector. Participants highlighted that there was a lack of knowledge of stagecraft as a profession.

“I think people generally don’t know about stage craft and there is no college that teaches stage craft, in terms of what we do on stage. You will have colleges that teach sound and lighting, but their curriculum is not aligned to what we do here.” (Participant 14, male, 47 years old, 26 years with the organisation, middle management).

And:

“Our arts education curriculum does not expose the little ones [young scholars in the arts discipline] to the technical side of the arts. There is so much on artistic genres, playing instruments, drama, ballet, poetry, etc., but there is zero exposure to technical aspect, yet all that they are teaching cannot succeed without technical support.” (Participant 5, female, aged 55, top management, 22 years of work experience).

#### **4.4.2 Sub-theme: Limited Career Growth**

Limited career growth also diminished the overall opportunities for the advancement of women and their empowerment towards successful and sustainable vocations in the arts industry as substantiated by the following:

“In the whole industry in general, career growth is very slow, hence many technicians opt for freelance work where they can increase their earning and at the same time travel.” (Participant 8, male, aged 42, senior management, 4 years of work experience).

Another participant said:

“You have technicians that have received 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 years’ service awards in this entity. This is good because you hold on to your experience and retain the knowledge within. Your clients are satisfied as they work with these experienced technicians’ year in and year out. But you have a problem, you will not have new people, new energy and the females we are talking about, to bring that mix you want” (Participant 2, male, aged 63, skilled technician, 30 years of work experience).

#### **4.4.3 Sub-theme: Lack of Female Role Models**

The lack of role models in technical roles gave an impression to a girl child that the profession was meant for males only, as suggested by the following response:

“First of all, we need to understand that theatre is broad . . .there’s lighting, there’s sound, there’s management, technical management and all that stuff. When we do career guidance, this must be facilitated by [a] female. . . when they see a female doing the facilitation, then it would increase interest” (Participant 16, male, aged 61, skilled technician, 29 years of work experience).

#### 4.4.4 Sub-theme: Perceived Salary Inequalities

The few females in the technical business unit clad junior positions and all of them were paid at a junior level. A participant raised this as a concern needing attention:

“All of us as females are junior stage managers and paid at a junior level, yet doing the work of the stage managers, except one who works with props.” (Participant 13, female, aged 31, skilled technician, 4 years of work experience).

Another participant expounded as follows:

“If you have been in a position for a long time, especially us in the technical side, and there is no salary growth, but you do even more than those who earn more than you, this can be discouraging. In our unit, we know who does what, and I know that junior technicians have been in those for too long and they do the same work as some of us. I know this has been raised with our management team, I hope they are doing something about it. . . as a father to a daughter, I will want her here in the future and she must not experience what is happening now” (Participant 6, male, aged 43, experienced specialist, 21 years of work experience).

### 4.5 Theme 4: The Impact of COVID-19

This was the least frequent, yet nonetheless interesting theme that emerged in this study. Participants provided insights regarding the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it could be pivotal in nudging organisations, including the arts industry, towards an accelerated, progressive future.

#### 4.5.1 Sub-theme: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most of the participants unanimously agreed that the pandemic had a minimal impact when it came to the staff complement of the entity, as there were no retrenchments:

“So, I think COVID-19 definitely smacked us in the gut. . . this has affected us, we can’t appoint technicians because all posts are frozen, there is no funding” (Participant 14, male, aged 47, middle management, 26 years of work experience).

Whilst there were no retrenchments in this entity when others shut down, the participants nonetheless believed that there were lessons to be learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic that could help the entity create an environment conducive to attracting females in the technical space.

“Yes, I think we can learn from our pandemic experience and improve our work environment and culture. Look, we quickly invested in technology to allow working from home, everyone pulled together to invest in technology. We must use the same spirit to invest more in technology for our technical [units]. New technology will ensure females are not intimidated by the sight of mega instruments. (Participant 8, male, aged 42, senior management, 4 years of experience).



## 5 Discussion

The research focused on female representation within the performing arts industry. The main aim of the present project, as indicated, was to investigate female representation in technical roles within a performing arts entity. The accompanying objectives were to highlight measures used to address such female representation by identifying the gaps around addressing the underrepresentation and empowerment of females.

### 5.1 *Unequal Representation*

Regarding the entity explored in this study, females are clustered together in administrative and support functions, not technical and managerial positions. Globally, regardless of decades of progress, females remain underrepresented in the upper parts of earnings distribution (Bertrand, 2018). Espi et al. (2019) believe that females (especially black and coloured females) continue to be underrepresented in high-skilled and management positions. The present study found that, whilst there was fair representation in the administrative support functions across all occupational levels in the entity, low levels of female representation occurred in technical roles and management positions in the technical business unit, thus stifling the empowerment of women within the entity.

### 5.2 *Leadership*

Leadership is essential, as it affects the business outcomes and the processes of change involved (Tang, 2019). The work of Schutte et al. (2019) resonates with this: they add that in the challenging, volatile, uncertain, and complex world of business, companies need conscious leaders who will inspire followership to bring about the desired outcomes. In the same vein, Nandasinghe (2020), and Saurombe and Barkhuizen (2020) emphasise that the success of the organisation depends on the quality of its leadership, while the latter impacts the behaviour and results of organisational performance. The presence and empowerment of female technicians and female leaders in the technical space is also advantageous to female artists. They are more likely to feel free to express themselves to a female technician than a male technician on certain matters. By having an equal representation of males and females, the industry will be able to attend appropriately to all its stakeholders and keep them happy (Smith, 2020).

### **5.3 *Career Trajectory and Growth***

The following were listed as contributing factors to career trajectory and growth: firstly, perception and lack of knowledge of stagecraft as a career. For young people, making decisions on what to study has become more important and difficult, hence effective career guidance practice, which includes schools introducing and encouraging student vocation at an earlier age combined with the essential role of exposure to the working environment, is important (Haxhahyseni, 2021). The participants highlighted a lack of knowledge about stage craft as a career. Consider against this background that stagecraft is not introduced at the basic education level to expose students to the profession as a career option. Yet, its introduction at an early age is critical to the success, seamless adjustment of children (especially female), and empowerment of women, who later take up the profession as adults (Maree, 2018).

### **5.4 *The Impact of COVID-19***

The findings of this research indicate that, whilst the entity retained all its workforce, it was also affected by the pandemic. The theatres were closed and there were no activities in theatres since they are located indoors and were restricted from filling their venues. This limited the entity's revenue, and it could not employ any new employees. The freezing of vacant posts is a lost opportunity to appoint female employees. Due to the pandemic, the entity had to find new ways of operation, investing in new technology for live streaming. The pandemic triggered innovation and creativity on how work had to be undertaken and structured, organisations remained connected during lockdown regulations, paving new ways of connecting and working (Dean & Campbell, 2020). Participants also acknowledged that flexible hours worked very well during the pandemic, and this should be the norm for the future to accommodate the greater domestic and societal roles female still must play. This will help female technicians find time for their families and care for their children, while simultaneously empowering them to be more efficient in their work.

## **6 Recommendations of the Study**

### **6.1 *Recommendations for Future Policy***

The research findings identified, amongst others, a lack of knowledge of stagecraft as a career option. This was partly because the arts education curriculum does not include stagecraft. A curriculum review of arts education is recommended, from primary school to tertiary level. This will ensure exposure for the youth to stagecraft, both males and females, and ensure an adequate supply of stage technicians where

the industry can get the best-trained females and qualified technicians. There is a need to influence the policy in departments of basic and higher education regarding stagecraft. The National Department of Basic Education has already added into their curriculum “robotics” and “coding” to cater for future fourth industrial revolution needs, but there is no zeal and national interest for stagecraft to be introduced to students at an elementary level. It is recommended that leadership in the industry must influence the policy of both basic and higher education for their curriculum to cater for stagecraft.

Knowing that government approval processes are affected by bureaucratic red tape, whilst pushing for a policy review of the curriculum on arts education, it is recommended that the performing arts entities join hands and invest in the setting up of their accredited school of stagecraft and arts administration. They have available to them experienced current employees and retired specialists who can be facilitators in the academy.

The findings of the research also highlighted limited career growth for technicians. It is recommended that a policy on a career path and career planning be developed. A career path for technicians, just as in the cases of scientists in laboratories, must be developed and implemented. Technicians who run the core of the business must feel that they are growing and be remunerated accordingly. Profiling of excelling female technicians who must act as mentors to other junior female technicians must be done through internal and external platforms. This will not only boost the female technician’s confidence but also open the public’s eyes to this almost unknown yet satisfying profession.

## ***6.2 Recommendations for Future Research***

This research was conducted within one entity in the performing arts industry, which may reduce generalisability. To influence policy and garner adequate funding to support the establishment of an arts academy by the performing arts entities, future research on the same subject with all performing arts entities in South Africa is highly recommended.

Whilst they have a national and international footprint in their productions, performing arts entities are all regionally located. A study across all entities, although they number only a few, would give a more credible picture of the extent of the problem and the recommendation would be representative of all, thus increasing the likelihood of buy-in from the relevant key national departments. Further, a quantitative study with a larger sample should be conducted. This would increase the ability to make comparisons and be of value to the academic field, the performing arts industry, and the national transformation agenda.

## 7 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate female representation around the technical roles within a performing arts entity. The project worked to gain insights through employing a qualitative case study approach, using semi-structured interviews, and focusing on a mixed audience of the organisation. The researchers achieved the research objectives and was satisfied that the research questions were answered to the satisfaction of the foci of the study. Overall, the findings of this research demonstrate several discrepancies that still exist regarding women empowerment in the arts sector, despite many decades (over a century) of the promulgation of this movement. Whilst the study answered the research objectives and questions, the researchers simultaneously uncovered emergent themes which may be useful for policymakers and leaders within the organisation, towards the successful and sustainable empowerment of women in the arts industry. It was found to be prevalent among participants that there was unequal female representation in technical roles within the specific arts organisation explored in the study. Leadership can use these findings in line with new policies to be instrumental in bringing the desired transformational change in the organisation's demographics and meeting the employment equity requirements.

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# The Experiences of Women in Academic Leadership Positions in Cross-cultural Contexts in South Africa



Kathryn Anne Nel and Saraswathie Govender

**Abstract** Women face many challenges in the higher education sector in South Africa. They have to ‘fight’ against male patriarchy, subtle and explicit racism, non-support by their female peers and academic jealousy in order to find any recognition at all. Women academics in leadership roles are often defined as ‘overly aggressive’ or having personalities not suited to leadership. As a result, they end up having to overcome these perceptions on a daily basis. This is exhausting and often leads to burnout, giving up on promotional opportunities and/or them leaving academe for the private sector. Empowerment of women in institutions of higher learning is often at the forefront of senate and faculty discussions. In this regard, many workshops and ‘upskilling opportunities’ are provided to them. However, these can be described, as evidenced by the struggle women have in claiming their place in academe, as ‘paying lip service’ to gender equity. The preliminary research had a qualitative approach using descriptive phenomenology underpinned by positive psychology, with a purposive sample of 8 women of colour who are academics in leadership roles. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse semi-structured interview questionnaires with these women. The aim of the research was to show how they used their experiences in a positive way in their leadership roles in academe. Themes and sub-themes identified were: (1) Patriarchal context; (2) Lack of institutional will; sub-theme: 2.1 Pressures on women’s leadership roles; sub-theme: 2.2 Challenges to women’s leadership; Theme 3: Perceived leadership styles of participants and Theme 4: Emotions associated with leadership roles. Recommendations, arising out of the research included institutions reflecting on their policy and process in terms of gender equity and the Department of Education for Higher Learning to conduct audits in institutions on appointments and promotions to ensure gender equity, racism and nepotism did not play a part in the process.

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**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Academic · Gender · Leadership styles · Patriarchy · Racism

## 1 Introduction

Globally, the world of academe has traditionally been a patriarchal one and women have to surmount many challenges to rise into positions of leadership. Carbajal (2018) states that men do not advocate for women to reach positions of leadership and lack any empathy with helping them rise through the ranks. Additionally, he notes that patriarchy in many Christian societies' is reinforced by biblical teachings which imply that men are superior to women. It is apparent that the leadership ascendancy of women is underpinned by historic and social limitations that are ingrained in political and institutional contexts (Crawford & Windsor, 2021). As a result, women are disadvantaged and, if they have children, there is further bias against them as this is seen to 'interrupt' their ability to focus on their academic role. Additionally, women of colour incur more bias and drawbacks. Moreover, the authors suggest that men do not suffer any consequences if they have children, and need to look after them, in fact they are often lauded as being 'Good Fathers.' Gizem et al. (2017) indicate that men and women are not regarded equally in an educational environment. They infer that this is because of deeply ingrained social gender roles and behaviours which still exist in contemporary society. Furthermore, academic structures either subtly or openly adhere to a patriarchal culture which is deeply embedded in the societal psyche.

According to Seale et al. (2021), in South Africa, and Africa there are major challenges to women's ability to rise to positions of leadership because of embedded societal patriarchy. Moreover, they postulate that if women are to rise to 'top' academic leadership positions society has to change.

“[from] patriarchal hegemony and shift management discourse and culture to a pluralistic leadership culture where transformational leadership becomes the norm and praxis (p.1).”

The researchers decided to conduct research in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo Provinces in South Africa amongst a group of upwardly mobile academic women in order to find out what their experiences were in rising to leadership positions in academe. The research was undertaken as a reading of literature pertaining to the topic indicated there is an under-representation of women in leadership roles in academe (Tshipani, 2021). The research approach was qualitative in nature, with a phenomenological research design which allowed researchers to gain in-depth data on the topic.

## **2 Challenges to Women Ascending into Leadership Roles in Academe**

In the following paragraphs the authors briefly document identified challenges to women rising in leadership roles in the academic milieu. These can be barriers that are structural in nature for instance, patriarchy and gendered social roles and expected norms. The institutional mindset in academe still confers more credibility and often higher salaries on males in leadership roles than females. This occurs even though globally women outnumber men in gaining degrees (Bartel, 2018). Individual mindsets can also act as a barrier to women rising to leadership in academe for instance, administrators in charge of hiring staff often perceive women as ‘care-givers’ first and workers second. This type of unconscious gender bias tends to lead them into preferring male candidates as they do not have maternity leave and are usually not the ones who stay at home when a child is sick (Rainers, 2021).

### ***2.1 Institutional Bias***

Shepherd (2017) reports that although there have been many attempts to change the diversity of people in leadership roles in academe there is still a substantial gender discrepancy. This is related to structural factors such as conservatism within institutional structures. Moreover, attempts to provide more gender equality with policies or other interventions is unlikely to have success until deep-seated structural issues are changed. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2017) suggests that in some professions men are more likely to be given access to resources than women, in the same roles, which is known as performance bias.

According to a report by various stakeholders in the United States of America (National Academy of Sciences (US); Institute of Medicine (US) & Committee on Maximising the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering, 2007), institutional bias is also based on the belief that academic staff will be fully committed to their workplace and family is second to that. Furthermore, that this notion is increasingly outdated for all genders but is deeply rooted in institutional memory.

Yousaf and Schmiede (2017) contend that although most institutions have gender committees and policies women are still under-represented in all parts of academe. They assert that at management level the stereotype of the successful strong manager, who is assertive and competent, is still masculine. Additionally, it is noted that these stereotypes are formed in childhood through socialisation processes. The dominant male is expected to go out and work, and the submissive female is more likely to stay at home as a caregiver. These gendered role stereotypes are problematic as they are entrenched in the minds of individuals responsible for hiring staff at academic institutions. Other barriers included lack of opportunity networks, lack of help or support at home and cultural stereotypes. Another, more worrying issue was



that sexual harassment in the workplace impedes women on their quest to higher positions in academe. This is supported by Rainers (2021) who reports that women are at continually risk of sexual harassment which impedes progress in their careers. The author states that in the USA up to 70% of women face sexual harassment during their careers and the 75% who report it face some form of retaliation.

The researchers contend that gender and racial bias are connected in many ways which is seen through the preference of many employers in academe to prefer a specific gender and race over another. This could be a form of unconscious bias that is inherent to all cultures based their socialisation, cultural background and learned behaviours. In terms of gender and race bias pay is problematic as in South Africa the pay gap between men and women is between 23% and 35% (Mahamba, 2022).

Gender and racial bias are experienced by female academics in the way men behave towards them. According to Rainers (2021), men interrupt women when they are speaking more than a third of the time which means that they are not heard. Furthermore, if the woman is 'heard' anything she says is likely to be ignored. This has led to what is commonly referred to as the intangible 'Glass Ceiling.' This means that a woman can see top leadership roles but cannot break through as these jobs are 'reserved' for males.

Patriarchy is the dominant paradigm in South African academic institutions. The researchers, as females within academe can attest to that. This sentiment is supported in research by Dlamini and Adams (2014) who found that patriarchy impacts on the upward mobility of female academics.

[Women] experienced male supremacy, disempowerment, and disrespect of womenfolk. Another finding is that patriarchy impacts on their upward mobility and deprives them of promotions they deserve. The participants also felt that the reigning patriarchal environment does not only impact on their academic output but also on their intellectual and emotional well-being and their person (p. 121).

## ***2.2 Woman Leaders and Family Responsibility***

Academic leadership positions held by women activate an array of interrelated complications, prejudices and challenges which affect their private lives and professional roles. Female academics experience additional constraints during pregnancy and their work-life balance becomes a more serious concern when they reach executive positions (Rainers, 2021). According to Shava and Chasokela (2021), cultural and social barriers pose formidable barriers to woman in academic leadership positions. Rainers (2021) concurs and notes that women often do not get support from male academics and from the institutions they work for (Rainers, 2021).

Bias against women academics who have, or want to have, families is known as the 'maternal wall' and stops women progressing as they are often not recognised, by the institutions, as being on a fast-paced career track to a leadership role. As women fear their careers will be put on hold, they are less likely to have children or wait until

they have achieved their academic leadership goals (National Academy of Sciences (US); Institute of Medicine (US) & Committee on Maximising the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering, 2007),

Being a woman leader in higher education poses many challenges as many studies have reported resistance or limited support from parents, spouses, and children (Flower, 2019). As most women are still caregivers in their families there is no doubt that they have many challenges in their professional lives which escalate after motherhood. Lewis (2017) notes that the disadvantages experienced in the professional lives of women are due to gender prejudice. Shava and Chasokela (2021) report how women of colour in academic leadership roles feel an internal (psychological) division between family and work. Their experiences illustrate the ways in which women have to sacrifice family and community commitments in order to pursue academic leadership. The researchers contend that achieving and sustaining a balance between a career and family life represents a challenge for women throughout their careers.

### ***2.3 Women Academic Leaders and Well-being***

Although women have higher life expectancies than men, they are also known to be more affected by stressors (Mayor, 2015, p.1). This is known as the “female–male health survival paradox.” This infers that female gender roles impact negatively on women’s health as compared to gendered male roles. As a result, men are at an advantage in terms of their overall health and well-being. Additionally, women have higher levels of mental health problems than their male counterparts when exposed to multiple daily stressors (Seedat et al., 2009). These differences cause them to have more time off work than their male colleagues (Case & Paxson, 2005). According to Mayor (2015), traditional socialisation norms give men an advantage, not only in terms of power and financial resources but also in overall better health. The researchers suggest that this is because of patriarchal power, which is the overarching paradigm in contemporary society. As Mayor (2015) so eloquently states (p.4)

Socialization, particularly through gender roles and gender traits, has been related to the stress process, the experience of stress, and to the health of individuals. . . The literature reviewed here shows that masculinity is beneficial for health.

Young et al. (2017) looked at women and well-being in academe and found that they often became unwell when trying to balance the life-work mix. These authors suggest that institutions must ensure that leadership and promotion pathways are clarified, and that job tasks and demands be made clear to women at the outset of their careers in academe. This, they assert, would help women in academe in their overall well-being. Black women, in the workplace are also more prone to anxiety and depression because of racial stressors particularly if they are from underprivileged families (Williams, 2018).

Women who work in the medical field in an academic environment struggle to get past the so called ‘glass-ceiling.’ Fundamentally, it is still very difficult for them to overcome deeply entrenched subtle and overt gender bias in the medical profession. It is postulated that one of the reasons for lack of progress in the field of women’s health is their lack of prominence in leadership positions in academic medicine (Geller et al., 2018).

### **3 Leadership Styles and Theories**

Martin (2022, p.1) recommends that women should “embrace their natural leadership styles.” Women, the author suggests, have inherent qualities such as empathy and compassion (Löffler, 2023) which allows them to view all parts of their lives as a whole, unlike men who compartmentalise their lives into work, home, and leisure (Martin, 2022). This makes women exceptional leaders. Consequently, the researchers considered it necessary to present a brief description of Leadership styles that are prominent in the literature and the theories that underpin them.

#### ***3.1 Leadership Theories***

##### **3.1.1 Trait Theories**

These theories looked at the characteristics or traits of leaders which include the ability to motivate people and adapt to situations (Johnston, 2022). The researchers suggest that an example of this style is charismatic leadership here one can think of Michelle Obama, the wife of President Obama of the USA. She was a lawyer who wanted to support her husband in his presidential aspirations. However, she later became known for her charismatic style of leadership and advocated for women in different areas of life as well as being a role model for them. Her influence on women in the USA is still recognised (National Archives, 2018).

##### **3.1.2 Behavioural Theories**

This type of leadership theory focuses not on a leader’s behaviours. The emphasis is on a leader whose behaviours are geared towards specific aims. These leaders communicate and delegate well. These are often not inherent but learned behaviours (Johnston, 2022). An example of this type of approach is an authoritarian/autocratic leadership style where the leader takes all decisions based on their own beliefs and rarely take the advice of others. The researchers assert that this type of leadership style is exemplified by the late English prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. It can be successful, particularly in times of conflict, but disastrous in others. In the

aforementioned case Mrs. Thatcher had little empathy with mine-workers and the poverty their families experienced when she was instrumental in destroying the coal industry in the United Kingdom.

### **3.1.3 Contingency Theories**

In this type of theory leadership develops in specific circumstances. The leader should have the respect of the workforce or followers however, s/he must have a clear vision, aim and objectives. They establish their leadership by demonstrating that they are able to take the ‘reins of power’ by setting sustainable and achievable goals (Johnston, 2022). This type of leader, the researchers propose, is embodied in Kamala Harris, the USA Vice-President. She gained the nomination through the Democratic Party and has since shown she is able to take on the ‘mantle of power.’

### **3.1.4 Transformational Theories**

According to Johnston (2022), these theories are based on leaders who try to inspire and motivate their workforce by ‘appealing to their better nature.’ These leaders have strong ethical and moral values which they want their workforce to adopt. They have the ability to lead by example. The researchers contend that an example of this type of leader is Oprah Winfrey who has inspired thousands of women of colour to become leaders in their own field.

## **3.2 Leadership Styles**

### **3.2.1 Authoritarian/Autocratic Leadership**

An authoritarian leadership style is characterised by a leader who dictates policies and procedures as well as decides what goals are to be achieved (Zhang & Xie, 2017).

### **3.2.2 Participative Leadership**

According to Al-Ruweithi (2018), in this type of leadership style, the team’s input is considered during the decision-making process, but the decision is ultimately made by the leader (Haselhuhn et al., 2017).

### **3.2.3 Transactional Leadership**

According to Cherry (2020a, b), transactional leadership places the emphasis on ‘doing’ and is often found in large, bureaucratic organisations. These leaders work within organisational rules are relatively simple this might work well but when confronted with diverse issues this type of leader can struggle.

### **3.2.4 Transformational Leadership**

This style of leadership was introduced in the mid-twentieth Century. The transformational leader motivates his employees in an inspirational manner in order to make positive changes in an organisational setting. This helps improve morale and also leads to employees offering their ideas, which may be innovative (Burns, 1978).

### **3.2.5 Laissez-Faire (Delegative) Leadership**

According to Cherry (2020a, b), this style is often referred to as one that is ‘hands off.’ Employees have to make many decisions themselves and usually set their own goals. This type of leader encourages employees to try and resolve any problems they have before seeking help.

### **3.2.6 Charismatic Leadership**

This leader is one that uses their charisma, eloquence, and excellent communications skills to motivate and influence their employees. They have good ‘people skills’ and are able to make connections with their employees. This type of leader can also lack boundaries (David, 2021).

### **3.2.7 Eclectic Leadership**

Fundamentally, Johnston (2022) suggests that this type of leader does not use one style of leadership. They are open to different visions of leadership which allows for some spontaneity. It also allows the leader to develop a mixture of styles which is natural to them.

## **4 Research Method for the Preliminary Study**

The research approach used in this study was qualitative in nature. The researchers followed a phenomenological method as they wanted to get an in-depth account of participants experience of academic leadership.

## 4.1 *Participants and Setting*

South Africa has been referred to as the ‘rainbow nation’ because of the diverse population groups which have distinctive cultures. The population is identified through different racial demographics namely: Black, White, Indian/Asian, and Coloured. In this research cross-cultural contexts refers to the women participants in terms of their racial demographic and their different cultural groupings. There were 8 participants who took part in the research 4 were Black (2 Zulu’s and 2 Pedi’s), 2 Coloured (mixed-race which has a unique cultural identity) and 2 Indian (1 Hindu and 1 Buddhist).

The participants all worked in different academic institutions in Mpumalanga, Gauteng and Limpopo Provinces, South Africa which are all diverse in terms of their racial and cultural mix. The women were all in higher-level leadership positions, which are not identified, as this may pose a breach to confidentiality. There are very few women in academic leadership positions in universities in the designated provinces. As a result, participants positions, race and cultural identity were not identified in their responses to ensure their confidentiality. Participants were numbered from 1–8 to maintain their anonymity. They were aged from 29 to 55 years.

## 4.2 *Research design*

A descriptive phenomenological research design was used in the research. Tuohy et al. (2013, p.18) report that in this type of research the objectives are to, “describe, understand and interpret participants experiences.” This approach is aimed at clarifying and understanding the fundamental meaning of what is being researched from the point of view of those who are immediately involved in it (Giorgio et al., 2017). These authors state that:

“With descriptive approaches one tries to describe the experiences being lived through very carefully and once the raw data has been obtained, a thorough phenomenological psychological analysis of the data takes place within the perspective of the phenomenological psychological reduction (p. 180).”

Moreover, the focus of descriptive phenomenology is for researchers to understand people’s realities in their own environment. Phenomenological reduction means that a researcher needs to ‘strip’ away any existing perceptions so that the truth of any phenomena is revealed (Giorgio et al., 2017).

For this reason, the researchers considered the design appropriate as they wanted to understand the experiences that the participants had as women academic leaders and to understand the meaning, they attributed to them.

### **4.3 Instruments**

The researchers constructed a semi-structured interview guide with open ended questions after a reading of the literature pertaining to women in academe. Questionnaires were piloted on a group of 4 academic women. These questionnaires did not form part of the completed research. Some of the questions, on this draft interview schedule, were rewritten as they were either ambiguous, or did not glean enough in-depth information.

As a result of high levels of Covid-19 infection at the time of the research, and loadshedding (scheduled electrical blackouts in South Africa), the researchers decided to email the questionnaires to participants and followed up with phone calls if clarification, or any probing, was required. Two follow up calls were required for this purpose. Questions such as: “Please tell us about your experiences as a woman leader in academe?” and “What behaviours do you use when acting as a leader in academe, please describe them to us?” were asked. The last question asked participants to: “Describe any other experiences that you think are relevant to your current position?” This question was added so that they could freely describe any challenges related to experiences that they had endured, felt, or suffered in their quest for academic leadership roles. Participants were also provided with a summary of leadership styles and asked: “What kind of leadership style do you think you have? Can you please describe it to us?” The researchers considered this information pertinent to the study as the participants style of leadership impacts on how they are perceived by others in academe.

### **4.4 Sampling Technique**

A purposive sample of 8 women of colour who work in academic and clinical leadership roles were recruited. The researchers for this study, are women who work in academe thus we were able to draw on colleagues and peers in various institutions.

### **4.5 Research Questions**

The overall research question was:

“How do women, who are leaders in their field, experience their academic environment?”

### 4.5.1 Objectives

There were three objectives related to the overall research question.

1. "Do women in leadership roles experience mental well-being?"
2. "How do women perceive their style of leadership?"
3. "What are the challenges facing women in academe in South African institutions of higher learning?"

## 4.6 Process

The study was a preliminary one undertaken to help us gather contextual information on the topic and to establish if there is a need for a larger mixed-methods study. Emails, with the questionnaire attached, were sent to 20 women, in different institutions of higher learning in Mpumalanga, Limpopo and Gauteng Provinces, South Africa. The questionnaires took approximately 30 min to complete. The participants were all leaders in specific fields and/or on higher level committees in positions that are recognised as leadership roles. Eight women responded and they were recruited for the initial study. All ethical procedures namely informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity as well as the right to withdraw from the study at any time were followed.

The researchers followed Shenton's (2004) notions to ensure credibility in qualitative research. Firstly, the researchers carried out checks to find out if the data was credible. Participants were sent copies of the interpretations and were asked to check the meaning. Coherence was guaranteed by making sure the data was integrated and establishing a link between themes. The researchers also had many meetings to discuss the meanings and interpretations that emerged out of the data base. Bias was minimised by not making any judgements about the contents of the data which involved putting aside any pre-conceived ideas (this is known as bracketing).

## 4.7 Data Analysis

Data were collected by the use of an open-ended question interview schedule. The participants wrote down their experiences which we analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 stage process for data analysis was used to carry out the analysis namely (1) Familiarisation with the data; (2) Generating initial codes out of the data; (3) Generating themes; (4) Reviewing themes and potential themes; (5) Defining and naming each theme and/or sub-theme and (6) Producing the research report/chapter.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the data. In doing this the researchers played a dynamic role in knowledge



production (Braun et al., 2019). They familiarised themselves with the data and coded it according to the meanings that were found which were reinforced by their own knowledge base. This is a form of reflective analysis in which theoretical assumptions about the analysis, as well as the researchers' combined skills and resources (Byrne, 2021), are used in order to accomplish a measured and creative interpretation. The researchers checked interpretations and overall sense of the data by engaging in a reflective and considered process which was collaborative in nature. Then they followed the process of coding followed by the development of themes which emerged out of the data in a fluid and natural progression. This helped find patterns in the data that helped the researchers organise codes and understand meaning (Braun et al., 2019). In this case researchers decided to use a descriptive phenomenological method because it can be:

“Adapted to increasingly challenging phenomena and research topics. The enduring nature of this method gives every indication that it will continue to play a significant and lasting role in the accelerating diversification of methodologies we are witnessing in psychology today (Giorgio et al., 2017).”

The positive psychology tenets of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, relationships, meaning and accomplishment or PERMA (Seligman, 2018) were also used as indicators of well-being in the participants. Although no scales were used and completed by participants in this regard, we decided to use the tenets in an innovative manner. Researchers analysed the responses of the participants and inferred subjective aspects of their well-being out of them.

## 5 Results of the Study, Analysis, and Discussion

The researchers carried out a detailed analysis of the transcripts and 4 themes and 2 sub-themes were identified. Verbatim samples of participants responses are provided to support each theme and sub-theme. These themes narrate the challenges that the participants have experienced during their rise in academe to leadership roles. There is some overlap between themes and sub-themes which is inevitable owing to the nature of the topic. Nonetheless, they are delineated as far as possible and can all stand alone. The researchers provide the participants responses that support the theme first followed by a descriptive analysis using RTA and a short discussion. The concepts of positive psychology (PERMA) were also used to augment the interpretations in theme 4.

### **Theme 1: Patriarchal Context and the Mental Well-Being of Women in Academic Leadership Roles**

“It is a very sad situation we find ourselves in. If we speak, we are told we are too noisy and if we say nothing, we are told we are too quiet [by men]. In meetings men speak all the time but they do not like women contradicting them or putting another point forward, in fact they do not listen. Later though, in that same meeting a man will say what I have said and suddenly it

is a good idea. Until my institution is serious about gender equity, I don't think much will change." (Participant 1)

"Gender differences. In my opinion this is due to out-dated cultural beliefs and values. Institutional culture also tends to be dominated by men as do selection processes." (Participant 2)

"Patriarchy and incompetent men who have their positions through nepotism and the fact that they support the person who wanted them appointed. This also goes to women who are appointed because they do what they are told and do not cause controversies." (Participant 8)

"Gender bias and racial stereotypes work against us. You see many employers' think that a man who is a bully is being assertive. When a woman tries to be assertive [not a bully] she is called aggressive." (Participant 5)

"Gender discrimination, lack of trust in women and there is also an element of racism here. I think black women are often not given top leadership roles in favour of white or Indian women." (Participant 3)

It is clear from the results of our study that the patriarchal context of institutions in South Africa promote conservative, patriarchal values. These values overlap with both gender, racial bias, and the mental health of women for instance, "*If we speak, we are told we are too noisy and if we say nothing, we are told we are too quiet.*" This finding is supported by Rainers (2021) who noted that men often interrupt or ignore their female colleagues. Racism was noted by one participant who noted that, "*I think black women are often not given leadership roles in favour of white or Indian women.*" This may be an unconscious bias related to stereotypes embedded in many South Africans psyche because of apartheid. Essentially, all race groups are seen as superior to blacks. Conversely, it may be a conscious decision related to racism which still exists in South Africa, but which is not properly addressed at institutional levels. The patriarchal environment in institutions of higher education in the country is reflected in the descriptions of participants, "*patriarchy and incompetent men,*" and "*gender discrimination, lack of trust in women and there is also an element of racism here.*" Dlamini and Adams (2014) also found that patriarchy and male supremacy exist in academic institutions in the country which impacts negatively on the upward progression of women academics. The researchers concur with these sentiments which were also echoed through the voices of the participants. Additionally, it is noted that the overall mental health and psychological well-being of women, particularly those of colour, is negatively impacted by racism, stereotyping, and gender-bias which can lead them to becoming anxious and depressed (Williams, 2018).

## **Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Will**

The following responses underpin this theme which reflects the fact that although institutions in South African have many policies to put women on an equal footing with men. The researchers contend that these are not enough to ensure a 'level playing field.'

"Institutions have a lack of real interest in women gaining leadership roles. They are often only appointed to fill quotes, so they are not taken seriously." (Participant 8)

“One of the barriers to women going forward in institutions is that universities do not give enough time and support to them. They don’t provide leadership workshops focusing on women.” (Participant 7)

“Institutional memory where old male professors are still ‘revered’ for their experience. There is lack of institutional will generally in South Africa, so the status quo remains, because it is easier that way!” (Participant 8)

“Most women in academic leadership experience challenges embedded within institutional structures and systems which are related to lack of transformative change.” (Participant 4)

“We face challenges such as lack of administrative support. When we take on leadership roles people [Human Resources and other administrators] do not provide us with proper support and many processes are unclear.” (Participant 1)

The women’s voices are shared in stating that one of the major challenges to women rising and performing well in academic leadership roles is lack of institutional will. They are still stuck in institutions that are steeped in the institutional memory of the older and thus supposedly ‘wise’ male academics who are ‘*revered*.’ This is due to structural issues such as the conservative nature of institutions of higher learning (Shepherd, 2017). If there is no institutional will, which must come from the top, there is not likely to be any real change in gender equity in South African institutions. It also appears that women leaders in academe are not well supported by Human Resources and other administrative departments as they do ‘*not provide proper support*.’ This supports the ILOs (2017) statement that men are given better access to support services and other resources than women. The challenges faced because of lack of institutional support thus make things difficult for women in leadership roles even though many institutions have gender equity committees (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017).

### **Sub-theme 2.1 Pressures on Women’s Leadership Roles**

“Lack of respect. We as women do not get the respect men do and as a result, we sometimes do not feel motivated to perform well in our positions.” (Participant 7)

“There are few women in academe to network with thus our networking opportunities are small. Men prefer not to network with us but other men.” (Participant 6)

“Lack of teamwork in academe. For me, it seems that although I try to motivate departments to work together, they are unwilling to do so. Most of the men say that they want to keep their work from being stolen and they do not trust some of the other people . . . and by this they mean women academics.” (Participant 5)

“The so-called boys club. That is when men stick together and do not include us women.” (Participant 8)

This sub-theme encompasses lack of respect for women. This is seen through male academics’ lack of co-operation “*men stick together*” and lack of motivation to network with women as they prefer to network with “*other men*.” Networking opportunities are poor for women in academe which is supported by research by Yousaf and Schmiede (2017) which notes that women have lack of opportunity in finding networks which support them in their quest to perform well in leadership roles. The “*boys club*” is also an acknowledgment of lack of networking

opportunities and overlaps with the patriarchal context in which women leaders find themselves. The term “*boys club*” was historically used for any organisation or structure that excluded women and people of colour. However, in South Africa it increasingly means white and black males who exclude women and other ethnic groups. There is no doubt that the experiences of the participants are echoed by others, the researchers, as women academics, can attest to that.

### **Sub-theme 2.2: Challenges to Women’s Leadership Roles**

“I have found, through the years, that we [women] are given much higher workloads than our male counterparts. This makes us very stressed, and we get burnt out. It is difficult to say ‘no’ because we are not ‘asked’ if we can do something but ‘told’.” (Participant 5)

“When I first joined the institution there was a colleague who kept making inappropriate remarks—he would come and have tea in my office. I told him I was not interested. I complained and later I was told that he said that I had propositioned him and that it was his word against mine.” (Participant 8)

“Women who do not like to see other women get leadership roles. These women are usually appointed because they do not contradict or say no to anything male peers say. It is about academic jealousy I suppose.” (Participant 4)

“Family responsibilities. We face many challenges balancing our work and family role. This has limited me in my ability to pursue leadership roles.” (Participant 6)

This sub-theme demonstrates that sexual harassment, and the bias women experience because they are still expected to be the primary caregiver to their children and extended families, exists in South African institutions. Yousaf and Schmiede (2017) note that these stereotypes are learned through socialisation and learned behaviour in childhood. Fundamentally, women are expected to take care of sick children and attend school functions and the like. We found that women in this research stated that this is a barrier which impacts on their leadership roles for instance, “*this has limited me in my ability to pursue leadership roles.*” This may well be more of a problem for black women as Shava and Chasokela (2021) report that they face an ongoing internal divide between their work and family responsibilities. Sexual harassment is another impediment to women succeeding in academic leadership for instance, “*a colleague [male] who kept making inappropriate remarks.*” Rainers (2021) reports that sexual harassment is still a problem in academic institutions. Moreover, it is likely the majority of women experience it at some point in their careers but if they report it, they face some form of retribution. In this research it was found to be a problem which is associated with the lack of institutional will to prevent it happening and the overarching paradigm of patriarchy.

### **Theme 3: Perceived Leadership Styles of Participants**

“I try to fit my style of leadership into the situation. You know, I do not think that one style of leadership can fit all situations in my institution as it is very diverse culturally. It is varied, I think I fit into the eclectic style of leadership.” (Participant 8)

“I would say that I was democratic but that I did not always have the same style. I think my style is the eclectic one.” (Participant 2)

“I have looked at the styles but think that I am not one or the other thing. It seems to me that I would follow the eclectic style of leadership.” (Participant 4)

“I try to adopt a transformational approach but sometimes I have to be more authoritarian, especially with male colleagues who do not listen to me when I adopt a more conciliatory approach. . . when I do this, they see me as weak.” (Participant 1)

“My style of leadership is Laissez-Faire as I trust my staff. I think this allows people I work with to use their creativity and get on with their jobs.” (Participant 3)

“I use the transformational style of leadership and I like to collaborate with my team. I encourage them and help them to grow in their roles. I think I also inspire them.” (Participant 5)

“My style of leadership is participatory as I feel this motivates and encourages creativity. I like to engage with my staff.” (Participant 6)

The researchers found that the leadership styles the participants perceived they had differed. It is apparent that they allowed their ‘natural’ leadership style to develop as they progressed through their academic journey. Three of the participants favoured the eclectic style of leadership. This style suggests that these women are open to change and different ideas of leadership which may well make them more flexible (Johnston, 2022) and approachable. These women, the researchers contend, are likely to lead by example. Two of the participants described their style of leadership as transformational which means they feel that they are able to motivate their colleagues and are able to build positive morale amongst their staff in order to promote meaningful change. However, one of these participants stated that she is more authoritarian when she has to be. This means that, at times, she may well dictate to staff members rather than listen to them. This may point to the fact that the participant is not secure in her leadership role. The participant who perceived that she has a laissez-faire leadership style is likely to trust her staff and lets them carry out their tasks without too much interference. She is able to delegate. Positive changes through her motivational skills. This leadership style is one that has a leader who is objective and fair in any decision-making process. Lastly, participative leadership was noted by one participant. This type of leadership style recognises a teams decision making input but ultimately the leader takes the final decision. This style is indicative of a leader who allows much discussion between team members and is very effective in academic institutions.

The participants perceived and/or adopted leadership styles, particularly the participative style, can be effective for a woman in a leadership role in an academic institution. The only one that we would not consider appropriate is the authoritarian style. It is very likely, we suggest, that this participant has observed her male colleagues using this leadership style as, in patriarchal contexts, it is common. It is a top-down, ‘do as I say’ approach with no input expected from employees. This style is not commensurate with academic freedom of expression in HEIs.

#### **Theme 4: Positive Emotions Associated with Leadership Roles**

“Sometimes I feel tired of it all, but I soldier on. If this happens, I reflect on my life and career and see how well I’ve done this makes me feel motivated again” (Participant 6)

“I face daily obstacles which make me doubt myself, but I have accomplished a lot by getting to my position in academe. I pick myself up and get on with it. When I complete tasks, I feel good.” (Participant 5)

“I struggled to get a leadership role and sometimes I have ignored the unethical conduct of my male peers which makes me feel guilty. I did not report them because I know I won’t be listened to and people who have tried have ultimately lost their jobs. It is a dilemma, but I try to engage with other members of staff in a positive way and do not make direct accusations. I support policies and procedures that are aimed at preventing unethical behaviour which is the best I can do.” (Participant 8)

“At present, I have been given a mentor who has achieved an even higher position in academic leadership than I have. This is a good thing and I feel very positive about it as this will help me when I experience any challenges.” (Participant 2)

“I feel positive about my role in academe because as a leader I am a role model for female students, and I think this serves as an inspiration for them. They see that they can do this if they work hard.” (Participant 4)

This theme looks at how women are able to find positives in their academic leadership roles which arise out of an often negative and difficult environment. Seligman (2018) refers to positive emotions related to personal engagement, perceived meaning, relationships as well as personal accomplishment to accomplishing the ‘good life’ or having positive mental well-being. Responses to questions revealed that although participants may have struggled, felt tired at facing challenges or obstacles they still described facets of this ‘good life’ or overall well-being. For instance, “*I pick myself up and get on with it*” points towards this participant’s overall engagement with her work which has a positive effect as she does not ruminate over any challenges. Another participant noted that “*sometimes I am tired of it all*” however, she takes the time to reflect on her life and accomplishments and this helps to motivate her again. Additionally, a participant is was somewhat despairing as she found it difficult to deal with the unethical behaviour of some male colleagues, “*I know I won’t be listened to.*” However, she also stated that she, “*supports staff in a positive way,*” and furthermore, “*I support policies and procedures that are aimed at preventing unethical behaviour which is the best I can do.*” This suggests that in a very negative climate she was able to use positive emotions to deal with a difficult situation. Finally, one participant stated, “*I feel positive about my role in academe. . . .as I am a role model for female students.*” This suggests that she has found meaning in her role as a leader and has positive relationships with her students.

The participants each clearly described some aspect of subjective well-being consistent with Seligman’s (2018) elements. The participants, the researchers assert, were able to continue their work as women leaders in academe because they describe aspects of positive emotionality, engagement, meaning and accomplishment in their responses.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter presented research on a topic close to the researchers' hearts namely the experiences of women in leadership roles in academe in the cross cultural and diverse context of South African higher education institutions (HEIs). The qualitative research using a descriptive, phenomenological research design revealed that patriarchy, gender bias, racism, lack of institutional will to support female academics and other challenges and influences have a negative effect on the upward mobility of these women. However, the majority (all but one) used effective and appropriate leadership styles, and all showed aspects of positive mental well-being.

## 7 Recommendations

The researchers recommend that HEIs in South Africa reflect on how they are promoting women leadership in academe. They need to look at the structural constraints imposed by years of patriarchy and determine if they are doing their best to promote gender equity. In this regard workshops and 'think tanks' should take place. University management should also incorporate revamped policies and strategic plans that counteract bias against women in hiring, promotions and how they are treated.

### 7.1 *Need for Future Research*

A mixed methods study is suggested covering all HEIs in South Africa. The quantitative section should have a randomised sample so that results can be generalised. The rationale for having this kind of study is that unless a broad understanding of the needs and challenges of women in academe are fully understood little progress will be made in terms of their upward progression.

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# Women Leadership in the Transcontinental Country: A Study in Turkey



Ummugulsum Gunes  and Wei-Wen Chang 

**Abstract** Today's professional environment is more diverse in terms of social, cultural, and ethnic dimensions than that in recent decades. The existing research has revealed that an organization's innovation and problem-solving capabilities benefit from diversity. With the increasing number of women in the workplace, gender, at least in part, has become a focus in organizational diversity. However, women in leadership positions, especially at lower and middle management levels, continue to be confronted with systematic microaggression and discrimination in their workplaces. Although an increasing number of societies are advancing toward gender parity in the work environment, the representation of women in senior positions remains a concern for many countries.

Research shows that leadership effectiveness is contextual and connected to sociocultural values. Historically, transcontinental countries have potential advantages in terms of transit. Such a unique status brings cultural diversity and creates various economic opportunities for the workforce. Thus, based on interview and document review, this study focuses on a transcontinental country, Turkey, and examines the challenges faced by women leaders and their strategies to change existing systems through the precedence of leadership. As an emerging market, Turkey has witnessed significant growth in its economic and social development since the early 2000s. However, according to the World Bank, similar to many other countries, the COVID-19 crisis has deepened Turkey's gender gaps and increased the risk of inequalities. The chapter discusses various challenges at the societal and organizational levels that Turkish women managers face throughout their careers. Through an examination of the challenges and strategies perceived by women leaders, this chapter thus also provides implications for the development of women's leadership in the future.

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## 1 Introduction

A review of the literature on women in professional life reveals that women's leadership has started to receive increased attention due to changes in the labor market in the last few decades (Razavi, 2016). Increasing women's labor force participation rate and creating a fairer and more inclusive economy are significant factors that define economic productivity and dynamism in a society. However, in 2020, the global gender score, based on the population-weighted average, was 68.6%, which means that there is still a 31.4% average gender gap that remains closed globally. Nevertheless, there has been improvement compared to previous years, for example, several countries are advancing toward gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2020). While this has narrowed the gender gap in the labor force, advancing their career remains a concern for women. Globally, only 27.1 percent of managers and leaders are women—a figure that has changed very little over the past 30 years, even though the percentage of women managers at lower and middle levels has increased, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO)'s 2019 Report on Gender Equality (Beghini et al., 2019). Moreover, with the impact of one of the deepest global recessions in history since WWII due to COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020), there has been an increase in the gender gap and challenges to women's advancement in several countries through a higher increase of unemployed women than men (ILO, 2020) and an inequitable division of increased domestic labor and childcare that has impacted more mothers than fathers (Carlson et al., 2020).

The Republic of Turkey is one of the few transcontinental countries in the world. The unique transcontinental status of a country arguably enables it to be a part of various international, intergovernmental political, cultural, and economic entities, which are usually organized on geographical and regional principles (Kassen, 2018). In turn, Turkey's unique location between Europe and Asia has paved the way for cultural diversity and creates various economic opportunities for its workforce. Turkey's *sui generis* sociocultural context, with a specific emphasis on the status of women in professional life, can provide new insight into this field.

This chapter, overall, seeks to uncover the experience and perception of female leaders regarding their career journey within the context of the Republic of Turkey. Through this purpose, this research sought to answer the following question: "What are the challenges Turkish women leaders face in society and organizations throughout their careers?" Thus, this research analyzes and determines the challenges that female employees have perceived in regard to being promoted to higher positions, particularly high management positions, as well as several strategies they consider crucial for remedying these challenges.

## 2 Literature Review

The literature analyzing barriers to the advancement of women employees shows that the primary issues range from subtle gender stereotypes—based on the history, culture, and policies of a broader society (glass ceiling, unconscious bias, microinequities in interpersonal treatment, well-intended but excessive and paternalistic discrimination, and gender roles) (Gentile et al., 2018; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019)—to discrimination rooted in structural characteristics such as organizational hierarchies, procedures, and practices that create divergent advantages and disadvantages for different genders (Utoft, 2020). The nature of the barriers that cause discrimination against women and minority groups has evolved, by becoming more hidden and unconscious (Ely et al., 2011), into second-generation gender bias (Eagly, 2008; Lim et al., 2021; Llorens et al., 2021). With the changing of historical and societal norms, invisible barriers have become more implicit over time (Cortina, 2008). Women employees and leaders encounter such subtle discrimination that they may not even be aware of its existence or its adverse effect on their careers. Over the past decade, studies have documented that women are significantly under-represented in management positions (Brahma et al., 2021), and recent research showed that gender stereotype still has effect on perceptions of men's and women's fit in the professional field (Boysen et al., 2021).

According to a broad survey conducted in Turkey, organizational policies and limited career opportunities are the leading reasons why women do not consider themselves high-ranking managers in their career development plans (Pwc, 2018). Even in academia, while Turkey has the highest percentage (45%) of women academicians and teachers in Europe, the EU average is 41.3 percent (Turkish Council of Higher Education [YOK], 2021), but still the percentage of women in senior positions is relatively minimal. Research shows that women struggle in a male-dominated working environment through their exclusion from decision-making processes and social and informal occasions, as well as the societal expectations of conventional gender roles during their career journey (Yıldırımış et al., 2021). Thus, the impact of organizational and social factors on women's careers is much heavier than on men's careers (O'Neil et al., 2011).

The literature is exceptionally rich in the field of gender in leadership. However, the question of why current knowledge is at odds with organizational policies and practices continues to be debated. The research regarding the solution has evolved from “fix the women” to “fix the organization,” i.e., the focus has shifted to interpersonal relationships (mentors and networks) and organizational policies and practices; more recently a “fix the environment” approach has been used, shifting focus to societal factors such as gender roles and status differences and legislative and institutional interventions (Metz & Kumra, 2019).

### 3 Method

In this study, the researcher explores the challenges that women managers in Turkey face in their professional life and their strategies to change existing systems through the precedence of leadership. Phenomenological qualitative analysis was applied, through which we aimed to “understand, explain, explore, discover and clarify situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences of a group of people” (Kumar, 2019, p. 170).

Purposeful sampling was used for discovering, understanding, and gaining insight regarding our particular topic; the sample was selected precisely to learn the most about it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) women leaders living and working in Turkey who (b) have managerial experience in the private sector of more than two years and (c) have earned their leadership position rather than acquiring it via a family business or ownership transference. With these criteria, a total of 19 Turkish women managers from various levels, including top management, senior management, and mid and entry-level, with tenure year ranging from 2 to 25, were selected. In addition, to include more comprehensive perspectives, data were collected from different companies, sectors, and industries in Turkey.

For data collection, both semistructured interviews and document reviews were used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The transcriptions were then repeatedly read and scrutinized in association with the company documents that accompanied the interviews for data analysis. The data were analyzed by using the qualitative software Atlas.ti 8.0. Both techniques, open coding and axial coding, from grounded theory were used. After data collection, the analysis started by focusing on the research question. All the codes related to the research question were gathered under the themes related to women leaders’ challenges and strategies. It led to creating the first open codes for the analysis by summarizing the phrase of the participants’ opinions, which is relevant to the study. After first step, axial coding was conducted by grouping the data under similar dimensions. Provisional classifications were repeatedly revised and refined to allow the researcher to organize the data into a well-defined final analysis state.

### 4 Findings

The data collection revealed the perceived barriers women identify as standing in their way to obtaining senior management roles based on their past experience. These gender-based leadership barriers primarily operate at the group and societal levels, which are one of the main determinants (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016) of the lack of women in management positions. It was found that almost all participants had experienced barriers in their career journeys. Although some explicitly denied the existence of such barriers, it has been deduced that they were also subject to various

challenges at the societal and organizational levels. Data analysis also revealed positive organizational changes when these barriers were challenged, which women leaders have been a part of. The female managers presented some strategies and interventions that can contribute to the advancement of women to senior management by breaking the glass ceiling.

## ***4.1 Challenges at the Societal Level***

Due to the unique transcontinental status of Turkey, the examination of women in the society exposed the impact of both Western and Eastern cultures. Despite being one of the forerunners in modern attempts regarding the equal representation of women in every sphere of society (Ugurtas, 2021), today, in Turkey, traditional sociocultural norms and attitudes about the role of women still exist (Titrek et al., 2014). This current sociocultural context ultimately continues to create particular challenges for women.

The barriers that occur at the societal level, “operating as a whole, prevent women from advancing or succeeding in leadership” (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 191). This makes it challenging for women employees to pursue higher positions, for women leaders to contribute their professional expertise and for both women and men to internalize that women leaders are natural in the working environment by associating women employees and leaders with a decreased managerial ability and less effective leadership (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

### **4.1.1 Cultural Constraints on Women’s Choices**

The dynamics of the society women live in create constraints on their educational and career choices. Most participants indicated that they feel the effect of societal restrictions on their career choices, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, Participant 7 emphasized how social coding affects and prevents women from moving upward:

After graduation, I had drawn my career path to becoming a high-level manager in the future. However, my mum talked with me and said, ‘... you will be a mother in the future and have your own family. So, come to the level of director, but not more, not a general manager, let’s say. Otherwise, you cannot start your own family if your career is located in the middle of your life.’

Regarding her present life, she was not entirely sure that not aiming too high was purely her choice, especially after becoming married. The societal barriers to women’s choices are also reflected in the recruitment and promotional processes of business life. In the following example, a participant discusses her experience in an interview for a male brand’s manager position, i.e., how the questions asked

during her interview and the interviewer's overall attitude made her question her fitness for the job as a woman:

After many technical questions, he started to ask such questions as 'Will you be able to manage a male product brand as a woman in Turkey? As a Turkish woman, will you be able to add the brand's name to your LinkedIn profile? Can you get in front of the marketing team and introduce a new product?' (P3)

Society expects the interviewer to direct such questions to a woman candidate, which creates an obstacle to women's career choices. In addition, society's expectations for women push them to choose between their career and family life, placing them in a complicated dilemma. For example, a participant stated that one of the reasons for her organization's support of her position is that she is not planning to have children in the long run (P2). Another participant indicated that in one of her previous companies, the HR team had a policy not to hire women unless they were single and did not have a child (P16).

#### 4.1.2 Gender Stereotypes

In line with society's expectation of what kind of career women should pursue, another strong macro barrier women face in their career journey are gender stereotypes, relatively fixed and oversimplified generalizations about women. Sometimes, women cannot obtain a position or assignment due to the conception of women as "the weak link in the chain which, in turn, lead[s] women to be assigned a mostly trivial chore" (P6). For example, the following woman manager stated that women's actions are labeled emotional rather than professional:

I had a slight problem with one of my woman colleagues. The feedback we received on the reflection of this issue was oriented around women having communication problems. Our supervisor warned us that if we do not want to hinder the careers of future women, we should be careful with these issues. The same problem can happen between one man, one woman, or two men. Still, when two women have a problem, it ceases to be a typical business problem and turns into a woman-to-woman communication problem. (P4)

Although participants broke through barriers and proved themselves in their leadership positions in a professional framework, they have still been subject to fixed and oversimplified generalizations about women, such as being labeled emotional rather than professional. Interestingly, some participants noted that the old-fashioned gender stereotypes toward them became reality once they had move up in the ranks. For example, one respondent expressed, "in a subordinate position, they think that's where you belong anyway, as a woman." The more women become visible in the layers of society, the greater they feel trapped in such pigeonholes.

Another stereotype toward women that was expressed by most participants is as the perception that women are a "potentially distracted gender" (P18), i.e., they could become married or pregnant at any time. One participant indicated that there is no difference between male and female employees until women have a baby. The common stereotype is that a married woman or a woman with children cannot focus

entirely on her work and is thus not as effective and efficient as her male or single women colleagues. This notion is derived from the old-fashioned understanding of gender roles in society: “men are breadwinners, women are responsible for kids and home” (P3, P7). A woman manager experienced this on her team, as one of her female team members did not receive a promotion; instead, a male colleague of hers received it, as he was getting married soon and would therefore become a breadwinner.

### 4.1.3 Leadership Perceptions

Another barrier that occurs at the societal level is associating leadership with masculinity. Participants stated that there is a common belief that men are more capable of conducting stressful jobs and assignments. One participant discussed the general atmosphere in the financial sector regarding this biased belief:

Unfortunately, there is a general belief that men in financial markets can better manage stress. Since the financial markets are subject to constant change and high customer demands, the density is too high. There is a common misconception that women may be less responsive, especially in stress management (P2).

While there is a common belief that men are more capable of performing stressful jobs, such as leadership, working under a man’s supervision can also be something people are more familiar with. With more women in power, that is, “. . .by proving the opposite with taking and creating successful examples, we can break the existing assumption” (P10), allowing women’s leadership to become standard in people’s eyes.

However, sometimes having a woman manager will not help break people’s traditional leadership perception because they categorize these women leaders separately—as women who carry male characteristics or traits. For example, their successes have been associated with masculinity via the use of terms such as “the manliest” or “randy” (P5), as if the only way a woman can be successful is to have male characteristics. Thus, it is necessary to bring more women into leadership positions and remove the masculinity that is associated with it. However, despite the ongoing need for more institutionalized interference into this process, our participants are slowly changing the mindset of people by introducing new leadership styles that emphasize communication, proving here are alternative ways and methods of leadership (P17, P10, P4).

### 4.1.4 Welfare State Implications

Aside from the participants’ experiences that have been shaped by the cultural constraints on women’s choices, gender stereotypes, and leadership perceptions, participants also mentioned welfare state policies and their implications for strengthening women’s position in professional life in the framework of societal barriers.



There are state policies to facilitate women's access to the labor force, but they are not as adequate as they were planned for increasing women's participation in leadership positions. Parental leave, an example provided by most participants, has not strengthened women's professional life but the social expectation that "women should be the one who takes care of homes and kids" (P3). From the managers' and companies' viewpoints, hiring women has become less profitable than hiring men due to specific practices, such as maternity leave or working from home (P18, P7, P2):

There is a false statement that the women who marry and give birth to a baby ultimately will experience a decrease in their performance. As long as we create a more flexible working environment, lactation rooms, flexible working hours, etc., there are absolutely no differences in their performance compared to that of their male colleagues. We even think that they are more successful in a way, because women can manage many things simultaneously. Thus, we broke this stereotype against women by giving them a chance to show themselves (P12).

## 4.2 *Challenges at the Organizational Level*

### 4.2.1 **Religious Identity**

The religious identity of participants appeared to be a reason they had been subjected to discrimination in the hierarchy of their corporate system. Religious identity has become an issue for some participants due to its visibility to others, e.g., wearing a hijab. Participant 4 indicated that women with hijabs experience discrimination during in the promotional processes not only because of their gender but also their hijab:

At the beginning of my career, wearing a religious scarf was still an unresolved issue, even in universities. At the moment, you can work in many companies without facing such a problem. However, some companies used to have a policy not to employ women with a headscarf; even though they would hire us, management kept us in less visible positions. Thus, it was harder for women like me to get a promotion despite our hard work, talent, etc. (P4).

When it is visible to others as wearing a hijab, women's religious identity is still taboo in Turkey. Regardless of the progress in the last decade, women who wear hijabs remain a minority in professional life, due to a particular blockage between them and higher-level positions or departments. For example, one participant assigned a hijabi woman into a particular position for the first time in her company's history:

No one has preferred a hijabi employee for the sales department so far, and there has been a stereotype that a woman wearing a hijab cannot do this job; on the contrary, she is currently on the right track and has a promising future in the company. There was definite discrimination against women in that regard. I am fighting with the status quo by opening the way to minority groups and proving that they can also work (P10).

#### 4.2.2 Male-dominated Organizational Culture

Overwhelmingly, male corporate culture and its norms have an adverse impact on women employees' career paths. Some participants stated that a willingness to maintain male dominance in high-level management triggers discrimination in promotion procedures based on gender:

I noticed a tendency to select males for senior and top management positions. Because the high-level management team consists of men, [its members] believe that men will be able to adapt to their world more easily. It will also be way more comfortable for them since they have to be careful regarding their attitudes and expressions if there is a women manager. For example, they cannot use slang words. They also need to pay more attention to their business travel arrangements (P15).

An intense male culture within an organization affects organizational practices by blocking women managers ascending in their careers. Moreover, several participants indicated a lack of full recognition or support for their leadership, especially after being promoted to management (P3, P7). A lack of full recognition from organizations might reflect that they value women managers' ideas less than those of their male counterparts. As one participant explained “. . .during meetings, men usually have more opportunities to express themselves, and their words, [their] ideas carry more value during the decision-making processes” (P14). Such attitudes might lead women managers to feel alienated and thus limit their impact overall. Participants also recognized that some level of tokenism was involved in their selection process for specific tasks, which can also lessen the credibility of women leaders within their organization (P4). Several respondents emphasized that the discrimination toward themselves or the undervaluing of their leadership compared to that of their male partners occur in an invisible formation. That is, such aspects are not easy to point out; they are often hidden between lines and in attitudes, making participants feel that their achievements, talents, and efforts are being undermined (P14, P4, P7, P3). As one participant asserted “. . . I cannot give a solid example but the feeling that you pull out from the sentences. There are sentences like, “well, you're beautiful, you're drawing attention anyway,” as if all my educational background, work experience, and achievements are for nothing” (P10). This is a well-known but unwritten reality among women.

Male gatekeeping, i.e., men's control of women's access to specific departments and leadership positions and the boundaries of their leadership, occurs in organizations due to high male-dominant culture. One participant, for example, indicated that no matter how well she performs her job, there are still particular departments, such as treasury or credit, where she cannot pursue a career because their managers keep their gates open only for male employees (P4). Male solidarity in professional life, moreover, is evident when considering the ratio of men at the management level, an impactful factor for creating obstacles to women: “. . .when we come together in different sectors with different customers, I have noticed that men help each other more, referring one another for job changes, promotions, providing more information flow, etc.” (P19).

### 4.2.3 Lack of Mentorship and Networks

One of the most prominent women's workplace barriers is a lack of support and mentoring, especially when women receive less mentoring than their male counterparts. One participant, for example, stated that in Turkey, there is "in-group favoritism, where men mostly mentor other men, referring [other men] to job changes and promotion, and providing information flow" (P19). Moreover, having limited access to such an informal network was defined as an existing problem in women's career advancement (P15).

Several respondents felt they had been ostracized from informal communication networks because of male in-group favoritism. One of them emphasized how women can quickly find themselves outside of such networks, mainly social ones, since they are not usually invited to, for example, soccer-related events or relevant conversations and how this exclusion was not only a social but a workplace networking concern, as such networks could possibly open paths to career opportunities within the company (P4).

### 4.2.4 Contradiction in Positive Discrimination Implications (CPDI)

Regarding the practices applied within the framework of positive discrimination, most respondents felt that these had failed to address the roots of the real problem, such as how parental leave had become a tradeoff for women:

According to my observations, some positive discrimination practices are imposed today to strengthen women's position in professional life; however, unfortunately, I can see that the dynamics that create the necessity for positive discrimination's implications still exist. Let's look at the issue of maternity leave; even the decision of a woman to give birth is a tradeoff in Turkey right now (P7).

In addition to such inefficient positive discrimination practices, a novel type of barrier has been observed that causes an increase in gender stereotypes by imposing ideas such as "women are weak," "women are naive," or "women need protection" (P15), which have particular implications. One respondent indicated that this sort of practice serves only to prevent women's visibility in the hierarchy of a corporate system by reputedly "protecting women" (P6).

## 4.3 *Strategies at the Societal Level*

In addition to all the challenges that women face in their professional career, the research data also revealed a rise in public awareness concerning the struggles of women during their professional life and the positive relevant changes in their organizations. Our research participants noted that there are still gender stereotypes; however, recently, they have observed a new period where "gender inequality is

seriously noticed in many areas, including working conditions, payments, promotion processes, and other unequal practices, by all the levels of society, and voices are raised about it” (P2). This transformation within society has also empowered women’s confidence to stand against inequality: “Now, women can put these issues on the table to convey them to high management. Now, they can share more with their close network, their friends, and their families” (P2). As one of the respondents stated, women have come so far that “it is hard to put women back in the box after all those achievements collected over the years” (P5).

Moreover, participants emphasized that welfare state policies, such as parental leave and positive discrimination, are not strengthening women’s position in professional life, especially in higher positions, but rather the old-fashioned understanding of gender roles in every sphere of society. This has defined women, in the perception of others, as less productive, more easily distracted, and thus riskier, particularly from the perspective of organizations. Therefore, Turkey should adapt progressive policies to foster gender equality in the labor market by ensuring equal family responsibilities between parents. This would, moreover, facilitate disrupting the traditional social expectations of and norms regarding women that continue to prevail in Turkish society.

#### ***4.4 Strategies at the Organizational Level***

The respondents in this research and some of their organizations have utilized several strategies to create change, at least within their companies, to ensure women’s career advancement. Our participants are paving the way for transforming organizational culture and practices by paying extra attention to ensuring that women and men have equal access to opportunities for promotion to prevent discrimination: “When we have external training, I set teams that consist of equal numbers of men and women, depending on performance and capabilities. If we give women equal chances, they can manage to reach the top” (P11). Providing equal opportunities for women employees to prove themselves also paves the way for overcoming biases against women, e.g., that men are more capable of conducting stressful jobs such as a leadership position. Working under a woman’s supervision can therefore become something that people are more familiar with. With more women in power, thus “. . .proving the opposite by taking and creating successful examples, we can break the existing assumption” (P10), making women’s leadership standard in people’s eyes.

Another strategy implemented by our participants is building relationships with women employees to help them express themselves while supporting them through mentorship, similar to men’s in-group favoritism. Since men mostly mentor other men and often refer only other men to job changes and promotions, the provision of such information flow has been used by several participants to break the negative effect of a male organizational culture. For example, since participant 13 had received support from her manager in her career advancement, she supported

women as much as she could: “While I was trying to level up in my career, my manager supported me a lot to make sure to open my way to promotion. I also supported, as much as I could, everyone who made an effort to rise to keep them from experiencing what I went through” (P13).

In addition to such efforts by women leaders, several relevant practices have been institutionalized by organizations, such as having clearly defined policies denouncing discrimination, promoting equality, diversity and inclusion committees, constructing separate entities focusing on helping and supporting women employees concerning motherhood and birth processes, and even creating company kindergartens. For example, one company with specific policies and programs to ensure equality in every layer of its organization has improved the rates of women’s leadership impressively. In this particular company, the percentage of women in leadership positions rose from 37% to 54%. Similarly, the percentage of women among its board members increased enormously in the last decade, from 21% to 58%.

## 5 Discussion

This study has identified major challenges for women leaders throughout their career in Turkey, such as cultural constraints on women’s choices, gender stereotypes, religious identity, lack of mentorship and networks preventing women from taking credit for their success. Moreover, some policies that aimed to strengthen the position of women created a new kind of barrier keeping women from advancing their careers. Similarly, the contradiction in positive discrimination’s implications is also a new form of barrier that undermines the visibility of women, though more subtly, as expressed in research on well-intended but excessive and paternalistic discrimination (Hopkins & O’Neil, 2015). The seemingly friendly policy for women brings unexpected outcomes, which contrasts with the findings in previous research (Mandel & Semonoyov, 2006). While studies showed that gender diversity is positively associated with firm performance, such as innovation, occupational well-being, and corporate governance (Brahma et al., 2021; Clavero & Galligan, 2021), more appropriate gender equality plans and policies are critical steps for transformational change in organizations. To ensure the outcome effective, policy makers need to ground gender equality initiatives upon the evidence-based understanding of the benefits of workplace gender diversity (Fine et al., 2020).

In this study, challenges and strategies are categorized into both societal level and organizational level, and these two levels are closely intertwined. Zhang (2020) examined data from 35 countries and 24 industries to understand the relationship between gender diversity and firm performance. Based on the longitudinal sample of 1069 public firms around the world, the study found that the context of a country or an industry has significant effect on the relationship between gender diversity and firm performance. “The more that gender diversity has been normatively accepted in a country or industry, the more that gender-diverse firms experience positive market

valuation and increased revenue” (p. 439). Therefore, during the change process, the context in societal level and organizational level need to be considered and comprehended *cohesively*.

Finally, research showed that the ongoing pandemic has more heavily impacted women, deepening the unequal share of family responsibilities between men and women (Dang & Nguyen, 2021), and participants in this study also shared similar experiences. Working from home stems from the elimination of the separation between home and office and brings certain severe effect for women leaders’ multiple roles in the family and company. Their experiences are coherent with the results from recent literature. Carli (2020) indicated that the pandemic has generally created challenges for women’s advancement. Compared to men, more women lost their jobs, suffered infection and psychological stress, and had more work disruption due to the blurred line between work and family. Yavorsky et al. (2021) attested that as gender inequality in family and work are connected, the pandemic has deepened the pre-existing gender inequalities in both realms. This issue should continually receive attention and examination.

## 6 Implications

### 6.1 *Societal Level*

In Turkey today, gender discrimination in professional life, while seemingly less compared to the past, nonetheless exists, albeit in a more invisible form. Our research participants noted that there are still obstacles for women trying to climb the corporate ladder. However, they also emphasized the rise in public awareness concerning the struggles of women in professional life and the relevant positive changes in their organizations. These participants are paving the way for transforming organizational culture and practices by applying a different kind of leadership, by providing equal opportunities for women employees to prove themselves, and by breaking the stereotypes regarding women’s management skills and abilities. However, these women leaders’ efforts to create change will not spread fast enough to increase women’s representation in high-level positions without the support of their organizations and government interventions. The government’s establishment of a legislative groundwork, including its adoption of several current policies, e.g., the National Strategy and Action Plan on Women’s Empowerment in Turkey’s 11th National Development Plan 2019–2023, promises to increase public awareness by empowering women and preventing discrimination against them to ensure their equal access to opportunities. To ensure the elimination of gender inequalities and gendered stereotypes, in addition to the government’s existing efforts, NGOs, academic institutions, and organizations in the public and private sectors should participate in the design and implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated policy for gender equality.

## **6.2 *Organizational Level***

According to secondary data analysis, in most companies within the research scope of this research, efforts at change mostly originate within the circle of their women leaders, slowing the pace of such changes. For instance, among the selected companies, only two provide kindergarten even though having a kindergarten once a certain number people are employed is protected under Turkish labor law. Only two selected companies have clear policies for denouncing discrimination and promoting equality on their websites. Only a few organizations have studied diminishing the gender gap, and just one of them has published a report evaluating the salary gap based on gender in the last decade. Only one organization follows international standards, such as the Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) or the Equality and Diversity for European and International Standard (GEEIS). However, in these limited companies, their various attempts—e.g., establishing diversity and inclusion committees, policies, and programs to ensure equality at every layer of their institution or creating separate entities to help and support women employees with motherhood and birth processes—have proven that women leaders together with their organizations can remove gender-based barriers. The findings of this study show the necessity for more organized, systematic attempts to address the gender issue in professional life.

## **7 Limitations and Future Study**

The study focused on only women managers' perceptions of the barriers preventing women from holding management roles and their career journey overall. In the future, research also focuses on males' perception concerning the same issue can bring more insight into the research area. Secondly, this study only explored the experience, perception, and observation of women who already reached management positions. For future studies, including the perception of women who yet reach the top level regarding the current situation in Turkey can provide a deeper understanding of the issue.

## **8 Conclusion**

This chapter explores the challenges that women leaders in Turkey have faced and the strategies that they deem necessary for developing a more equal work environment. Through an examination of the data from both societal and organizational perspectives, this study reveals the influence of the traditional stereotypes and organizational policies on the phenomenon of women's absence from corporate leadership. Furthermore, it helps bridge a gap in the literature by providing a more

comprehensive picture of women leaders' situations in Turkey. Through an understanding of the challenges women leaders face in these existing systems, the direction for future change can be identified, and the endeavor for building a more equal environment can continue.

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# Women Struggling and Thriving in Higher Education: Exploring the Experiences of Women Researchers Through Social Dream Drawing



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**Abstract** Globally, role expectations, competency requirements and increased workload challenge academics' wellbeing. Women researchers in the academia face many challenges impinging their capacity to match the research outputs and leadership representation of male colleagues. Applying a systems psychodynamic lens and socio-analytic methodology, this chapter explores the experience of four women researchers in academia as they thrive and struggle in the research landscape. The women live in Gauteng, South African and respectively have 5–17 years teaching and research experience in Higher Education. The researchers adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation in this collaborative auto-ethnographic research. Data were collected through the socio-analytic method of Social Dream Drawing and analysed through thematic analysis. Findings indicate women researchers are frequently overwhelmed by research opportunities and expectations. To deal with this, women engaged in identity work, re-negotiating their research identity past traditional matriarchal and patriarchal role expectations. Identity work made them aware of their ability to work in bounded instability and to tolerate paradox, giving them a sense of empowerment and expressions of thriving in their research endeavours. This research highlights the need for making available collective, self-reflective space encouraging women researchers in the Higher Education landscape to engage in identity work as a collective, intrapersonal strategy that empowers them to take up their (research) leadership, through appropriate self-authorization and authentic connections.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Women in research · Social dream drawing · Systems psychodynamics · Socio-analytic methods · Collaborative autoethnography

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## 1 Introduction

The landscape of South African Higher Education (HE) is mired by demographic transformation, as well as socio-economic and political change. Most concerning is the staffing dilemma resulting from an increasing shortage of qualified and experienced academics (Barkhuizen et al., 2017; Makondo, 2014) exacerbated by the alarming rate of academics on professoriate level reaching retirement age in the current decade (Altbach & Hazelkom, 2017; Theron et al., 2014). Growth in student numbers furthermore surpasses growth in the number of academics (Mmako, 2015; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). As does the pressure to consistently deliver a higher number of research outputs and PhD graduates, increase academics' supervision burden and imbalance the student-academic ratio (Bezuidenhout, 2013).

Globally, the academic environment is deteriorating and becoming less favourable to academics' wellbeing (Koga et al., 2021; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). In South Africa, transformation of the HE system, result in challenging role expectations and competency requirements for academics to perform well (Bezuidenhout & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Since 2016 the issue of access to tertiary education has become a national outcry evidenced in unruly mass rallies and student action campaigns such as '#fees must fall' (Cini, 2019). In addition to disruptive student mobilisations, employee industrial action has become a frequent occurrence in the South African HE landscape. Whilst some demands may be legitimate, the violence that characterise them compromise the capacity of HE Institutions to maintain quality education standards with the workload burden falling to academics. Against this contextual background of HE, it is not surprising that numerous research have been emphasising the increased workload academics face (Barkhuizen et al., 2017; Bates & Kaye, 2014; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021) and the stress experienced by academics consequent to such work overload (Bates & Kaye 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2021), even to the point of noting higher incidences of mental illness amongst academia (Shaw & Ward, 2014).

Challenges faced by women academics have been the focus of much research in HE (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019; Koga et al., 2021; Montes-López & Groves, 2019) yielding figures indicating that despite a rising representation of women in academia their managerial representation and research output remain overshadowed by that of men (Fritsch, 2016; Zulu, 2013). The National Research Foundation (NRF) moreover reports that women NRF rated researchers increased from 30% in 2015 to 35% in 2020 (NRF, 2020). Despite numerous empowerment strategies, women moreover remain inequitably represented in academic leadership hierarchies (Gelardi & Gozzi, 2021; Montes-López & Groves, 2019; Warren & Bordoloi, 2021) restraining women academics in constructing an academic leadership identity (Bhatti & Ali, 2021). Recent studies combine research findings on the challenges women face in academia and identify strategies to address these (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019). However, suggested empowerment strategies remain focussed on contextual policies, strategies and interventions and fall short in capitalising on women's intrapersonal strength resources.

In this article, we seek to contribute to the global dialogue on female academia (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Specifically, we expound systems psychodynamics, and socio-analysis, as a particular theoretical and methodological perspective to explore the experiences of women academics in the South African HE context. Socio-analytic research methods integrate above and below surface dynamics to enhance understanding of social phenomena and human experience (Long & Harney, 2013). Subsequently, as women researchers, we embarked on a collaborative auto-ethnographic research project employing socio-analytic methods to explore how female academics struggle and thrive in the landscape of research.

## 2 Theoretical Orientation

Systems psychodynamics or socio-analysis, is a broad field of research and practice that extends psychoanalytical concepts from the individual to the wider socio-cultural arena, including groups, organisations, and societies at large. It is ‘an interdisciplinary field amalgamating influences by psychoanalysis, the theories and methods of the field of group relations, and the task and boundary awareness of open systems perspectives’ (Fraher, 2004, p. 65). As an organisational and leadership perspective (Greyvenstein & Cilliers, 2012) systems psychodynamics draws on a diverse range of sub-fields including psychoanalysis, object relations, systems theory, social defence theory and group relations theory. The perspectives underlying systems psychodynamics thus combine systems thinking with psychoanalytic concepts to foster deeper understandings of the complex processes that underpin human behaviour. These perspectives are founded on the idea that in the same way that individual behaviour has both conscious and unconscious influences, and has both rational and irrational dimensions, so do the dynamics of groups, organisations and society. As De Klerk (2012, p. 3) notes, ‘in systems psychodynamics, we treat the organisation as a complex system, beyond rationality or conscious awareness, providing insights into the way unconscious forces drive the fantasies, anxieties and defences in organisations’.

Focusing on both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of human behaviour, systems psychodynamics makes possible, sophisticated understandings of complex organisational and societal phenomena. It eschews linear thinking which often yields simplistic solutions to what are increasingly confounding social and organisational phenomena. Systems psychodynamics extends psychoanalytic insights to ‘normal’ everyday life and beyond the therapeutic context. It should be noted, however, that systems psychodynamics does not intend to pathologize people, groups, and organisations. As Sievers (2006, p. 105) states:

whereas the notion of socio-analysis explicitly refers to its roots in psychoanalysis, it surmounts, on the other hand, the focus of the individual predominant in the therapeutic use of psychoanalysis . . . it represents a broadening of psychoanalytic perspective to groups and institutions.

In framing organisations as socio-technical systems, systems psychodynamic perspectives underscore the fact that people bring to their workplace, both their rational and irrational selves. It is because people's unconscious aims and needs very seldom coincide with the requirements of the explicit primary task of an organisation leading to so much psychodrama that characterises workplaces. A systemic view of organisations makes possible an appreciation of the wider systemic factors impacting on people's experiences of work life. Rather than locate analyses in the individual, the perspectives assume behaviour is a function of both individual and systemic influences. From a systems psychodynamic perspective, we are therefore metaphorically venturing into the *mirroring*<sup>1</sup> world of unconscious experience to construct an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women researchers in HE. To enhance this in-depth understanding, regressive dynamics, such as splitting, projection, projective identification (Klein, 1959) and basic assumptions (Bion, 1961; French & Simpson, 2010; Mnguni, 2012), as well as transformative dynamics such as potential space (Amado, 2018; Diamond, 2007) and bounded instability (Henning, 2021; Stacey, 2019) was explored in the system-psychodynamic tradition.

### 3 Methodology

Driven by ontological and epistemological notions underlying social constructionism, a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation was fundamental to the planning and execution of this study. Believing any meaningful social reality is contingent upon the meaning people construct as they engage with the world they live in, forms the basic tenet of constructionism (Crotty, 2005) and highlights the interactive dynamic between the researcher and the research phenomenon. Constructionism in this sense mirrors the notion of intentionality, a key aspect in phenomenological research (Lavery, 2003) and focusses on the mutual constructing effect between the object and the subject of research. Also like a phenomenological orientation (Van Manen & Van Manen, 2021), research in a constructivist vein entails an openness to and curiosity for meaning that is potentially new and different from the conventional meaning we associate with a phenomenon (Crotty, 2005). Adding to constructionism the belief that all the meaning we construct is preceded by a world of meaning into which we are born, develops the philosophical underpinning of social constructionism. Social constructionism highlights the pre-dispositional lenses through which we construct meaning and the belief that all meaning is already and continues to be socially constructed (Crotty, 2005). Our study reflects collective meaning making as per Schwandt's (1994, p. 127) distinction of social constructionism being 'not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by the convention of language

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<sup>1</sup>Rorty (1979) used the mirror as metaphor of the mind, having different representations (i.e. conscious and unconscious) emphasising novel, non-empirical methods to study the mind

and other social processes'. Therefore, this study adopted the form of collaborative auto-ethnography as described by Chang (2008) incorporating ourselves as participant-researchers in the study.

Congruent to our social constructionist stance, we approached the study from a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenological orientation which discards pure phenomenological description for a more critical interpretation of participants' lived world experiences (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Thus, we do not only acknowledge the influence of researcher presuppositions in the construction of meaning but consider critical interpretation of data by integrating researchers' theoretical and experiential preconceptions into the research findings (Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003) as key to rigorous research. Our theoretical orientation therefore played an important role in how we interpreted the data and directed our way of executing the study from its inception.

Systems psychodynamics, as described in the theoretical orientation section, pre-empt a socio-analytic methodology as a golden thread running through this study. Researching with the aim of understanding social processes and dynamics that manifest subconsciously when people interact in their life-worlds is described by some as socio-analytic research (Long & Harney, 2013) or psycho-social research (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). In socio-analytic or psycho-social research the interest of inquiry focusses on the underlying dynamics of human behaviour that enhance our understanding of conscious behaviour manifesting on individual, group and organisational level, combining elements of systems theory and psychoanalysis (Long & Harney, 2013; Long, 2017). From the hermeneutic phenomenological and socio-analytic methodological considerations explicated here, follows the procedure of this study and the socio-analytic methods we employed in the process.

## 4 Research Procedure and Methods

This research was conducted in a HE institution in South Africa. Four senior academics attended socio-analytic methodology workshops and subsequently decided to pursue a project on women in research applying amongst others the method of Social Dream Drawing (SDD) developed by Mersky (2013, 2022). As such, we constitute a purposive sample to provide rich data on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Table 1 illustrates our biographic profiles as women working on various levels within an academic environment, being involved in tuition, research supervision and various other community engagement and academic citizenship activities. As the four researchers involved in this study were also the participants, a collaborative auto-ethnography approach (Chang, 2008) was followed. Collaborative auto-ethnography entails a group of researchers sharing data from their own lives to gain a better understanding of the self within a specific socio-cultural context (Chang et al., 2013). All four participants consented to recording the sessions and photographing our dream drawings and mutually agreed to ensure

**Table 1** Participants' profile

Qualification	Position	Academic tenure	Tuition experience	Family context	Socio-economic status	Nationality	Code
PhD	Professor	17	Honours to Doctorate level	Married; three children	Middle class	RSA	PIPhD17M3MCSA
PhD	Professor	17	First year to Doctorate level	Married	Middle class	RSA	P2PhD17MMCSA
Masters Doing PhD	Senior Lecturer	7	Postgraduate to Masters level	Married; two children	Middle class	RSA	P3Ma7M2MCSA
PhD	Associate Professor	5	Undergraduate to Doctorate level	Single; one child	Middle class	RSA	P4PhD5S1MCSA

All participants are active members of various professional associations and serve on various committees within and external to their current organisation. All participants have several academic publications and local and international conference presentations



confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical clearance was obtained in accordance with the academic institution's ethics policy (Reference number: 2016\_CEMS/IOP\_079).

Data collection was conducted through applying the socio analytic SDD method developed by Mersky (2013, 2022) to explore above and below surface dynamics experienced by women researchers in HE. The SDD method combines two socio analytic research and organisational consulting tools, the Drawing Method (Nossal, 2010) and Social Dream Matrix (Lawrence, 2007). Dream drawing is, of course, not new. It has long been part of psychoanalytic practice (Furth, 1998). Three weeks prior to the planned session, each participant received instructions as to the theme of the session—'*Dreaming the researcher*'—and was given the task of drawing a picture of a dream they recently had. Participants were placed in a circle and one picture at a time was explored in depth. Each step in the following process took 15 min. First the drawer explained the picture and answered clarifying questions. Thereafter participants offered free associations and amplifications to the dream drawing whilst the drawer only listened. After a few minutes, the drawer participated and shared reflections. Free association as a method is used to access the unconscious of the participants (Long & Harney, 2013). Within this general discussion, and in line with the systems-psychodynamic and socio-analytic methodological foundation of this study, the associative unconscious of this system is accessed through the reflections of all the participants. The aim is not to disregard the thoughts and feelings of a participant (drawing owner), but as Long (2017) suggests, to work with the individual's thoughts and feelings as also part of a social system. Participants then changed seats and a general discussion was conducted with the set theme in mind, namely reflecting on how women thrive and struggle in the landscape of research.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This entailed transcribing the SDD sessions, familiarisation with voluminous amounts of data, categorising and coding the data and eliciting themes from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## 5 Findings

The thematic analysis yielded four themes: research as a nurturing endeavour; research as a gendered endeavour; research as an expression of appropriate competition; and authentic connections. The discussion of the themes is descriptive in nature and substantiated by verbatim quotes from the participants. In presenting the evidence we will indicate whether it is an excerpt from a dream, free association/social amplification from a dream or reflections on a dream.



Fig. 1 Feasting on cakes and sweets

### 5.1 *Research as a Nurturing Endeavour*

Opportunities to research are clearly abundant in the context of HE in South Africa, and women reflected on the satisfying effect doing research has on them. Yet women's experience of this abundance in research opportunity seemed ambivalent. Women talk about the research landscape as offering prime development opportunities to nurture their research activities, yet that the same abundance of opportunity can be debilitating instead of fortifying. On the one hand participants experience being overwhelmed by the 'riches' (products and opportunities) not only provided in the HE landscape but which also accumulate as a consequence of doing research. The participants experience that the 'riches from research' hold enticing opportunities yet could also be overwhelming to the point of being incapacitating. For them these could also result in hoarding of the riches as explained by a participant 'the hoarding happens causing sort of in-movement or non-consumption, non-processing'. This hoarding of opportunities, research projects and research data in the end may lead to being overwhelmed, having to juggle too many research riches, leading to sometimes feeling paralysed and not engaging in or publishing research. One dream provides a pertinent example as the P4 dreamt about a feast:

Cakes and desserts, all the food, all the food ja. It was just food everywhere, you end up going round in circles. I never quite ate, I kept collecting and carrying a lot of different stuff, I couldn't have enough. I couldn't get enough but I never got to eat it either and I never got to go to whatever the event was.

Figure 1 below shows the drawing of the dream by P4PhD5S1MCSA. In the context of an abundant, stimulating research landscape, women experience a complex

interchange of both thriving and struggling. Women thrive in this rich research context leading to a struggle of being overstimulated by their own need to engage in all or most research opportunities. It seems that the thriving-struggling experience is dynamic, and cyclical complemented or balanced by applying coping strategies to move them back towards a thriving research experience. This is evidenced in the reflection that their reaction to the overwhelming, incapacitating indulgence as the researchers present the need to refocus their research priorities, make time for themselves in the context of numerous opportunities and various tensions to truly experience research as a nurturing endeavour:

It is quite a balancing act. . . balancing to get all the food carried and balancing not to lose your balance and fall into the empty hole and balancing in between gathering everything you need to do and eventually get onto the task.

## ***5.2 Research Excellence as a Gendered Endeavour***

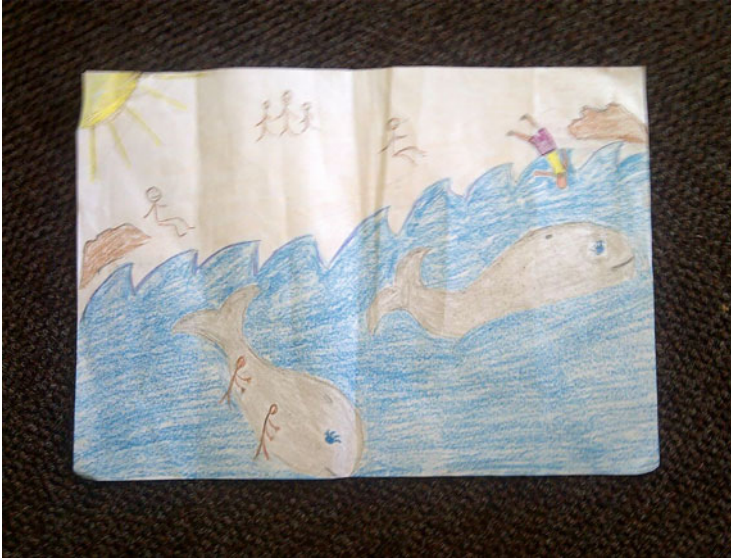
Researchers expressed their wish that their research is (always) acceptable to others. A researcher reflected:

I think it is my wish that I'm heard, and I think that the wish is on some level that the research should always be acceptable . . . And can I as a researcher do that and give up my need or my wish for my research to be accepted.

Another built on this reflection by saying: 'I think for me it talks to my vulnerabilities and my need therefore, for validation'. Linked to this wish seems to be the fear of not being able to express oneself. During a reflection phase another researcher articulated:

I think my fear as a researcher is that I'm not able to express myself. And that what comes out seems to be vomit to other people. Therefore, I rather don't say too much. I just keep it in, I swallow it down.

The researchers' need to be accepted in the research community seem to be grounded in stereotypical gender roles regarding success in academia (Fritsch, 2016; Zulu, 2013) and may impact the achievement of women researchers' full potential. The researchers furthermore reflected on their experience of anxiety pertaining to subjectively perceived risks in presenting their research; viz. the experienced risk is seen as 'being in trouble' in the research community or being 'celebrated beyond imagination.' The images used to represent these two options was manifested through free association/social amplifications in the women comparing themselves metaphorically to 'becoming Castor Semenya, because you run like a man' and to being like '[James] Bond'. It seems significant that these two images (a male spy and a female athlete who reportedly runs like a man) were used by the women to express feminine excellence in research. Reference was also made to 'Zola Budd' who seems to represent female excellence without adequate resources. In connection to one dream (Fig. 2 below presented by P2PhD17MMCSA) the story of the whale rider as a social artefact was amplified. The whale rider reminded us about the film



**Fig. 2** Whales in shallow water

wherein a Maori teenage girl takes up her leadership role and exercises authority in relation to the male elders of her community. In the progression of the images there is a movement from images with male characteristics presenting female excellence, to an image of how a woman without adequate resources performs excellently and finally a teenage girl who embrace her leadership and authority. This progression in the representation of female excellence may denote willingness of these researchers to embrace their leadership and excellence as young women researchers in the fraternity. This may point to their internal drive to disconnect from a stereotypical gender role (struggling) to become authorised and self-actualised members of the research community (thriving) and in so doing, experience a sense of empowerment.

### ***5.3 Research as an Expression of Appropriate Competition***

Research is seen as a way of appropriately expressing one's competitiveness—'climbing the stairs to the top of the pavilion' (see Fig. 3 drawn by P3Ma7M2MCSA). The stair area was also amplified as 'Jacob's ladder' that can be used to reach Heaven/Nirvana. Yet another association elicited by the stairs was that of a rainbow—perhaps with a pot of gold at its end. Research is seen as a way in which women can engage in appropriate competition, embrace their excellence and thus having peak self-actualising and thriving experiences.

With research having been associated with a sport pavilion and a racetrack (Fig. 3) where many athletes through blood, sweat and tears run the race, research



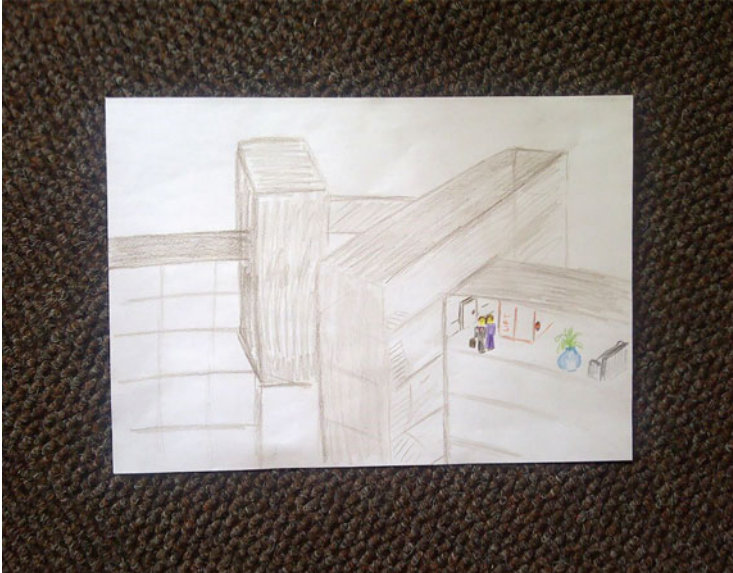
**Fig. 3** Running and falling at the school pavilion

is compared to an obstacle course or a long-distance race because ‘what we can be more certain about is that research is not a 100m sprint’. As part of the reflections on this dream, it was suggested that by running the (research) race we may be chasing our own tails (self-defeating) or chasing our own tales (the autobiographic nature of research) and in so doing, want to protect our precious stories from others impinging on them. Running the (research) race also seems to raise questions about whether as a researcher one is running as part of the pack or whether one can break free and run on your own. To stand out from the pack, break away from the crowd or even become the leader of the pack seems to be an important question for the participants, representing another apparent ambivalence about their excellence as researchers. However, the women researchers seem to demonstrate strength and a thriving orientation despite competitive challenges, by taking responsibility for their personal excellence and how they can appropriately compete in the research landscape. One of the women researchers reflected:

I think as a researcher the question is can I stand out. Or can I, can I permit myself to stand out, can I permit my peers to review me and I don’t mean just in terms of the article, but judge me as somebody who is the leader of the pack. Not whether they will do it for me, but whether I can permit it.

#### **5.4 Authentic Connections**

Research is also experienced as an opportunity for thriving through making authentic connections with other colleagues. A dream (represented in Fig. 4) by



**Fig. 4** Crowding, pairing, or going solo

P1PhD17M3MCSA that could be summarised as authentic connections resulted in the following reflection:

... and in your dream it was about being with one person and being supported, being nurtured in a way or being connected. Belonging to something or someone. So it is almost as if we've progressed from being alone to being alone between people to being connected with one person.

Further reflections about opportunities for authentic connections raised a question: 'How do I know when to go solo, when to pair and when to move [with] the crowd'. The researchers also experienced research as an opportunity '... to be in the community, you need to share with each other you need to support, you need to uplift, you need to motivate'. And that in making authentic connection through research women researchers are thriving because such connections also 'enable us to really flourish'.

From the discussion, it is evident that through research women on their own, as part of a pair or a crowd, find opportunities to thrive and enhance their research identity and activity.



## 6 Discussion

Research by women academics seems to be marked by projective dynamics (Mnguni, 2012) as evident in research being experienced by women as nurturing and gendered endeavours. The projective dynamics include the use of defence mechanisms such as splitting, projection, introjection, and projective identification (Jaques, 1990; Likierman, 2001; Menzies Lyth, 1990) in relation to the resources available and those they can form collaborative relationships with. The women seem to experience anxiety and struggle with having too many (research) resources that they on the one hand cannot always harness in their research efforts. On the other hand, they seem to hoard research opportunities to the extent of becoming filled up and overwhelmed by the expectations of those offering these opportunities. Being filled up and overwhelmed by others' expectations could be a paralysing experience, but instead of identifying with the projections that come their way the women researchers seem to unwittingly give back inappropriate opportunities and expectations by not swallowing, but "vomiting" such opportunities. We think that a similar process of giving up/giving back projections occurs in relation to an appropriate competition amongst themselves, but even more importantly in relation to men as illustrated in research as a gendered endeavour. It is evident that women in research must do the work of giving up the projections they receive—this process seems ambivalent (hoarding and vomiting of riches), yet possible and ultimately essential in retaining a sense of empowerment that stems from within. Through the SDD sessions, the women created a transitional and potential space containing creativity and hope (Henning, 2021; Mnguni, 2012) in which they could negotiate their (research) identity (Henning & Cilliers, 2012), as well as the relationships amongst themselves and the wider research fraternity. Negotiating their identities enabled them to integrate the conflicting experiences of being women in academia, and thus they felt more empowered to cope with their performance anxiety.

It seems that research is a vehicle through which women can legitimately exercise their competitiveness, and healthy ambition to achieve peak experiences and self-actualisation. The aforementioned is illustrated by the images of two middle distance runners, reaching the top of the pavilion and climbing the ladder. The running images (Zola Budd and Caster Semenya) could point to how women use perseverance, resilience (Bezuidenhout & Bezuidenhout, 2014) and diligence to engage the challenges of research and publishing. These metaphors pertaining to success in sport and especially the two controversial South Africa female Olympian middle-distance runners also provide evidence of how women surpass gender role stereotypes to succeed in difficult circumstances. Zola Budd, who ran bare footed, started her career as an Olympian runner with controversy and was marked by the 'fall' incident where she was blamed for tripping a fellow athlete (<https://rw.runnersworld.com/selects/after-the-fall.html>). Caster Semenya had to deal with the controversy of claims that she is a man and was banned from running competitively in 2009, the ban was lifted in 2010 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caster\\_Semenya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caster_Semenya)). These controversial stories are further amplified by the film *the whale rider* where a young woman

takes up leadership where it was expected for men to take up leadership. Despite these controversies and obstacles, these women found themselves competing fiercely and achieved accolades within a highly competitive domain. It appears women researchers have the generalised resistance resources (Bauer, 2017; Strümpfer, 1995) which enable them to compete fiercely and successfully in highly competitive research arena with other researchers (female and male). It is through the collective self-reflection in the SDD sessions that these women were empowered to embrace and integrate potentially conflicting identity desires and needs. In the self-reflective space they became aware of the gendered projections that they introjected and colluded with. It is upon such deep self-awareness that they can embrace and open the self for authentic experiences of achievement and success in the academic work environment.

We propose the authentic connections women must form to be successful in research relates to women's search for those they can trust to look after the difficult emotions they may experience when doing research. Forming authentic connections may also be about these researchers' ability to find mentors and partners on whom they can depend on to assist them to grow in the relationship towards interdependence. The different kind of authentic connections could also suggest basic assumption dynamics. A basic assumption group can be disintegrative (rigid social defences) or can be in the service of the workgroup (De Felice et al., 2019). In exploring the different kinds of authentic connections, the women seem to be working at the edge of different basic assumption groups—as part of a crowd (basic assumption of we-ness), a pair (basic assumption of pairing) or solo basic assumption (basic assumption of me-ness). From a complexity perspective it may suggest that if the women can work at the edge of bounded instability (the edge of the basic assumption group), they could experience the phantasing of the basic assumption group and a more transformative process, marked by engaging their creativity during which they tolerate uncertainty and dwell in the presence of the unthought known (May, 2010; Stacey, 2019). Further, by being able to work in bounded instability women researchers experience thriving in their research endeavours through innovation, complexity, paradox (both/and thinking), hopefulness, continuous creativity vitality and life (Henning, 2021).

The participants, by using images of being James Bond, of being Caster Semanya (a woman that was thought to be a man), the whale rider (a young woman that challenges patriarchal and matriarchal understanding of women's place in relation to men) and Zola Budd (a young woman who used different resources to be successful) may suggest that women are creating potential space (Mnguni, 2012) in which they can explore with their identity as researchers and in so doing feel empowered to perform and achieve on their own terms. Women unconsciously collude with gender stereotypes that are disempowering to them and need self-reflection, awareness, and support to understand their potential (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019). Creating collaborative self-reflective spaces in which women can engage with their identity construction will empower women academics to overcome the micro-machismo (below the surface work practices and behaviour that undervalue women) (Montes-López & Groves, 2019) that they are confronted with. Such intrapersonal



work in a collective space seems valuable to women empowerment over and above policies and tangible support strategies, which have to date not succeeded in eradicating the gendered challenges that women face in academic work settings (Gelardi & Gozzi, 2021; Warren & Bordoloi, 2021). Importantly this identity does not fall into the ‘mainstream’ female or male researcher identities. Through the images the participants are co-creating their researcher identities that on the one hand is playful and on the other controversial, courageous and strong/well.

## 7 Conclusion

To support women in their quest to develop and excel as researchers, opportunities for collective, reflexive identity work, should be made part of formal empowerment policies and strategies. It is through facilitating their conscious identity work that women are given the opportunity to process their colluding and destructive dynamics and engage in constructive, transformative dynamics and strengths to embrace their identities as researchers. Through such identity work they are intra-personally empowered to forge an identity that circumvents the inhibiting effects of a traditional matriarchal and patriarchal understanding of their role as female researchers; and they are empowered to explore different kinds of authentic connections that enable them to potentially thrive as researchers. We suggest that it is through self-reflective identity work that women are empowered to shift beyond the traditional gendered role constrictions, re-negotiate their researcher identities and hopefully enhance their confidence and research outputs. We are aware that the four women in this project were willing to share their dreams—in this we may have left out the voices of women who may have been more reluctant to share their dreams. For future research it is important to explore the identity work experiences of more women researchers in academia, using suitable socio-analytic methods. Identity work was not the original focus of this study but became part of its outcome. As such, future research endeavours that are more focussed on exploring the effect of identity work experiences may be important to solidify the proposition that it has an important role to play in empowering women to take up their work roles with confidence and agency.

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# Empowerment of Unemployed Women in Low Income Communities: A Wellness Perspective—Women Self-reliance for Sustainable Tomorrow in South Africa



Meahabo Dinah Magano and Hector Mothudi

**Abstract** A democratic South Africa brought hopes for women who had dreams and aspirations of assuming leadership positions as a result of a new dawn of a liberated state. Those who were from marginalised and repressed groups were hoping for better lives and were thinking of transformation and social justice prevailing in all sectors in a democratic South Africa. The research question is how can women in low income communities be empowered? For a better insight and understanding of the study, the researcher used a lens of African philosophy which is Sepedi proverb 'kgomo go tsošwa ye itsošago' meaning one's life can be improved if there is willingness from the other party. Standpoint theory from the feminist perspective was preferred as a theoretical lens underpinning the study. Furthermore, Hettler's wellness theory enhanced the focus and elucidation of the study. The study was situated in a transformative paradigm and used a qualitative case study design to explore the lives of mentors and mentees. Mentors were 3 and mentees were 40. Snowball sampling was used and the study had two phases. Data collected through interviews in phase 1 revealed that women from higher education and one male mentor was ready to assist and support women from low income communities. There was willingness to receive mentoring and readiness to improve their lifestyles. Furthermore, in the second phase of the study women received practical lessons of improving their situation and to sustain their livelihoods through self-employment using skills acquired during empowerment sessions. Resilience was also evident and courage to face lack of skills. The study recommends a '*Tshwaragano (Togetherness) Community-Higher Education Partnership*' Model of women for sustainable futures.

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**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Transformative leadership · Wellness · Resilience · Empowerment · Feminism · Community of practice

## 1 Introduction

Higher education has three main key performance areas being teaching, research and engaged scholarship. It is the prerogative of every academic to be involved in engaged scholarship which integrates their teaching and research so that they are seen as rounded scholars (please add reference). This chapter reports on the engaged scholarship project carried out by academics from the University of South Africa (Unisa) with the aim of empowering and mentoring unemployed women in Daveyton Township in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The focus of the engaged scholarship was to address the plight of unemployed women between the ages of 18 and 40. With the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) in mind the focus was on goal number one—no poverty, goal number two—zero hunger and goal number four—quality education. These three goals formed the bedrock of the engaged scholarship project for the researchers and engaged scholars so that “no woman should be left behind” even though it was on a smaller scale in a township. Universities need to do their part in addressing issues of social justice in impoverished communities in meeting the mandate of White Paper on Community Engagement (Ministry of Education, 1997). Furthermore, universities are no longer seen and perceived as ‘white elephants’ and ivory towers but they are part of communities and should form close partnerships with communities to reach the SDGs and transform low income communities.

The pedagogy of hope should be brought by universities through empowerment, mentoring and coaching in impoverished communities. Elitism should be eradicated but an element of humanity should be planted in communities from centres of learning such as universities. Children who grow up in disadvantaged communities should be attracted to study hard by seeing role models who frequent their communities and form partnerships through engaged scholarship projects that have a positive impact and bring change. South Africa had hope in 1994 when it transitioned into a democratic government. Although, the dawn of democracy was perceived as freedom by most South Africans, the opposite of freedom is now evident in most communities. Unemployment is crippling many households since many people do not complete their school education, and, then again many young graduates are unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Unemployment may lead to poverty and ill effects thereof such as criminal elements, violent behaviour and depression (Agu, 2013).

## 2 Problem Statement

Since 2021 South Africa's unemployment is struggling with high unemployment at 35.3% (Statistics South Africa, 2021). From this percentage, women are the hardest hit in all population groups (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Coupled with unemployment, there are factors that contribute to this high percentage such as lack of soft skills and lack of relevant skills for the world of work. The hardest hit unemployed citizens are between the ages of 25 and 34 followed by the 15–24 -year age group (Statistics South Africa, 2021). These figures were exacerbated by lockdown restrictions during COVID-19 and led to even further job losses (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Among youths there is an alarming unemployment rate of 74% in the age cohort of 15–24 (Graham et al., 2021). The highest unemployment rate is found among black African women at 38, 5% (Statistics South Africa, 2021). It is clear that youth and women bear the brunt of unemployment.

In addition to these statistics about high women unemployment, the sad thing is that women are hit the hardest when it comes to unemployment as a societal problem (Brijlal & Jere, 2019). The problem is that 52.3% of the 7.2 million unemployed persons most were without matric and only 7.5% that is 1.8% of the unemployed were graduates (Statistics South Africa, 2021). These unemployment statistics indicate a grave issue to address. In most townships, the challenge of unemployment is common and that led one to ponder on the engaged scholarship project for Ekurhuleni region and also other relevant regions across South Africa. The problem that will be addressed is food insecurity and other skills that may empower communities to have sustainable livelihoods by doing things for themselves. **Hence, the aim of the study reported on this chapter was to empower the unemployed women in low income communities for sustainable development and improved livelihoods from a wellness perspective.**

### 2.1 Challenges of Unemployed Women

There are a myriad of challenges for unemployed women whether in rural or urban areas. Challenges range from starving children, parents and lack of basic resources for their families (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018). There are stereotypes that pertain to women who are without education and skills which leave them being marginalised in the participation of the economy (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018). As the world is evolving, many uneducated women find themselves without relevant skills such as ICT skills and there are demands that need the basic computer skills. Other skills such as agricultural skills like growing crops in spaces within their own yards are needed and this is a challenge where men and women do not utilise spaces to plant to address the challenge of hunger. Nandy and Kumar (2014) highlight that diversification in education which can be skills in sewing, cooking, beadwork and many skills. Owing to lack of education and awareness, many women rely on social grants



in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2021) which is just a meagre amount that cannot feed the family and buy other commodities. As a result, families headed by single women are faced with hunger owing to a lack of basic needs to maintain the family. Even in families where there are both male and female parents, unemployment cripples the family structure and women bear the brunt of seeing children starving and daily women make means of providing meals and other basic needs (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018).

## ***2.2 Growing the Township Economy***

Statistics South Africa (2021) reported an unemployment rate of 35.3% which indicates that the majority of the people are unemployed. The margin continues to increase between the poor and the rich and inequality becomes the norm in most countries. A study conducted in Russia by Voronkova et al. (2019) highlights that social entrepreneurship could be considered as an auxiliary function which supports the state in stable operations for unemployed women. The findings of the study by Voronkova et al. (2019) indicate that social entrepreneurship assisted in solving social problems through the development of urban and regional infrastructure. Furthermore, it attracted unemployed women of many children and people living with disabilities to work. In addition, the study proposed vocational training that entailed key areas such as business models, financial management and marketing among others. In growing the township economy, the empowerment of women is critical as it will lead to local businesses being established to alleviate hunger and poverty (Woodward et al., 2011). Townships are normally characterised by high levels of malnourishment and micronutrient deficiencies (Battersby & McLachlan, 2013). Training and upskilling of unemployed women may change the situation and provide sustainable development at micro to macro level. Another way which has proven to be helpful to alleviate the challenge of unemployment is informal micro-enterprise by hawkers in South Africa (Woodward et al., 2011). In addition, the establishment of informal businesses which will form the ‘second economy’ (Ligthelm, 2006) characterised by underdevelopment mainly practiced by poorest rural and urban inhabitants for self-generating growth and development. The examples of second economy are normally side traders, small home-based businesses like tuck/spaza shops.

## ***2.3 Skills That Are Relevant for Women Empowerment***

Empowerment is defined as the process of gaining new abilities and skills in order to perform some tasks (Ibrahim-Dasuki & Abbott, 2011). Furthermore, empowerment is based on two main aspects, namely, motivation from an individual and self-esteem coupled with goal setting (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020). These factors contribute to

willingness of the unemployed women to be able to see themselves achieving and changing their situation. In contrast, Kishor and Gupta (2004) point out that empowerment is a process by which the powerless gain greater control over their lives to achieve goals. Improved welfare and decision making are relevant for women empowerment in order to improve their living conditions. When self-esteem is improved, there will be control over resources and participation level will also heighten in their households, neighbourhood and economic affairs even though that may be on a smaller scale. Apart from self-esteem, unemployed women need to be equipped with financial management skills, computer skills, project management skills and other practical skills from an asset-based approach, especially from what they can do (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020). Skills to grow crops for household food security is another important skill that is necessary for unemployed women. Food security is defined as a state in which all people have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious to maintain a healthy and active life (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020).

## 2.4 *Theoretical Framework*

The study used three theoretical frameworks so that there was deeper understanding of the study, namely, African Philosophies using proverbs which has aspects of African positive psychology 'kgomo go tso swa ye e itsosago' a Sepedi proverb in English meaning 'you can only assist a person who is willing to be helped' (Rakoma, 1986). Proverbs in Africa are used as psychological phenomena that guide the moral stance of African people. Dinah (2020) termed proverbs Afro-Psychology owing to their deep psychological effect on the lives of Africans. Hence, this study used a proverb that depicts the willingness and the resilience of unemployed women who wanted to be empowered in a township. The lens directed the study since there was no punitive measures for those who pulled out and those who remained in the project and study was mainly on their willingness to be empowered.

The second theoretical framework was Hettler's wellness dimension theory (Hettler, 1976). The wellness theory has six dimensions namely, physical, emotional, social, career, academic and spiritual wellness. In the current study, each of the wellness dimensions was scrutinised so that women empowerment should be in a more balanced manner even though some dimensions were not so emphasised but owing to their interconnectedness, it is easy for one to influence another. These women's academic wellness was heavily impacted. Hence, the use of the wellness theory as a lens was more relevant in the study and focus was on all wellness dimensions to empower unemployed women.

The third theoretical framework used in the current study was the feminist standpoint theory which purports that oppressed women need to improve their situation which was largely ignored by social-political theories (Gurung, 2020). Furthermore, the standpoint theory urges feminists to reflect on hegemonic factors which hinder their development, especially in male dominated societies and cultural

oppressive communities (Smith, 1997, 2013). The research question is how can women in low income communities be empowered?

### **3 Methodology**

The transformative paradigm guided the study owing to the desire of researchers to see transformation and empowerment taking place in the lives of oppressed women in a township in Gauteng Province in South Africa (Wagner et al., 2012). A transformative paradigm or emancipatory paradigm aims at destroying myths and empower people to change society radically (Wagner et al., 2012). In addition, the study was qualitative in nature, as evidently reflected in different phases which were characterised by problem identification, data collection, analysis, findings and intervention.

#### ***3.1 Phase 1 of the Study***

The objective of the first phase of the study was to do baseline analysis of unemployed women in low income community. The researchers obtained ethical clearance from Unisa to conduct a study in Daveyton where the university has a satellite campus. Community leaders were invited to Unisa campus by whom by researchers in 2021 to discuss an engaged scholarship project and how the project will unfold. Five leaders came to the meeting and were asked what the challenges were in the community for women and if they were willing to participate in a project. They were further requested to invite other women who had similar challenges that they outlined from the community. Five leaders further invited other young women of ages between 25 and 35. They were all unemployed but had matric (Grade 12) and no training after Grade 12. Some women did not have Grade 12 which is the expected grade that a woman of 18 years and above should have attained. Unfortunately, this was not the case since some had lower grades owing to unemployment of parents which impacted on their schooling.

##### **3.1.1 Data Collection**

A discussion forum was held with them on a voluntary basis to outline what women challenges were and how they would love to be empowered. Women elaborated on how unemployment has hit the community and most lived on the R350.00 grant that the government provided during COVID-19. Some had children and were also receiving grants that the government availed after the inception of the democratic dispensation in 1994 in South Africa. They further explained that receiving the grant money is not what they want but they want either to be employed or to gain some

skills that will empower them for sustainable future. Unemployed women further expressed that they would love to be empowered in agriculture being able to start businesses in crop farming, sewing, cooking and have computer skills. They further outlined how they would love to be empowered on issues of life. They explained issues of life such as self-awareness, financial skills, gender-based violence and what to do, issues of death and healing since many lost family members and loved ones owing to HIV/AIDS and COVID-19. The focus group discussion took 3 h of lively engagements. The researchers requested the community members to do snow balling defined by Wagner et al. (2012) as a way of recruiting people or participants of similar background or contexts. These were other women who were also unemployed with similar needs and challenges.

### **3.1.2 Data Analysis**

During the first phase qualitative data were collected from the initial group of participants. Thereafter, researchers were able to do thematic content analysis from the given data by listening to the transcription and come up with themes.

The themes were as follows unemployed women needed to be empowered in the following areas:

Nutrition and cooking, sewing, crop farming, financial management, computer skills, self-awareness, gender-based violence, dealing with pain and loss of a loved one and project management.

## **3.2 Phase 2 of the Study**

### **3.2.1 Procedure**

In the second phase of the study, five community leaders were contacted and they all presented lists of women who were willing to be part of the engaged scholarship project. Eighty-nine women were interested in being trained on various skills. Women community leaders were told that there was no stipend or any form of remuneration that these women were going to get but knowledge and skills only which will enable them to have sustainable livelihoods. Since they were liaison officers between university researchers and community women, a message was carried out without fail. From September 2021 skills were rolled out at Unisa Daveyton campus and COVID-19 protocols were observed.

- Women were given sewing lessons starting with how to sew a simple garment like a face mask since this was a need in communities.
- Nutrition lessons also commenced which tied so well with their physical wellness.

- What was more interesting to all 89 women was the practical computer lessons. They were beaming with joy and some were operating the computer for the first time.

The facilitators were academics from Unisa School of Computing. The facilitators were able to scaffold the lessons so that even a layperson could grasp new knowledge easily. The lesson on how to start a small food gardening was also presented virtually and women gathered in a computer room where the researcher used a smartboard to link with a laptop so that they can hear and see the presenter. Women were able to ask questions on what to do regarding challenges of food gardening and how to take care of their crops. Other lessons such as gender-based violence, dealing with trauma and loss of a loved one, self-awareness and project management were also carried out by various facilitators.

Women who attended the empowerment sessions were interviewed individually on a random basis. These interviews were in a natural setting and in a discussion format. From the interviews transcriptions were done by researchers and colour coding was used to group similar thoughts. Furthermore, similar findings with the same colour were grouped together to form categories. These categories were further collapsed to form themes. The themes that emerged were as follows:

- New knowledge gained in starting a crop garden;
- Ability to start and manage own business;
- Healing on past pain and hurts; and
- Being skilful in operating a computer a sewing machine means attaining intellectual wellness and more empowerment for women.

### 3.3 Discussion of Findings

***New Knowledge Gained in Starting a Crop Garden*** Unemployed women were impressed to receive lessons on starting their own food garden in your own yard. The findings indicate the motivation that unemployed women had in learning a new skill as pointed out by Hussain and Jullandhry (2020). Some participants of the engaged scholarship project highlighted the following points when asked about what they have learnt and what they will do.

P:01: *I learnt about a lot of things such as how to stop worms from eating our produce, adding Epson salt to water, and spreading over the produce leaves to repel ants from eating your leaves. Spreading some cayenne pepper to repel rats from eating our seeds.*

P:02: *I learnt about which type of plants to grow together with some of the foods like spinach can be planted together with mint and garlic to repel insects like mosquitos. . .the benefits of Epson salt in food gardening.*

P:04: *We have problem in that when we grow our seeds . . . they disappear, and they don't grow. So, I learnt that we can grow our seeds within the right season so that our produce grows and using fertilisers to enrich our produce.*

P:07: *I learned how to prepare a manure using banana peels before planting seeds and also to plant cayenne pepper next to your veggies (i.e., spinach) to repel rats. I also learned that even when you don't have space in your yard, you can use wood boxes or damaged containers such as broken baths to plant.*

**Ability to Start and Manage Own Business** Findings revealed that women were empowered and were confident that they can start their own businesses using the skills that they have acquired from Unisa academics. These are some of the expressions from participants.

P:03: *I can start my own small garden at home. . .the issues is just I don't have space. I also learnt how to sew but i dont have a sewing machine. See Fig. 1*

P:06: *Yes, I can start my own garden now individually or as a group.*

P:01: *I have a food gardening at my house. . .I plan various veggies there, just that I was disturbed by worms eating my food. . .now I know how to deal with them.*

P:07 *I think if I can get a piece of land, I will plant many crops and sell so that I can support my children. I have a small piece of land as depicted in Fig. 2*

Since these lessons started in 2021 some participants brought pictures that they took from their homes on how they implemented what they were taught. They further indicated that there is no longer hunger since they get fresh vegetables from their yards.

**Healing on Past Pain and Hurts** From the findings of the study, it was vivid that women live in pain of patriarchal oppression either from partners or siblings and many were deeply hurt. The pain led to anger and unforgiveness and their emotional wellness was negatively affected. The findings revealed that Hettler's (1976) emotional and social wellness were also addressed in the sessions that women attended. Upon receiving sessions on healing either on loss or past hurts the following were said by various participants:

P: 11 *In terms of emotional healing, it assisted me a lot. . .especially in that I had a serious fight history with my family, after my mother's death, my family fought me for being a beneficiary of my mother's belongings. . .but now I managed to forgive all of them, except my brother who is still stubborn, but the session taught that I take time to heal, so I am will to deal with my brother when the time is right and forgive him too, if he is willing to come and ask for forgiveness, I'm prepared to forgive him. I hope and wish that we will have a repeat session on healing. . .*

P:20 *I was late on the session, but I captured that I could manage to deal with stress very well, how deal and work with people who have stress and also to deal with situation of such and to make good decisions as well.*

P:23 *We were not in good terms with a family member, but I learned that you need to forgive and forget. . .and that it takes time to heal. Now I'm with Unisa, I'm learning a lot of things and I started a new job as well. . .so my life is going on well since I started these sessions with Unisa.*



**Fig. 1** Women during sewing lessons

The participants responses show that also the social wellness was affected which affected their relationships. Therefore, after the healing process the emotional, social and physical wellness will be enhanced. One participant was yearning to have another session of healing which is an indication of a need for emotional wellness by participants.

***Being Skilful in Operating a Computer and Using a Sewing Machine Means Attaining Intellectual Wellness and More Empowerment for Women*** The exciting part of the engaged scholarship was seen in the way women were willing to operate a computer. There was excitement and the young ones were helping elderly women in the group who were struggling. The joy of learning a new skill is in line with the African proverb ‘kgomo go tsošwa ye e itsošago—meaning you can only assist a person who is willing to be helped (Rakoma, 1986). Women felt empowered and it was difficult for them to even take a break owing to the inner joy of knowing that chances of a job were possible because of a new skill they have acquired. Their career wellness possibility was evident, and it brought hope for them. Since wellness dimensions are somehow interlinked when the career wellness or skill leading towards it is attained, it also impacts on the self-esteem and emotional wellness (Hettler, 1976). Being empowered for women auger well with the feminist stand-point theory where women defy all odds that oppress them and are able to take a position of establishing themselves (Smith, 1997). With the skill of knowing how to use a computer, women felt a sense of autonomy and being able to start their own businesses.

One participant said ‘*Knowing how to type gives me confidence that I will now type my CV print and drop it at various institutions so that I can get a job.*’





**Fig. 2** Picture of some home gardens started in 2021 after attending some virtual sessions

Another participant said *'Now that I know how to use a sewing machine, I will get a container and get women form a corporate and sew school uniforms for the schools in the surrounding townships.'*

The empowerment received by women and the mentorship from Unisa academics gave women confidence and new ideas which show career independence start to emerge. Even though the project is still in its infancy, but signs of hope were evident. The image in Fig. 3 shows a session of computer lessons being taught by an academic from Unisa School of Computing.





Fig. 3 Women during computer lessons with facilitator from Unisa School of computing

## 4 Recommendations

- The study recommends a '*Tshwaragano (Togetherness) Community-Higher Education Partnership*' Model of women for sustainable futures.
- Through interaction and observations during training sessions, lessons learnt from research findings may lead to new African scholarly theories from communities.
- Formal and non-formal programmes at Unisa may be transformed and redeveloped. Also, short learning programmes may emerge from the engaged scholarship project.
- Furthermore, the teaching and learning will be improved and be aligned to the context of communities. This may even impact on the curriculum of Basic Education Grade R to Grade 12 to be more on self-employment, job creation and being creative to have sustainable futures.

## 5 Conclusion

All three theories used in the study reported on this chapter, namely, wellness, standpoint and African philosophies using proverbs formed a theoretical lens that guided the study in a more vivid manner. The wellness dimensions that were addressed were emotional and social through healing sessions. These were needed to ensure that the past hurts do not hinder other wellness dimensions like intellectual wellness which unlocks the cognitive being for unemployed women to learn new skills. The skills learnt such as gardening, sewing and computer skills brought excitement and ignited hope that things will be better. Seemingly, a pedagogy of hope was created through the engaged scholarship project. The mentoring,

encouragement and coaching from facilitators brought confidence to all women who were project members.

## 6 Limitations of the Study

The study is a longitudinal study and data will be collected on a continuous basis. The chapter was written while the study is in its second year and other wellness dimension(s) were not yet attained. Data collection and intervention is still needed on an annual basis to see the full empowerment of women in a township of Daveyton Gauteng Province South Africa and the impact of the project in the fourth, fifth year and so forth. There is a need to conduct further research to address other needs for low income communities.

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# Perspectives on Leadership and Management Challenges Facing Women Leaders in Rural Secondary Schools



Joyce Phikisile Dhlamini  and Njabulo Khoza

**Abstract** Gender development includes both men and women as biological species, however, this concept tends to be attributed to women more than it is to their counterparts and numerous reasons are attributed to this. The purpose of this article was to investigate the challenges facing women school managers due to the gendered nature of the rural communities they operate in. The liberal feministic approach underpinned the study as its theoretical framework in its quest to unmask the plethora of encounters women school managers continue to experience in a democratic South Africa. A qualitative exploratory case study design was adopted to explore the phenomenon. The population for the study was women school managers comprising school principals and departmental heads from one rural district in the Northwest Province of South Africa. The participants of five female principals were purposefully selected. Data collection technique adopted was one-on-one interviews with the participants. The data analysis process followed a thematic approach. The major finding of the study revealed that the challenges emanating from the patriarchal nature of schools as learning organisations were to blame especially for the schools' high levels of male learner violence. The conclusion reached was that there is a dire need for the rural school communities and other social institutions to take the government's gender sensitivity initiatives seriously if women leaders are to succeed in their roles as managers in these social institutions. The study fully recommends that the subject of gender sensitivity needs to be inculcated in virtually all institutions of society for the country to realize the benefits arising there from. This study was conducted for the master's dissertation and never published as an article or book chapter.

**Keywords** Gender · Masculinity · Femininity · Patriarchy · Stereotypes

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## 1 Introduction and Background

While South Africa is acknowledging the human rights as stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a, b), this somehow contradicts in one way or another with what is culturally entrenched. In many of these contexts in South Africa, democracy is forced because there is a mismatch between democracy and culture. In these contexts, democracy is somewhat forced because in as far as culture is concerned, women are still seen as human beings who do not have the potential and capacity to lead and occupy previously male dominated positions such as those of principalship. Due to the geographical areas of many schools in South Africa and the political landscape of the country, schools face tremendous challenges. This is exacerbated when the schools are rural and isolated and are led by women. The main attributor to this is that schools as organisations are a microcosm of society, this simply put means, the attitudes, belief systems and values of the immediate schooling community are translated to the school and this often has catastrophic results especially when the immediate schooling community presents inherent bias and stereotypes towards leadership.

The study sought to unpack the pertinent gender stereotypical issues in educational leadership and management in the country in general and the Northwest province in particular. Owing to this, the study considers it imperative to unravel the glitches and complications in leadership and management at the secondary school level. School leadership and management challenges have been among the most prominent conversations or debate in recent times and through such debates many inferences have been drawn. For example, the Conference on Educational Leadership (2015) noted that the issues of violence school leadership and management are perpetrated in predominantly rural African secondary schools particularly those led by females as there is a gender biased or distorted image of females as leaders in many secluded rural African school areas. This is worsened in the remote secondary schools in South Africa, plagued with deeply engraved patriarchy, stereotypicalness and inherent bias existing within the schooling community exacerbates the challenges of female principals leading secondary schools successfully.

South Africa's education system is one of the most well-funded education systems in the world but unfortunately, low performance and lack of quality leadership has been associated with this system Maila (2013). Found in the CEPD Report (2014), South Africa compares unfavourably towards other education systems of the world, this is worsened for developing countries in the African continent. There is a plethora of hurdles with which the South African education systems faces on a daily basis and numerous documents have been produced to highlight this with little to minimal effect. Challenges of inadequate teaching staff, unqualified, underqualified and ill-disciplined learners in this regard seem to be the major obstacles in the education sector. As a result, Boucher (2014) maintains that there is inadequate support for learners especially those in the remote rural African communities as the culture of learning is distorted. This is often exacerbated by the scarcity of learning resources, the poor geographical areas and the struggle to

recruit and retain highly qualified educators. Many rural school communities discourage learning and destroy teaching and learning facilities because such communities have not yet seen any positive yields of education in their localities (OECD Report, 2014).

The enactment of many government policies to empower women leadership especially in secondary schools and other relevant social institutions still have negative connotations towards women leadership remaining in many South African communities (Choge, 2015:414). The OECD Report (2014) notes that although some women are appointed in senior school decision-making positions, their life in these positions is not all that rosy. As a result, a male figure is often attached to the appointed female leader. Zulu (2011) observes that although women leadership and management have been receiving growing attention in recent years, there are issues regarding the way women in Africa generally construct their leadership and management in the education sector. The aforementioned thus illuminate women's ways of leading and thus provides a basis for research into how the gender biases or distortions they experience at the hands of men and their learners, particularly the male learners, can be dealt with effectively in the educational sector.

## 2 Statement to the Study Problem

The country South Africa is one of the countries in the African continent considered to show significant growth and development in terms of economic, policy and governance Bakari (2017). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the education gains of the country in the post-apartheid state. Found in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, here forth abbreviated as TIMSS Report (2019), indicate that South African Grade 9 learners rank almost the worst in performance in Mathematics and Science. This trajectory has and continue to be a worrying phenomenon. There are many assertions attributed to this and the fundamental one is the extreme rurality of South African schools, lack basic ablution facilities and poor service delivery. South Africa is predominately a rural country with numerous communities still existing in the far-flung margins of the country. Many of these communities continue to operate within stringent cultural and traditional paradigms which in essence conflict the existence of a post democratic state. Found in Gordon (2017), there is a strong perception which deem impossible for women to be heads of the group or organisation where there are male subordinates. Culturally, and to a larger extension, religiously, women cannot be in charge of men. The rural communities, for example, mostly believe that there is no voice or law which can be above their culture (Gordon, 2017). This leads to confusion of traditional leadership and democratic governance, socio-cultural and politics.

The study aimed at unmasking the significant challenges constantly acting as boundaries for rural secondary schools in South Africa which are led by female principals.

### **3 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework which underpinned the chapter is the feminist perspective. This is the most relevant framework as its main assertions revolve around the deconstruction of the patriarchal hegemony specifically in the social context. Feminism aims at understanding not only the inequalities presented by gender but also the politics of patriarchy which women experience in the hands of their male counterparts (Sadie, 2005). Generally, there are three dimensions of the feminist perspective: radical, liberal and Marxist-socialist feminism. Two of these dimensions are briefly discussed in the subsequent sections.

#### ***3.1 Radical Feminism and Its Application to Female School Leadership Challenges***

Radical feminism is a version within feminism that calls for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts (Meena, 2005). Radical feminists thus seek to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing social norms and institutions and this includes opposing the sexual objectification of women, raising public awareness about such issues as rape and violence against women and women headed institutions as well as challenging the very notion of gender roles.

Seen in relation to this study, radical feminists would locate the root cause of women's leadership woes, challenges and oppression in patriarchal gender relations, as opposed to the legal system, which resulted in them occupying school leadership positions (Tabane, 2004). From the aforementioned, one would argue that virtually all proponents of a patriarchal leadership system for schools would tend to oppose women in such leadership positions as school principals or their deputies.

#### ***3.2 Liberal Feminism and Its Application to Leadership Challenges in Schools***

Liberal feminism as an individualistic form of feminist theory focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices (Marilley, 2013). As a result, female school leaders who subscribe to the views of liberal feminists would draw from its emphasis on making the legal and political rights of women equal to those of men (Mutekwe, 2013). Given that liberal feminist hold the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men, some women school leaders would seek to prove this assertion wrong in their course of duty as school managers (Marilley, 2013). The above view, which tends to

discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace would thus be refuted as they work towards defying it as an odd.

## 4 Literature Review

This section presents a summarised version of the literature review relevant to the challenges of female school principals in rural secondary schools of the North-West Province. Fraenkel et al. (2012) define a literature review as an assessment of a body or bodies of literature concerned with a specific question through essential research findings and theories. The primary purpose of this literature review is to examine and scrutinise the various challenges experienced by female school principals in the day-to-day management of their schools especially in rural areas of the North-West Province. Creswell et al. (2015) state that a good literature review includes the process of intense scrutiny of local and international sources consulted to obtain adequate, reliable and most relevant information regarding the topic at hand. The study of literature assisted in the establishment of the varied challenges female principals face in their tenure as principals and envisaged possible methods and approaches to tackle these challenges.

Furthermore, Creswell et al. (2015) postulate that this section of research as vital because it gives the researcher the opportunity to make an in-depth analysis of the phenomena studied, it assists the researcher to identify what has already been studied on the topic and what has not. This is when the researcher identifies the research gap.

Several studies have been conducted on school leadership by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2014). For the sake of this study, it is referred to as the OECD Report, within varied school contexts. The results have revealed that the school principal is the critical component for the success of any school. There have been various characteristics attributed and emphasised to good leaders; these include integrity, effectively managing external and internal environments, critical thinking and continuing professional development as the hallmarks of a successful leader (Pont et al., 2008).

Gurr et al. (2006) postulate that successful managers have excellent tension and dilemma management skills. With such managers in schools, the status quo ought to improve for the betterment of effective and efficient schooling environments. The challenges of management within the education context is a global problem which affects all schools throughout the world, especially those based in rural areas (Leithwood, 2008).

According to Bitterman et al. (2014), school management is still a significant challenge in many American schools, especially in the public education domain. These scholars have further found that only 42% of school managers are female; this is regardless of the notion that 85% of teachers are females. From these statistics, the interpretation emerging is that management and masculinity are correlated.

There has been enormous research conducted on school management and various, but similar findings seem to be prevalent dating as early as the early 1980s.



Shakeshaft (1995) found that senior educational specialists and school board members or district directors within the South African context, held unfavourable attitudes towards women in senior administration posts. The argument posed was that women had no support structures readily available for them, encouragement or counselling from family members, peers, subordinates or educational institution representatives to pursue or maintain careers in administration. Within the UK, Cole (2000) reported that although women in principal-ship positions still face challenges, their number is steadily increasing. Within the British region, Morris (2000) conducted a study on how students experienced women managers. The conclusions of the study stipulated that the female students were afraid to speak out in class because of fear of academic and social penalties.

Choge (2015) conducted research within the southern hemisphere on women leadership and management within the education context and noted the following as prevalent perceptions on women managers, especially within the educational domain:

- Children of working women are neglected,
- Marriages of women managers are neglected,
- Women without children or those with grown-up children are more competent than those with children,
- Women lose their femininity when they are appointed as managers; and
- Women must stay at home.

These findings reveal that women managers have great difficulties in becoming successful school managers, and this poses a threat to their male counterparts, subordinates and even seniors. There is a generalised bias towards women managers.

#### ***4.1 Barriers Hindering Women from Attaining Principal-Ship Position***

This section is categorised into three groups; firstly, there are intrinsic factors that hinder women as teachers pursuing the principal-ship position in schools, such as family attachments, low self-esteem and self-confidence. As well as internal motivation, qualification requirements, reluctance to apply for leadership positions, women turning down promotional offers, efficacy as well as the lack of managerial experience. The second group is typically termed extrinsic or organisational factors because they arise from the education system in which women work; these include the selection process, lack of transparency, age, lack of mentors, school and school policies. Lastly, social and cultural factors that hinder women from advancing into leadership posts are constituted by gender stereotypes, discrimination and negative attitudes (Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen, 2015).

## 4.2 *Internal Factors Based on Family Attachments*

Chaya et al. (2009) stipulate that family attachments have and currently are the primary determining factor which discourages women teachers from pursuing the position of school principal. Generally, women are attached to their homes and families, and because of this, their careers must fit into their lives, not the other way around. Furthermore, to this, they have found that female teachers, if presented with the choice of either career advancement while living alone in one area compared to the same career post living with their immediate family, such teachers opted to be around their families.

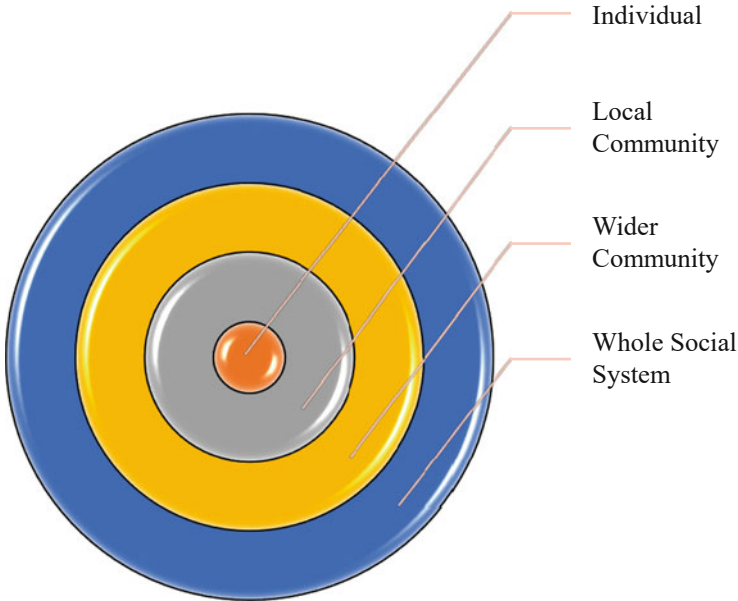
Women have and still are somewhat viewed as child-bearers and homemakers. There is an accretion that leadership is primarily for men and submissiveness is then associated with women. Women in leadership tend to face a significant challenge especially from male colleagues, and it is sometimes worsened by their own female counterparts. The African perspective of women from decades ago is distorted as it views women at times as 'objects' to be prepared and made ready for marriage. This has been the continued practice, and due to this, education and schooling were not seen as a necessity on the girl child; instead, such a child would be taught ethical conduct, housekeeping and being subservient towards men.

The family attachment was found to be the major reason why women teachers did not apply for school headship positions. Women were unprepared to take up positions away from their husbands and children. In fact, given a choice between career advancement in places away from the family and staying with ones' family, most women appeared to prefer the latter. As Dorsey (1996:30) explains, "from an early age, daughters are groomed for their marriage roles of wife, mother and food provider . . . and they are conditioned from an early age to believe that a woman is inferior to a man and that her place is in the home".

There is sufficient research studying the esteem and confidence levels of women versus their men counterpart. The self-definition project is somewhat different for men than it is for women, and thus men and women develop different types of self-concepts. Donald et al. (2015) indicate that one of the core aspects of learning and language acquisition is confidence. There has been a clear link between competence and confidence that can be easily identified in children from an early age. Males tend to inherit, and exhibit characteristics associated with assertiveness, confidence and decisiveness. These are perpetuated by the immediate families and communities (Fig. 1).

According to the Department of Education (2004:13), the feeling of inferiority in women puts them in a compromised position as they allow everyone to walk all over them instead of taking charge. This feeling is also perpetuated by the way girl children are raised, how society has crafted the role and function of women and the superior dominance of boys from an early age.

It is of paramount importance for a manager to first accept him or herself because low self-esteem affects one's performance at work. Coetzer (2004) states that a manager's failure to live with themselves means that they will not be able to



**Fig. 1** Levels of systems relating to education. Source: Okeke et al. (2014)

get along with others. Coetzer (2004) also points out that many individuals in senior positions experience significant problems with inferiority complexes and are continually trying to prove themselves at all costs. Stereotypical beliefs such as those about women's inability to be competitive and decisive and perceptions that they are often emotionally unstable continue to plague women managers (Heliman et al., 2004). Women are generally viewed as unable to control their tempers and always throwing temper tantrums when expected to manage any given situation. Women are also considered as bearing grudges and not forgetting and forgiving easily when hurt. Chisholm (2001) states that an approach that draws attention to the problem's women face as individuals, would try to affect their individual psychological factors (such as women's confidence and self-esteem) which prevent them from putting themselves forward for leadership positions. Finally, Chisholm (2001) reports that self-esteem and confidence are common factors which impede women managers' effectiveness in their professions. A woman manager may be her worst enemy as her attitudes and beliefs about herself and others can prove to be her worst enemy. This is particularly the case if women believe that they are not good enough for the position or that any criticism is a personal attack. A feeling of inferiority makes women managers let everyone walk all over them instead of taking charge. The opposite of this, the belief that one knows it all and nobody can tell one because one is the manager, is equally destructive.

## **5 Research Paradigm, Design and Methodology**

The research design adopted for this study was a qualitative exploratory case study, which according to Kumar and Phrommathed (2005) offer a naturalistic approach as it attempts to examine the everyday life of different groups of people and communities in their natural setting. It is particularly useful in studying educational settings and processes. Nievenhuis (2017) note that qualitative case studies involve an interpretivist paradigm so as to unpack the subjective realities involved as it attempts to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Further to this, Johnson and Christensen (2007) are of the view that qualitative case studies can be seen to have various strengths in that the data used is often based on the participants' own categories of meanings. A case study as viewed by Bromley et al. (2004) is a systematic inquiry into an event or at times a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest. Creswell (2013) states that a case study research excels at bringing researchers to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships.

### ***5.1 Population and Sampling Procedure***

The population that the research examined was all female school managers of a selected district in the North-West Province. The population group was filtered through with five secondary schools purposefully selected, wherein these secondary schools had one principal and at least two departmental heads. Guided by insights from Jack and Norman (2000) who caution that purposeful sampling is a non-random method where the researcher selects information-rich cases for the study, the experienced female school managers who took part in the study had work experiences ranging from 10 to 30 years of classroom practice. The sites selected for the study were rural school communities within the Northwest province of South Africa. All were public schools with female school principals.

### ***5.2 Data Collection Process***

The methods used for data collection for this study were individual interviews held with the female secondary school leaders. In the interviews data were elicited and recorded through an audio recorder for later transcription (Oosthuizen et al., 2017). In addition, notes were taken by the interviewer during the interview proceedings for purposes of ensuring the recorded data is corroborated (Creswell, 2013).

### **5.3 Data Analysis**

Ader (2008) maintains that data analysis as a process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming and modelling data with the goal of discovering useful information, patterns, trends and supporting decision-making, needs to be carried out expeditiously. It was in this light that the analysis of data followed a thematic approach, where the themes that emerged from the coding of interview responses were first categorised into code families or what Nievenhuis (2017) calls super ordinate themes before discussing each of them as part of the findings. As guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) the thematic approach is an analytic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the study through the use of emerging themes themselves (De Vos et al., 2011).

## **6 Discussion of the Findings**

The discussion of findings in this chapter are examined under the following four key themes as they emerged from interview sessions held with the rural female school managers:

- Female school leadership challenges in the South African rural schools
- Gender biases in school leadership and management in rural South African schools
- Gender role stereotypes and their influence on school discipline
- Lack of assertiveness in female school management

All four themes on gender stereotypes and their influence on school discipline and the feminine mystique are further discussed.

### **6.1 Female School Leadership Challenges in the South African Rural Schools**

The results of the individual interviews held with South Africa's rural female school leaders revealed that the female school leaders are affected by perceptions of their subordinates regarding what the school communities regard as ideal roles for men and women (Marilley, 2013). It emerged from the interview discussions held with the female school managers that South African school communities are so gender role polarised in terms of their social expectations. Many rural communities do not expect women to hold leadership positions especially in school organisations where men with similar qualifications and experiences are. For many of the female leader interviewees engaged, many men, female members of staff and learners feel that it is a misnomer for women to lead men in society. As a result, these subordinates are

always all out to criticise the female leaders and to demonstrate that they (men) can always lead and manage better (Leithwood, 2008). Some male teachers in the female headed school leadership tend to either withhold information or minimise their levels of school support especially in matters of learner discipline and innovation for school development. Their motive for such behaviour would be to prove the female teachers wrong and claim men are better school leaders and managers.

In support of the above views, one female school manager had the following to say:

**School manager 1:** *In my school the major challenges are not from the learners but from male teachers and who seek to prove they are better than women in matters of school administration. This view is contrary to my belief that school leadership is basically about the knowledge in both the field of work and adequate human relations in getting tasks accomplished by ensuring subordinates are effectively led in a corporative manner as opposed to challenge virtually all crucial initiatives from the school authorities along gender lines.*

Asked to give a brief account of their understanding of what school leadership and management entails, one female participant had the following to say:

**School manager 2:** *My view is that school leadership is telling people what to do, when to do it and sometimes how to do it. Furthermore, I am strongly of the view that though leadership is one of the managerial functions as Fayol contended school management itself refers to the internal operations of an institution, putting in place the systems, structures and promoting a culture for the effective and smooth day-to-day operations. The core purpose of management in all areas of the school is to enable the creation and support of conditions under which high quality teaching and learning can take place. My core business in educational leadership and management is therefore to focus on the effective delivery of teaching and learning so that our learners are not disadvantaged in the final analysis.*

Further asked to state if there is any substantial distinction between the two concepts of leadership and management two female participants had the following to say:

**School manager 3:** *While the general trend is to assume that all managers are leaders and all leaders are managers, it is important to note that in one way or the other, the bottom line is that the two concepts have a relationship in that leadership is one of the managerial functions along with controlling, organising and coordinating the activities of a human organisation. In mathematical terms, leadership is basically a subset of management. However, what is important to note in school management and leadership is that educational leadership can be identified in three dimensions with the first being the ability to influence the actions of individual followers while the second dimension is based on personal and professional values on the character of an individual. The third dimension is that leadership is also associated with the vision and ability of the manager to*

*articulate this vision throughout an organization. Yet another perspective on leadership can be the ability to direct change and being future oriented.*

The views expressed in the aforementioned excerpts show that school leadership and management activities have nothing to do with the gender aspects of the position holders but rather with their ability to influence the actions of subordinates towards the realisation of organisational goals. Therefore, any person can be a school manager or school leader as long as they have the ability. They also need to understand emerging trends in education and to guide their schools and subordinates through various challenges by achieving a vision based on shared values. The challenges of school leadership and management as outlined above are a social construction of communities due to their gender polarisation of social roles Leithwood (2008). The finding also resonates with what the minister of education in South Africa, Motshekga (2013) when she stated in her argument to justify why only 36% of school principals in South Africa are led by female principals. The majority of school principals in South Africa are males also explains the impact of patriarchy of leadership and management activities (Moloi, 2007). Given the fact that North-West Province is predominantly rural with high rates of illiteracy and strong beliefs in the patriarchal hegemony. It is no surprise that female headed schools experience high rates of staff and learner maladjustment challenges in terms of discipline including learner violence in the schools.

## ***6.2 Gender Biases in School Leadership and Management in Rural South African Schools***

The interview results held with the female school managers clearly showed that while the past few years have seen an improvement in the treatment of females in pedagogy or classroom methods and curricular materials, it would be premature to declare victory and dismiss issues of gender bias in schools. Participants cited, for example, girls and boys who remain victims of gender stereotypes in text and resource materials (Gordon, 2017). They are also victims of unintended or sexist behaviours by educators. In support of the above view, one female school manager cited examples of educators whose behaviours reflect varied expectations for learners, based on their genders, class, race and ethnicity. The discussion got interesting when one female school manager claimed that most of her subordinate educators feel they care deeply about their learners in their classrooms. She further mentioned that they also claim to be confident that they treat all their learners equally. However, when she goes for lesson observations, she discovers that many classroom practitioners' own attitudes and behaviours manifest the subtle and pervasive nature of gender inequity in their classrooms. Among her examples were the following gender biased behaviours: usually male learners receive more teacher questions than their female learner counterparts, more frequent follow-up questions with males, uneven ratio of learner-educator interactions. Male learners are

also more likely to call out or act out, demanding and receiving teacher attention (Leithwood, 2008). Further to the above, one female school manager had this to say:

**School manager 4:** *Segregated seating patterns reinforce unequal teacher attention. Many of South African school classrooms are characterized by gender segregated classrooms given that boys are more likely to be called up to the front of the room to do demonstrations (for example a science demonstration). Boys are also more likely to be disciplined than girls, even when the misbehaviour is identical. Girls are more likely to be praised for the appearance and neatness of their work. Female learners are often stereotyped into clerical roles because of neat notes while educators are more likely to offer boys specific feedback on their work, including praise, criticism and remediation. Further, boys are more likely to receive attributions to effort and ability, teacher comments giving them confidence that success and competence are simply a matter of applying themselves. For girls, they are often told, it's okay, as long as you try. For example, an educator may take the litmus paper from a female learner and does it for her but talks a male learner through the correct use of litmus paper.*

The above excerpts overall show that many educators participate in gender biased actions without realizing it. Another key area the interview participants pointed out as one area in which gender biases manifest themselves overtly is school textbooks and supplementary resource materials (Coetzer, 2004). These were cited as tending to be filled with male protagonists and stories while more positive feedback and remediation efforts are extended more to male learners than to their female learner counterparts and males are even allowed to speak over females. These views clearly indicate that schools do not operate in isolation from the societies in which they find themselves and therefore the gender values and views of these societies are in one way or another transferred and translated into the school setup (Bitterman et al., 2014). Male educators, especially those in charge of higher classes tend to undermine their superiors if female, although they may cooperate and adhere to the school rules and regulations. Some of such educators may tend to have negative attitudes towards being reprimanded or being called to order by a female head and this may make the job of a female school manager twice as hard compared to that of a male school manager.

### **6.3 Gender Role Stereotypes and Their Influence on School Discipline**

They were asked to give her view on how gender role stereotypes interfere with their leadership and management practices in the rural Northwest province, one female school manager had this to say:

**School manager 5:** *The formation of gender role beliefs and conforming behaviours and attitudes likely begin very early in childhood and have a significant role in*



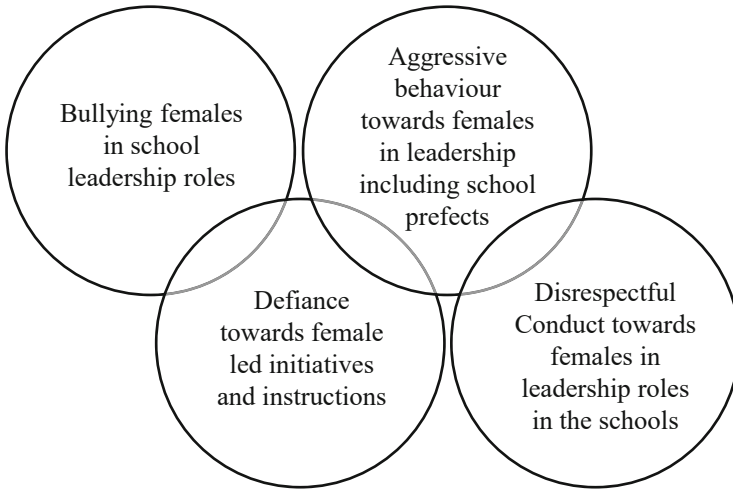
*the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Through the intergenerational transmission of preferences and beliefs, families have the earliest, most direct impact on the development of children's cognitive and social development. As a result, children raised in families with strong gender roles stereotypical views tend to experience serious challenges when they find themselves in leadership positions. This could be attributable to the fact that the channels of such transmission could be outright didactic teaching (indoctrination) or a more indirect influence via parenting styles (including the language used with the children) and providing role models. Examples for the former would be iterating what girls should and should not do and discouraging male-typed behaviour (girls are taught to be more obedient, subservient, kind and sharing) and examples for the latter would be a family where household chores are females' responsibility with males having more say in important decisions. Intergenerational transmission in the family may have important implications for children's attitudes, behaviour and outcomes.*

The aforementioned clearly shows that gender role stereotypes imply the social transmission of gender attitudes from mothers to daughters as well as daughter-in-law' and from fathers to sons and sons-in law. From the interview discussions with female school managers, it emerged that stereotypical beliefs about gender, tend to rigidly characterize differences between sexes and appropriate gender roles. There are pervasive in most societies and school communities. In the rural Northwest province these were found to be rampant in the schools sampled for this study (Bitterman et al., 2014). These deep-seated beliefs reflect the society's expectations that individuals behave and make choices in accordance with their gender.

Among the examples of gender stereotyped beliefs and how they are reflected in behaviours and attitudes as cited by the female school managers in this study are those that can be expressed in parents choosing rigidly-gendered toys for their children or steering them (subtly or blatantly) toward certain educational and occupational choices that are deemed to be suitable for their gender. They can be expressed in social backlash against or disapproval of certain behaviours on the part of girls and women, such as aggressiveness or ambition. To the extent that they are ingrained in a society and influence the actual choices and outcomes of individuals. These beliefs may in large part contribute to gender-achievement gaps as well as the underrepresentation of girls and women in top executive positions and in leadership (Gordon, 2017).

As ample evidence suggests, such gender inequality, factually confirming and perpetuating traditional gender role beliefs, can be quite persistent in for example, the leadership and management activities of females in schools. Once a child starts school, factors that contribute to the formation of beliefs and attitudes become broader and more complex. In addition to their families, children now interact with their peers in a more structured environment and more importantly, with another adult, the teacher.

Seen in this light, it was clear that to the extent that they are ingrained in a society and influence the actual choices and outcomes of individuals, these beliefs may in



**Fig. 2** Schematic illustration of some manifestations of gender role stereotypes and biases in schools

large part contribute to gender-achievement gaps as well as the underrepresentation of girls or women in top executive positions and in leadership positions in general Coetzer (2004). As ample evidence from this study suggests, such gender inequality, factually confirming and perpetuating traditional gender role beliefs, can be quite persistent. Also evident from participants interviewed for this study was the view that the formation of gender role beliefs and conforming behaviours and attitudes likely begin very early in childhood and have a significant role in the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Choge, 2015).

The participants pointed out that through the intergenerational transmission of preferences and beliefs, families have the earliest, most direct impact on the development of children’s cognitive and social development. The channels of such transmission could be outright didactic teaching or indoctrination or a more indirect influence via parenting styles including the language used with the children and providing role models. Some of the aforementioned gender role stereotypes and biases manifest themselves in ways schematically depicted in the figure below (Fig. 2).

The female school managers interviewed in this study were unanimous. The above illustration shows that there is a major crisis in terms of learner discipline and defiance, disrespectfulness and aggressive behaviour towards female school leadership especially female members of the Learner Representative Council (LRC). The bulk of the learners prefer to be led by male members of the LRC instead of their female counterparts.

#### ***6.4 Lack of Assertiveness in Female School Management***

When they were asked to explain their own understanding of the concept assertiveness in school leadership, participants in the individual interviews were clear in pointing out that it implies the quality of being self-assured and confident without being aggressive (Choge, 2015). The response showed they all virtually understood that being assertive in school leadership means exercising a form of behaviour characterized by a confident declaration or affirmation of a statement without need of proof to affirm their leadership rights or point of view without either aggressively threatening the rights of another (assuming a position of dominance) or submissively permitting another to ignore or deny one's rights or point of view.

Further explaining her understanding of being assertive, one individual interview participants had this to say:

In my view being assertive means using a communication style and strategy distinguishable from both aggression and passivity. It explains how one should deal with personal boundaries, their own and those of other people especially subordinates. It is crucial to note that passive communicators do not defend their own personal boundaries and thus allow aggressive people to abuse or manipulate them through fear. Passive communicators are also typically not likely to risk trying to influence anyone else to carry out their duties as expected. Aggressive people, on the other hand, do not respect the personal boundaries of others and thus are liable to harm others while trying to influence them towards executing their roles. I try by all means to avoid this in my school management activities. As an assertive female school manager, I strive to communicate assertively by overcoming fear of speaking my mind or trying to influence my subordinates but doing so in a way that respects their personal boundaries. For me therefore, assertive communication involves respect for the boundaries of oneself and others. It also presumes an interest in the fulfillment of needs and wants through cooperation.

In another interview, the participants elaborated on the above view claiming that as an assertive female school leader, she exercises the following principles:

I always feel free to express my feelings, thoughts and desires towards both my staff and learners regardless of their gender role stereotypes or biases. I make the work environment so conducive that they are also able to initiate and maintain comfortable relationships with each other. As a result, my subordinates have control over their anger. This does not mean that they repress this feeling but it means that they control anger and talk about it in a reasonable manner. They are always willing to compromise with others, rather than always wanting their own ways and tend to have good self-esteem.

From the above excerpts, it became clear that the interview participants constantly get refresher courses on public relations strategies because the views expressed by virtually all the female school leaders were in a way similar despite the interview sessions being conducted at different schools though in the same district. Their responses to the question regarding their understanding of the concept aggressiveness shows it is a subject they were familiar with (Choge, 2015). None of the participants appeared not to have anything to say regarding characteristics of assertive leaders. However, the incidents of ill-discipline among their learners and

subordinate staff members as reported in other sections of the interview sessions shows that the challenges of gender role stereotypes, biases and portrayal of females in social institutions showed there is a strong need for these female leaders to be as assertive as they claimed to be rather than just paying lip service to being assertive.

## **7 Recommendations**

The recommendations emanating from this study include the following:

- There is a serious need for the Northwest school communities to ensure that female headed schools are given the best support possible if they are to achieve the best possible results in learner achievement.
- The introduction of gender sensitivity lessons for schools and communities may also go a long way towards alleviating the influence of gender biases and stereotypes in schools.
- The Northwest rural school communities need to be sensitised on the need to embrace gender sensitivity and to support all initiatives in this regard.

The above recommendations are important to support the female school principals to have resilience in their roles as they are holding leadership positions in schools.

## **8 Conclusion**

The study concluded that although female school managers are capable of executing their leadership roles with much ease, they need to be provided with working environments that are free from threats of violence, aggressive tendencies, defiance, disrespectfulness and bullying from their male counterparts in their schools and community at large. The department of education needs to ensure that there is adequate support allocated to female school principals. The Northwest education department also needs to ensure that they arrange debriefing sessions of all principals, male and female, where there will be constructive learning conversations amongst them providing an opportunity to share best school leadership practices. Female leadership challenges in schools include the impact of gender role stereotypes, biases and perceptions of gender roles as held by the Northwest rural school communities.

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**Part IV**  
**Body and Sexuality as Resources**  
**for Women's Empowerment**



# Women's Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights as an Empowerment Strategy Towards Sustainable Futures in Sub-Saharan Africa



Mathabo Khau 

**Abstract** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a global imperative that requires countries to address past and current injustices to create equitable societies. One of the critical global development concerns is gender inequality. While women and girls in patriarchal communities have their rights violated daily, those who reside in rural areas are extremely marginalised due to an intersection of factors. For countries to achieve gender equality, there is need for concerted efforts to create conducive environments towards respecting people's sexual health and reproductive rights. Thus, in this chapter I use secondary data to present the context of young women's sexual health and reproductive rights in sub-Saharan Africa by focusing on the need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as an empowerment strategy towards gender equality. A literature review was conducted on the need for, and provision of, CSE for youth in sub-Saharan African countries. An inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature was developed and based on it, scholarly articles, book chapters, thesis and grey literature were collected to inform the chapter. I present the constructions of young women's sexual and reproductive health rights in relation to the context of sexuality education in sub-Saharan African schools and how the two influence each other. Using African Feminism, I argue for an inclusive CSE that addresses the cultural issues pertaining to the complex experiences of women and girls on the African continent, to facilitate the creation of equitable societies whose women and girls enjoy healthy and pleasurable sexual lives.

**Keywords** African feminism · Comprehensive sexuality education · Sexual health and reproductive rights · Sub-Saharan Africa · Sustainable development goals

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## 1 Introduction

Since its discovery in 2019, the corona virus and the subsequent covid-19 pandemic have had a disproportionate impact on women and girls in all their intersecting positionalities and identities. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated gender inequalities inherent in communities worldwide, thus critically affecting progress in different spheres of development. People's ability to live healthy lives and access health care services was impacted by economic, environmental, and social factors. Disruptions in transport during the total lockdown affected the health sector supply. Girls and women in marginalized communities faced increased challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and products. The stay-at-home orders implemented by governments to curb the spread of the virus among citizens exacerbated incidences of gender-based violence (GBV) against vulnerable members of society, due to job losses, unfavourable living conditions, and limited assistance (Khau, 2021a). According to Khau (2021a), the increase in cases of GBV also increased HIV infections and unwanted pregnancies.

Despite the many advances in healthcare towards the treatment and eradication of HIV infections globally, girls and women between the ages of 15 and 24 still remain disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to their anatomy and physiology. For example, the high incidence of GBV in sub-Saharan Africa leads to the high rates of HIV infections among rural girls and women who are totally dependent on men for economic support (Khau, 2012). Heterosexual rural women's risk to HIV infections is also increased by their lack of agency in negotiating safer sex and condom use, or through sexual violence and coerced sex by their male partners (Reddy et al., 2010; Artz et al., 2020).

Another causal factor to high HIV infections among girls is the traditional practice of early or forced marriage (*ukuthwala* or *Ho shobelisa*). This practice has been historically practiced by some communities as a legitimate route to marriage for couples whose families would not consent to the marriage, or when the girl was against the marriage (Maluleke, 2012). Arrangements were made to have the young woman abducted by her suitor and his friends, or members of his family, with the girl often being sexually violated; after which negotiations would occur between the couple's families to officiate the marriage proceedings (Koyana & Bekker, 2007). This practice increased substantially during the covid-19 pandemic lockdown, due to isolation and lack of protective services.

While the covid-19 pandemic exposed inequalities, vulnerabilities, and risks facing girls and women globally, these have always been prevalent in heteropatriarchal societies, especially in the sub-Saharan Africa. Bent and Switzer (2016) argued that popular international and development discourses position African girls as inherently and homogeneously powerless and vulnerable, thus needing to be rescued. The construction of rural girls as *girls-in-crisis* is reminiscent of colonial and Western feminist discourses which popularised the notion of 'Third World Women/Girls'. Mohanty (1984) argued that the '*Third World Woman/Girl*' is represented in contrast to presentations of Western women as a singular, monolithic

subject who “leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (seen as: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (seen as: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, and victimised)” (p. 337).

Such discourses fail to consider “...the various ways in which girls often demonstrate a strong resilience when they are faced with hardships, including violence”. Understanding how young women position themselves with regard to their agency, risk, and vulnerability is important in challenging deficit discourses and the narratives they produce (Paechter, 2018). This is important for creating alternative narratives which reflect young women's experiences and agency regarding the material conditions of their lives, and the social and structural constraints they contend with daily.

The covid-19 pandemic worsened an already dire situation of GBV, HIV infections, lack of menstrual health services and other reproductive health services in sub-Saharan Africa. Acknowledging that the covid-19 pandemic is not the last health challenge the world will face, makes it important for us to explore ways of dealing with future disasters. Thus, this chapter aimed at exploring the context of women's sexual health and reproductive rights in sub-Saharan Africa. This was done to map out strategies that could be employed to create enabling environments for women's reproductive health.

## 2 Literature Review

According to Feminist literature, predominant gender norms and stereotypes create expectations that cause women and girls to perform their femininities in ways that reinforce social inequalities (Lorber, 1994). This performance puts them at risk of GBV and vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). According to Shai (2018, p. 7), Jewkes and Morrell's concept of acquiescent femininity “suggests the need to explore how traditional notions of femininity are constructed and how the dominant traditional gender identity responds to other forms of female gender identities.” This is specifically relevant in this study due to the adherence to traditional beliefs, practices, and values in rural contexts within sub-Saharan Africa. These values, beliefs and practices privilege men and boys over women and girls due to the prevailing patriarchal gender order (Connell, 2014); while also emphasising age-related hierarchies, which demand of children to respect all their elders. According to Ngidi (2020), children are supposed to obey all adult instructions and expectations without question or challenge. He argues that such understandings of respect expected from women and girls towards men and boys, or children towards adults, inhibit the agency of those in positions of less power to challenge the beliefs and practices which may be harmful to their wellbeing. This situation of traditional beliefs and practices position girls at the periphery of society due to their age and gender.

Moletsane (2011, p. 89) also questions the “so-called cultural practices, and belief systems that disempower girls and leave them with little control over their lives and

bodies. . .”, thus rendering girls negatively affected by GBV, gender inequality, HIV, and poverty. Based on these arguments, one could argue that girls who live and grow up in rural contexts are specifically marginalised (Moletsane et al., 2010; Moletsane, 2007). According to Reddy and Dunne (2007, p. 165), their participants performed what they called “troubling femininities” due to their descriptions of disempowerment as “. . .integral to the performance of heterosexual femininity.” Performance of these femininities is exacerbated by poverty and leads to the perpetuation of harmful gender norms that put girls at risk and vulnerability to GBV, unwanted pregnancies, HIV and STIs. Supporting this discussion, Aapola et al. (2005, p. 1) argue that girlhood is “. . .something that is constructed socially, rather than merely as a stage of life fixed by biological processes and programmed psychological development”. They continue to point out that it is “. . .something that is accomplished through participating in the social, material and discursive practices defining young femininity” (p. 1). Thus, it can be argued that girlhood comprises of the intersections of ability, class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality.

Moletsane (2007, p. 164) points out that “girlhood is a complex and multifaceted identity which tends to be developed and enacted in often difficult circumstances, characterised by a variety of social ills, most importantly GBV and HIV/AIDS.” Balfour et al. (2008, p. 101) also point out that rurality has usually been conceptualised along the lines of backwardness, disease, exclusion, marginalisation, and poverty. They argue that “. . .the theoretical constructs we use to study rurality tend to focus on the space rather than the people, and tend to treat the space as homogenous, ignoring and simplifying the variations and complexities in identity, behaviour and nuance.” Because of this, Moletsane (2012) has pointed out that research and interventions within rural contexts fail to acknowledge the need for context-based understandings of rural communities, their assets, and strengths.

It is against this background that this chapter explores the context of women’s sexual health and reproductive rights in the global South and the need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as an empowerment strategy towards sustainable futures. This chapter answers the following questions: *How do communities in the global South construct young women and girls’ sexual health and reproductive rights?* And, *what is the position of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in relation to promoting young women and girls’ rights to healthy sexual lives?*

### 3 Theoretical Framing

The analysis of data in this study is based on African Feminist theorisations. Feminism is a controversial term associated with wide-ranging concepts. According to Hooks (2000, p. 1), feminism is “. . .a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. . .” While this definition is broad, hooks argues that it acknowledges the presence of other forms of feminism beyond it and that male support is necessary in advancing any form of feminism. Maathai (2006) also acknowledges

the importance of men in the advancement of feminisms which are against cultural and neo-colonist agendas that inhibit women's progress.

According to Atanga (2013) and Maathai (2006), African feminism reflects the diversity and history of Africa, including colonialism. It engages with the lived realities that women of Africa encounter daily which have roots within historical injustices. Additionally, Stuhlhofer (2020) argues that culture is important in understanding African feminism. According to Kamau (2014), African feminism is concerned with the needs of Black women in Africa, while also considering the economic and social differences within individual African nations (Gatwiri & McLaren, 2016).

Thus, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF, 2019) states the following regarding feminism:

We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists. We are African women when we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. (...) Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our past as a continent, diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonization, liberation struggles, neo-colonialism, globalization, etc. (para. 1).

African feminism was selected for its emphasis on the diversity of African cultures and historical injustices that women of Africa face daily, which are unique to their contexts.

## 4 Methodology

A comprehensive literature search was conducted for qualitative studies reporting on young women and girls' sexual health and reproductive rights, and the situation of CSE in sub-Saharan Africa. The following databases: EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest and Scopus were also searched for qualitative peer-reviewed studies published from 2010 till 2021. The reference lists of each article that fit the inclusion criteria were also searched to identify seminal authors in the field whose published articles may have relevance to the study. The database search was done using the following search terms: women's sexual health OR women's reproductive rights OR girls' sexual health OR girls' reproductive rights AND comprehensive sexuality education OR Life Skills OR Life Orientation AND sub-Saharan Africa. All search results were saved on Endnote (referencing software), and all articles were thoroughly reviewed for inclusion in this review.

Sources used as data in this chapter are qualitative studies focussing on women and girls' sexual health and reproductive rights. Specifically, the sources had to show linkages between comprehensive sexuality education and women's health in sub-Saharan Africa. Only sources published in English between January 2010 and April 2021 were included.

## 5 Data Analysis, Extraction, and Management

The six steps of data extraction proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and expanded by Levac et al. (2010) were used as the data capturing and organisation tool. The results were organised along the following types: authors and publication date, location, study design and sample, research focus, results on the situation of CSE and women/girls' sexual health and reproductive rights. The data was analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six thematic analysis steps. These include familiarising oneself with the data and generating initial codes. The next steps involve identifying the themes before defining and naming them. Then the results are reported according to the themes.

Thematic analysis allows for the examination of the final selected articles for patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In analysing the data, the positioning of CSE in schools was analysed in relation to how women and girls' sexual health and reproductive rights are constructed. Based on the analysis, recommendations were proposed towards transforming the context of women and girls' sexual health and reproductive rights.

## 6 Findings and Discussion

The questions guiding this study were used as overarching themes to analyse the data. Thus, the findings are presented within the following: *Constructions of young women's sexual health and reproductive rights* and *Positioning of CSE in promoting young women's rights to healthy sexual lives*.

### 6.1 *Constructions of Young Women's Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights*

Religion and culture have played a significant role in how African societies construct female sexuality, especially in relation to young women and girls. According to Tamale (2014, p. 153), "African sexualities (aesthetics, excitements, fantasies, feelings, and ideas)..." have been enormously influenced by Messianic religions to a point where traditional African sexual practices that were shaped through African traditional religions (ATR) and indigenous cultures are threatened. While some Abrahamic religions have constructed the female body as sinful, a source of moral corruption, and distraction from godly thoughts, ATR celebrates the female body and valorises it as a reproductive and sexual icon (Tamale, 2014).

While Black African female sexuality across the board has been constructed as evil through the influence of colonial regimes in Africa, girls and young women have been doubly marginalised due to their age and gender (Ngidi, 2020). According to

Gilmore and Marshall (2010), the discourse of girls-in-crisis constructs girls as having no agency because of their being and their circumstances. They argue that:

The figure of the vulnerable girls is tied to the absent figuration of women as fully human and as political agents. As such, this representation recalls colonial and orientalist histories and the representational politics of racialization; and it is in this figuration that the vulnerable and racialized girl in crisis has become the focus of human rights campaigns, corporate philanthropy, and service learning projects based in the United States (p. 667).

This construction governs young women and girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services because capitalist heteropatriarchal societies "objectify their uteruses, debate their vaginas and deny their opinions, while their nipples are sexualised, their bodies violated and their anger is underestimated" (Motalingoane-Khau, 2010, p. 82). Constructing young women and girls as lacking agency denies their capability to decide on their sexual health and reproductive rights. This makes them vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, sexual violence, and exposure to unhygienic spaces for accessing their feminine hygiene needs. This is exacerbated by untrained staff at clinics where young women could access contraceptive and preventative services, untrained law officials for reporting and persecuting GBV, policies preventing schooling access to girls who get pregnant while still studying, and prohibitive laws towards access to safe abortion services for young unmarried women (Khau, 2021b).

While access to health facilities and products has always been a challenge in sub-Saharan African countries before the covid-19 pandemic, it was exacerbated by the pandemic. During the covid-19 pandemic, all functional levels of sexual and reproductive health supply chain and service delivery were disrupted (CARE, 2020). Restrictions of movement created challenges for health-care providers and staff, while also inhibiting young women's access to services (MSI, 2020). According to UN Women (2020), the extended restrictions on movement in many societies, combined with economic and social stressors of the covid-19 pandemic, escalated incidences of harmful gender practices and increased rates of child marriage, gender-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM). It can therefore be argued that discourses of childhood innocence, which are often associated with young women, render them especially vulnerable in pandemic or conflict situations.

## ***6.2 Positioning of CSE in Promoting Young Women's Rights to Healthy Sexual Lives***

According to UNAIDS (2010), providing youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health education and CSE are central tenets to preventing HIV infections, unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions, and young women's access to SRH care. It also stated that ensuring equitable access to education and employment and creating enabling legal environments were crucial in the reduction of young women's vulnerability to HIV and other GBV related repercussions. In addition, UNAIDS (2019) highlighted

a decline in HIV infections globally proving that CSE and other youth friendly SRH services could successfully deconstruct harmful gender and sexual norms within communities.

Despite these successes, Baxen (2010) and Motalingoane-Khau (2010) highlighted the challenges teachers faced in effectively delivering CSE in classrooms such as teachers' beliefs, identities, confidence levels, and sexualities. These issues created barriers to open sharing of knowledge across the generational divide due to the respect that children should have towards adults and the childhood sexual innocence discourse inherent in communities. Such teachers believe that teaching young people, especially young women about sex would corrupt their innocence and lead them astray (Khau, 2012). According to Khau (2012), traditional beliefs and cultural practices were demonised within classroom-based sexuality education curricula, thus creating barriers for culture sensitive sexuality education practices. Hence, parents and communities felt affronted by CSE in their schools and opposed its implementation or facilitation (Baxen, 2010).

The two themes of this chapter have highlighted how young women and girls are constructed within capitalist heteropatriarchal communities. They have also shown how such constructions inhibit their agency in accessing and using appropriate SRH services. The provision of SRH services for young women and girls depends on healthcare providers. These healthcare providers should have knowledge on providing youth friendly services. Additionally, police officers and social workers should be educated on providing safe spaces for reporting violations of young women's SRH rights. Finally, communities should create safe spaces in which intergenerational sex-talk is encouraged. Past African communities had strategies of communicating about sex to their youth. Learning from the good practices of the past can enable the incorporation of such indigenous strategies into CSE so that it can become context specific.

There is no doubt that there are more women than men globally and it is high time that the majority does not live on the periphery of society, while the minority enjoys unabated power. Young women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa are not in crisis. They have the necessary agency to change their situations for the better within structures and spaces that celebrate their uniqueness (hooks, 2000). For sub-Saharan African countries to achieve sustainable development, there is need to recognise the unique realities and injustices that women and girls face such that the economic and social inequities they live with can be deconstructed and reimagined. As stated by African feminist scholars, any study of women should consider their diversity, history, and culture (Atanga, 2013; Maathai, 2006; Gatwiri & McLaren, 2016).

## 7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the context of women's sexual health and reproductive rights in sub-Saharan Africa. It focused on the need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as an empowerment strategy towards sustainable futures. The



analysis of secondary literature was presented with the aim of scrutinising the positioning of women and girls' sexual health and rights within the CSE curriculum. This was done to create a framework against which the challenges facing women and girls can be understood, challenged, and reconstructed. The discussions presented in this chapter show that the provision of a sexuality education based on Western ideologies and religions has not worked for sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, this chapter concludes that African countries need to learn from their past and reimagine a sexuality education curriculum that addresses the cultural issues and complex experiences of their people, to produce equitable societies whose people enjoy healthy and pleasurable sexual lives.

The current content and delivery of CSE in schools within sub-Saharan African countries was designed for a White, Western, affluent context which is not considerate of the specificities of sub-Saharan Africa. The CSE curriculum has not been adapted to suit the spaces and structures within which young African women live. Until the CSE curriculum gets decolonised, to acknowledge the diversity of girlhoods within the schooling system, it will not serve the needs of all young women and girls. As Moletsane (2011, p. 89) has argued, we need to challenge the practices and systems that disempower girls and “. . .leave them with little control over their lives and bodies. . .” Young women who are in control of their sexual and reproductive health become women who can lead society into equitable and sustainable societies, which live healthy and pleasurable sexual lives.

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# The Sexual Experience of Middle-Aged Married Women: Perceptions, Challenges and Course of Action



Tal Braverman-Uriel and Tal Litvak-Hirsch

**Abstract** The effect of maintaining of sexual desire on the mental well-being of women, in general, and particularly in long-term relationships, has only been partially investigated. Research that explores the ability of women aged 40–55 to actively influence their sexual experience is even sparser. Previous research has shown that women understand and experience their sexual desire mainly in the context of their partners’ relationships. They often report experiences in which they respond to sexual advances, as opposed to autonomy in sexual desire (Goldhammer & McCabe, *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 20:19–29, 2011). This chapter examines how, and to what extent, women can actively maintain sexual desire in long-term relationships, in the broadest sense, both toward their partners during intercourse and as an integral part of their mental well-being within the relationship. It also demonstrates how taking responsibility and nurturing a woman’s sexuality enhance personal and feminine empowerment, a way that has become more legitimate in recent years with the development of female gender awareness.

Our research is based on qualitative narrative data, collected from semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 20 Israeli women. The women were working mothers from a similar socio-economic status, aged 40–55, and were either married or in a permanent and prolonged relationship with a partner. This chapter presents part of a larger study that examined the ways in which the perception of sexuality’s role in a relationship, as well as its impact on the mental well-being of women, has significantly developed over the years. This applied study’s central contribution is that its findings demonstrated how the methods, means, approaches, insights, and responses of the interviewees can serve as a guide for other women, who seek to maintain sexual desire in marriage or in long-term relationships. This “life guide”

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may facilitate developing an approach toward sexuality and the very need for it, not only during intercourse, but also and especially as a way of life. Sexuality is an important part of marital communication and the mental well-being of women, as they learn to initiate, lead, and engage in practices that bring them the most sexual fulfilment. This theoretical implication of this study can further enhance the academic understanding of the topic.

**Keywords** Feminine empowerment · Long-term relationships · Mental well-being · Mid-life · Sexuality · Women

## 1 Introduction

The terms “wellness” and “subjective well-being” derive from the field of psychology. They describe a person’s subjective assessment of her/his own mental health, i.e., the extent to which a person perceives the overall quality of her/his life as being positive and desirable (OECD, 2013). People’s overall cognitive assessment of their life is based on their satisfaction with various aspects, such as work, relationships, and family (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004).

Nevertheless, the effect of sexuality on mental well-being among women, particularly those in long-term relationships, has only been partially investigated.

Though quantitative studies that examine this broad field observe both women and men, they are limited in scope. For example, Davison et al. (2009) researched the relationship between mental well-being and self-satisfaction with sexual function among 421 women aged 18–65, and the independent effect of menopause. The study concluded that women who reported sexual dissatisfaction experienced lower overall psychological well-being, and that menopause had no independent effect on mental well-being. Dundon and Rellini (2010) based their quantitative study on a sample of 86 women aged 40–70 and looked at predicting factors of sexual satisfaction among middle-aged women, in addition to sexual functionality. Their study concluded that sexual satisfaction is only partially explained by sexual functionality, and that other factors, such as mental well-being, how one adapts in relationships, compatibility between spouses and, to a lesser extent, menopausal symptoms, affect sexual satisfaction.

A qualitative study examined the meaning and experience of sexual desire for women, using semi-structured interviews with 40 heterosexual women aged 20–61. This study indicated that participants understood and experienced their sexual desire mainly within the context of their partners’ relationships, and most often reported responsive experiences rather than autonomous sexual desire. The implications of these findings are relevant to the classification and treatment of sexual desire disorders in women (Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011).

Against this backdrop, our study examined how women experience their sexuality in long-term relationships, and their ability to influence their experiences, during mid-life. We present women’s perspectives on what is considered a natural, intimate, commonplace, and seemingly expected experience to have. We explored the

relationship between this experience and their mental well-being during mid-life and analyzed the relationship between the women's ability to influence their sexuality and the empowerment this brought, and how they felt about their sexuality, over the age of 40.

The notion that female desire is an integral component of personal need, rather than necessity, is a step forward from historical prohibitions of "giving oneself," which emanated from fears of engulfment, loss of control, and loss of respect. These concerns become relevant during mid-life and need to be overcome (Yarom, 2018). Inasmuch as this is so, it is important to examine these phenomena while recognizing the significance of female sexuality as an integral component of women's self-worth, their resources, sources of power, and their female empowerment abilities. It is equally essential to acknowledge the importance of adult women's voices regarding their sexuality, as well as the discourse relating to how sexuality and its function are defined, sexuality's inherent role in how women experience self-worth, and their sexuality as a source of self-empowerment.

## **2 Theoretical Approaches to Female Sexuality in the Modern Age**

To understand the sexual experience of middle-aged married women with their partners and its relationship to their mental well-being, we must first recognize the difference in how "feminine" and "masculine" experiences evolve from culture, and stem from complex processes of social construction and friendships (Gilligan, 2016, pp. 118–120). Women tend to have a more contextual worldview that leans toward relationships and concern for others, whereas, from an early age, the "masculine" worldview is characterized by separation from others and by self-reinforcement. While both genders are born with the innate ability to consider oneself and others simultaneously, boys are expected to discard this "awareness" as they grow, and girls are expected to discard their "awareness" about caring for themselves (Gilligan, 2016). Subsequently, this approach leads to both "males" and "females" losing their personal voice, which, in effect, leads to the deterioration of their relationship with one another.

Due to the lack of power symmetry between the genders, the woman's position remains significantly weaker, when she is expected to be submissive, to be the giver, and to be the investing party, as she either lacks options or they are more limited (Friedman, 1996). However, sexual desire and the female body have become the main manifestations of empowered femininity today, in terms of "I decide"—"I want/I am having sex." We are now living in an era in which women have freedoms in society and sexuality, which are now also led by women. Today, more women recognize their need for sex and want to relish it at any age. They no longer just use their sex as a commodity to attract attention and/or to attain material and social gains, as was customary in the past (Yarom, 2018).

What happens when a person reaches mid-life after many years of being in a sexual relationship? On the one hand, as time passes, one can become more in touch with one's core "I," possibly overcome their fears and examine what they really want to do later in life. When this happens, normative and practical precepts weaken. In effect, a person feels freer to do what s/he truly desires to do at work, in relationships, with friends, to achieve quality of life, etc. Generally, this period enables one to live a more authentic life, breaking away from restrictive sexual stereotypes that were more influential during one's younger years. Women and men may begin to allow themselves to express parts of their personality that do not fit gendered stereotypes, which is illustrated in studies that measure the spike in women's confidence as they age. The studies have found that these women show improvements in their mental well-being, their self-confidence increases, and there is a change in equilibrium between the sexes, which is beneficial for the women (Friedman, 1996, pp. 142–143).

Based on these theoretical approaches, this study explored how women, between the ages of 40–55, expressed their sexuality in their long-term, permanent relationships. Through their sexuality, women affect their female empowerment. We explored what women think about the role sexuality plays in their lives, and their ability to influence that role. Due to our desire to focus here on issues related to female empowerment, the research question that is the focus of this chapter is: How does a woman's sexual expression affect her ability to empower herself and maintain a deep, meaningful, complete and honest long-term relationship that is based on equality between her and her partner?

## ***2.1 Sexual Desire, Sexual Need and Everything in Between***

Philippe et al. (2017) defined sexual desire as a one-dimensional phenomenon that arises from interaction between spouses and can be examined from a dualistic point of view: the object we desire and are attracted to, i.e., man, woman, tall, short, etc., and the sexual technique to which we are drawn.

Studies that explore women's sexuality and the maintenance of their desire indicate a tendency toward mixed trends. For example, studies show that women, who positioned themselves as "wanting" or "craving" sex, lacked sexual desire and experienced minimal sexual pleasure, as they compromised themselves in order to satisfy what they perceived to be their partner's "needs" (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). Perel (2019) demonstrated that the challenge of preserving sexual desire depends on the successful navigation between three poles that exist within each individual: (a) the desire to institutionalize the relationship versus the transition from freedom and independence to commitment and responsibility; (b) becoming too familiar, which may occur when closeness and intimacy replace individuality and mystery in the relationship; and (c) stereotypical gendered roles, like "mother," "wife," and "housekeeper" that promote de-eroticization of the self. Sexual desire is not anchored in the "expected and safe" side of the poles: it thrives when there is a

balance between the opposing impulses—between comfort and freedom, security and risk, and intimacy and individuality. Women who manage to maintain this delicate balance, between these seemingly opposite poles, find it easier to maintain their sexual desire over the years (Sims & Meana, 2010).

Indeed, a woman's sexual desire for a partner can change over time (Maass, 2007). The relationship between the couple, their previous level of enjoyment of sexual activity, and mental and physical health, are all factors that affect women's sexual interest and sexual activities (Maass, 2007). Davison et al. (2009) found that the psychological well-being of menopausal women, who report sexual dissatisfaction, is overall lower than their counterparts.

Problems pertaining to sexual desire are linked to relationship problems. However, Mark and Lasslo (2018) draw attention to the fact that there is a critical gap in our understanding of the factors that contribute to maintaining sexual desire in long-term relationships. Therefore, in this chapter, we explore how women maintain sexual desire in long-term relationships and empower themselves by maintaining it.

### **3 Method**

#### ***3.1 The Study Population***

This study used semi-structured interviews with 20 Israeli middle-class women. All women were aged 40–55, had academic degrees, had jobs, were married or had been in a permanent relationship for over 15 years, and were mothers to children of varying ages. During 2018–2019, the women were located and recruited to participate in the research by means of advertisements in various women's forums and social networks (i.e., Facebook), as well as via "snowball" sampling.

##### **3.1.1 Research Tools**

The study employed a qualitative narrative approach (Shkedi, 2003) to elicit experiences from the interviewee's point of view, to garner information regarding her relationship with her partner, in light of social, cultural, and personal contexts, and their effects on her attitudes and feelings. Choice of methodology was based on the need to understand the phenomenon under investigation, as perceived by the women themselves and as the women described and explained it. This is subject-dependent research methodology that is based on the research participants' stories and focuses on the topics they raise. This methodology makes it possible to present a rich description and a theoretical explanation of what interviewees share.

We used a semi-structured interview, which presented the women with some substantial questions. For example, they were asked: (1) What sources of power do you have as a woman within the marital relationship? How and in what way do you see the connection between your ability to express yourself sexually and your mental



well-being? (2) In your experience, what are the difficulties that exist for creating a change in couple sexuality? How do you think they can be overcome? (3) Today, as a woman in “mid-life,” what parts of your personality can you afford to express, that you did not express in the past? And (4) How do you think you can influence the place that sexuality has in this stage of your life?

### **3.1.2 Procedure**

The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' home (by the first author). They were recorded in their entirety and subsequently transcribed. The duration of the interview averaged between an hour and a half to 2 h. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and all participants signed an informed consent form. The interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis method that identified key themes that emerged in the interviews and were found to be related to the research questions (Shkedi, 2003).

## **4 Findings**

Regardless of our specific inquiries, an overarching finding revealed that over the years there has been significant development in women's perceptions of the role of their sexuality and how it influences their mental well-being. Though personal experiences naturally varied, what succinctly emerged was the participants' acknowledgement of the value of satisfying sexuality, and their desire to achieve it.

From our findings, the women's perceptions of their sexuality can be divided into two main categorical groups. The first group includes women who experienced little or no acquaintance with their bodies and sources of pleasure during their youth, and who abstained from the notion of sex for enjoyment for a variety of reasons, including ignorance, shame, and the desire and necessity to please their partner and fulfill their role as a woman. Today, as a result of broadening their knowledge, their perceptions have shifted, their sense of worth and self-confidence has increased, as has their desire to realize their sexuality and benefit from it. The second group includes women who have experienced satisfactory sex from the beginning of their sexual explorations, and who, today, strive to achieve sexual diversity to enrich and improve their sex lives. Some of the research participants successfully implemented improvements and diversity in their sex lives, while others are still contemplating which is the best direction for them and their spouses.

## ***4.1 Challenges with Sexual Aspects and Ways to Deal with Them***

### **4.1.1 Deficiencies and Divergences in Prolonged Sexuality**

Many women are aware of the complexity of sexuality in their married lives. Some sense an absence of flirtation while engaging in sex with their husbands, and that thrill of sexual tension has completely disappeared. Quite a few women do not feel satisfied in their sexual relationship with their partners. Irit feels that she's missing out: "I'm curious to know if there are things we don't know or are missing out on[. . .] I think we can do more." For her, and for Na'ama as well, reaching physical pleasure is challenging due to the difficulty in achieving open communication with their spouses: "I think there's a struggle to communicate, to talk about things [. . .] because we're not used to talking about it, and it isn't simple. . .".

Some women felt that the difficulties in their sex lives were perpetuated when their profound bond with their partner, and challenges in breaking with life's routine, led to an absence of creativity. This is how Roni described it: "Many times a new and different essence is missing[. . .] In a long-term relationship you bring to bed the whole day's burdens, and those from over the years[. . .] and at the end of the day it's the same smell, the same voice, the same person." During the interviews, frustrations that were voiced stemmed from a certain feeling of coercion of the women by their spouses—a coercion they felt they needed to comply with to abide by the education that they had received. For example, Daria said that giving in sexually to her husband when she was not in the mood, or his insistence, were unpleasant to her, and that the lack of communication with him around the subject was what frustrated her and led to a loss of sexual desire.

### **4.1.2 Sexuality, Mental Well-Being and Female Empowerment**

The search for information, inducing curiosity, and taking initiative, were repeatedly presented by these women as techniques to cope with and influence their sexuality for the purpose of breaking from routine and enhancing sexual enjoyment. Inasmuch, change is set in motion for these women by the power they gain once they learn what feels good to them, how to voice their desires and ask for what brings them pleasure. Mira explained that being influential can come from "small things, like writing a text message to the 'love of my life' or saying 'thank you for being here for me', or even writing an erotic message[. . .] aimed to excite and create anticipation."

Self-acceptance and acceptance of one's spouse and their weaknesses were some of the tools mentioned by Nurit and other women. An example of the former can be seen in Nurit's case—when her demand for perfectionism ceased being an issue for her, she gradually developed habits that facilitated a more positive relationship and subsequently influenced the role of sexuality in her life: "In the beginning I always

demanded perfection from myself. . . and. . . even as a model to aspire towards it's impossible to achieve[. . .] so you have to recalibrate." An example of the latter can be seen in Orna's acceptance of her spouse's vulnerabilities, including his mental depression, as a way to improve sexual relations between them: "Creating [. . .]an atmosphere that supports intimacy more, that leads [. . .] to a calmer home, [. . .] with acceptance, with compassion, and understanding him, is quite helpful[. . .] in creating intimacy."

The realization that a sense of 'other' is needed to rekindle sexual desire led some women to entertain thoughts of having an open marriage that were rooted in hopes for open communication with their partner. Yael braved the challenge of opening her relationship by sharing her desire with her partner: "I dared to face my curiosity, keeping in mind that 'I deserve to try it' [. . .]and since then I'm on a journey where I listen to myself." Her challenge was "how to phrase the question" openly, and she overcame it by finding a way to articulate it.

In others, the process of change came about by exposure to theoretical studies on the subject. Naama, who found it difficult to experience physical pleasure, said: "the knowledge that I acquired, that I hadn't known before, led me to learn that there's a 'women's response circle' which is something physiological. It took a while for me to believe that it's something that happens by itself [. . .] that it's an existing mechanism." Her insights resulted in self-awareness. Naama and several other interviewees thought that sex therapy, or couples therapy, might help improve sexual communication with their partners. Lori also utilized couples therapy to strengthen the quality and frequency of sexual relations with her spouse: "Due to the treatment we received [. . .] talking about sex has become easier [. . .] We've learned to discuss it."

From some of the interviewees' narratives, it became evident that they had come to terms with the disparities that existed between them and their spouses and had ultimately learned to deal with them. What helped Millie achieve this was her husband's ability to accept her and her needs completely. She views their reciprocity as the key factor in their success: "Part of being an adult [. . .] is accepting one's partner as they are and paying attention to what you bring [to a relationship] and being in this place requires him to be like you." Inasmuch, one's ability to come to terms with disparities in the relationship stems from the ability of each partner to accept the other, including their partner's shortcomings and weaknesses.

Most of the interviewees described the maintenance of passion and diversification of sex, its quality and frequency, as areas that fell under their responsibility. Similarly, most of the women expressed that it was their responsibility to deal with sex-related frustrations, noting that they were able and willing to influence what happened. Their tone was one of action, creativity, and female leadership toward sexual action. This entailed initiating an atmosphere of courtship and romance, for example, reading erotic literature, wearing sexy underwear, using sex accessories, and undertaking other initiatives, such as expressing their need for satisfying sex, a strong relationship, and effective communication with their spouse/partner. The women also began psychological therapy to enhance

self-awareness, insisting that their partner join them for couple therapy, and gained experience through workshops and theoretical learning.

All the women—those who consciously prioritized working on their relationship as a way of life and campaigned for good sexuality, those who came to terms with their partner's weaknesses, and those who dared to ask for an open relationship to achieve sexual freedom—were aware of the obstacles they needed to overcome to achieve their goal of improving the quality of their personal and marital life. This is how Lori, one of the “campaigners,” described it:

Firstly, I learned to effectively express what makes me feel good and what doesn't [. . .] Then [. . .] you look for new toys, new sexual positions [. . .] read books [. . .] The change occurred in both of us [. . .] It's a matter of learning [. . .] and consciously working on it [. . .] I noticed that when I enjoy it, it feels completely different. And when I stopped renouncing my own pleasure and started demanding things [. . .] the impact was immense.”

For Lori, influencing her own sexuality is a way of life: “I invest a lot in it [. . .] and initiate even when I'm not in the mood and do not feel like it [. . .] as if it's another task [. . .] but I want to enjoy this task.”

The link between adequate or sexual expression and mental well-being was evident among most of the women. For Orit, it affected all facets in her life: “When there's good sexuality between a couple, the relationship between them is good. And when you have that kind of relationship and foundation at home, you flourish even more outside the home.” Orit described the expression of sexuality as a realm in which she feels authentically connected to herself, without any masks: “I feel that I am focused on my needs one hundred percent—on my pleasure, and it's mine alone.” When human beings do not have the ability to express themselves, they feel limited and unsatisfied. It is the same with sexuality, Nurit explained: “When you don't express yourself in another area, then you will feel limited and unsatisfied, and it's the same here [. . .] If I don't do it, I really feel deprived.”

For Hagit, sexuality also played a central role in her life and granted her great satisfaction from her external appearance, her self-confidence at work, her positive relationship with her husband, and her high sense of self-worth, all of which sprouted from her ability to focus on her own needs: “Action, control, and attention improve one's quality of life.” Most of the interviewees developed their ability for sexual expression, and today the majority are able to put themselves and their needs at the forefront. Most of the women said that they feel more empowered than before, both in the long-term relationship with their partners, and even, in general, as women.

## 5 Discussion

This study suggests that women, aged 40–55, can cultivate better quality sexuality in mid-life and with a long-term partner. In most cases, the women perceived themselves as personally and directly responsible for the quality of their sexuality with

their partner and the degree of its centrality in their lives. These findings are particularly interesting in light of results from a previous qualitative study in which 31 married couples were interviewed (Elliott & Umberson, 2008). In the prior study, women expressed that it was difficult for them to find the time, energy, and inclination to be sexual. Those women, similar to the women interviewed for our study, tried to be more sexual and spontaneous in their sex lives, but not necessarily for the same reasons. While the women in Umberson's and Elliott's study considered "sexual chores" mostly their responsibility for the maintenance of their marriage, the interviewees in our study recognized the importance of this role and invested much effort and resources to improve their sex lives. This was based on the acknowledgment that sexuality functions as a component of their "self-accuracy" and female empowerment, which they consider essential to their physical and mental well-being. Additionally, our research found that the women's motivation emanated from their interest in sexuality and their aspiration to experience sexuality in and of itself, and not necessarily to enhance their married life.

These experiences of creating active change within a sexual context contrast with findings from a previous study in which different experiences of women emerged: that is, even though the women understood and experienced sexual desire, mainly in the context of their partners, they reported responsive and non-autonomous sexual desire experiences (Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011). In contrast, in our study, we found that gaining self-awareness, and reconnecting with their personal needs and desires led women in this age group to seek the kind of sexuality that is right for them, in terms of their preferred approach, frequency, and quality. In this context, our findings are also consistent with the process described in Yarom's research (2018), according to which an awakening occurs, instigated by perspectives on one's own mortality and considerations about how one would like to live the rest of one's years that will include retirement, old age, and ultimately death. Our research, similar to Yarom's (2018), found that the interviewees allocated significant weight to the notion of "lust for life" (the "true self") that caused them in mid-life to seek opportunities to boost their vitality and to continue this search for life. Many interviewees influenced their sexuality by taking action: some learned about healthy sexuality, some sought treatment, some diversified their sex lives with their partner, and some sought sexual freedom outside of marriage. These women, thus, enhanced their femininity, especially in mid-life, a phase that tends to emphasize the gaps in the sexual arena.

A key finding that further emerged in our study is the connection between sexuality and mental well-being and female empowerment. Most of the women were aware of the link between good sexuality and mental well-being, and the desire to create better sexuality for themselves. In almost all cases, changes resulted from the woman's influence and active initiative undertaken in a sensitive manner, while listening attentively to herself and to her partner, yet simultaneously being consistent and persistent. Our findings are congruous with findings from another study that showed that, according to women, as their married life progressed, so did their role of being mainly responsible for maintaining sexual intercourse and for ensuring that it occurred in a consistent manner (Maoz et al., 2019).

Sexual motivation has been found to be related to and to rely on innovation. Furthermore, the formation of positive expectations, regarding sexuality within a relationship, has been found to positively affect sexual desire, sexual approaches, and sexual techniques that directly address problems relating to sexual desire (McCarthy & Wald, 2015). The conclusions of these studies are well aligned with what several of the women in our study reported: creative and varied initiatives refresh and renew sexuality over the years, and positive expectations of sexual intercourse are important for developing sexual desire in a long-term relationship. In our research, numerous women discussed the steps and initiatives they took in preparation for having sex, such as creating a suitable atmosphere in the bedroom, wearing sexy clothes, sending romantic messages during the day, leading up to their sexual encounter, and more. While such preparatory steps may seem tedious when in a long-term relationship, couples in a committed relationship, who prioritize these steps, may experience consequential benefits, particularly women (Mark & Lasslo, 2018).

Our findings, however, contrasted with results from a study undertaken by Mark and Herbenick (2014), which looked at ways in which women coped with sexual desire and its discrepancy in long-term relationships. The scholars argued that the strategies women adopt to influence sexual desire within relationships often did not solve the problem. However, our study shows that the strategies utilized by some of the women, to bring about change in the sexual context, yielded positive results, and were perceived by them to be successful. Most of the interviewees considered problems in this area to be solvable—an attitude that was derived mainly from their high motivation, determination, initiative, creativity, and the ability to contain and overcome crises. This made it possible for them to manifest desires, founded upon effective communication between partners, among additional factors.

Finally, our study claims that in mid-life most women feel that they have gained control of their circumstances and can express themselves authentically and fully, sometimes even while feeling empowered. Thanks to their inner strength, most of the women changed from being passive women, who only fulfill sexual tasks, to active, leading and enterprising women. The alignment of these findings with Gilligan's (2016) theory is very striking: when women abandon their desire to "please" their husbands, they choose to fulfill themselves in ways that suit them best and, thus, express themselves with confidence. When they engage in a sexual relationship, they achieve love and freedom.

## ***5.1 Summary and Practical Conclusions***

Our study suggests that women, aged 40–55, attribute a central role to sexuality in their lives, which can foster unique and quality sexuality with a long-term partner during their mid-life years. In most cases, the women saw themselves as personally and directly responsible for the quality of sexuality with their partners, since they were the ones who led and initiated the change. Although we are neither generalizing

our findings to women outside of our sample, nor addressing the possibility that the women's partners may approach the topic from a different perspective, we see our study, nevertheless, as making a contribution to research of the issue, by highlighting ways women change in their abilities. The women manage, nurture, develop, preserve and influence satisfying and quality sexuality as part of their female empowerment, when they are in a very long-term relationship.

Furthermore, our findings shed light on the tools women use to successfully manage the ongoing paradox between erotic desire and the home-family space, and their ability to influence their relationships in these realms. The tools they utilize, the strategies they adopt, their insights regarding the process, and how they cope with and influence their sexuality are all factors that can interest and guide other women, who are similarly looking for ways to improve their sexuality in their long-term relationships. On a practical level, these insights may contribute to an instrumental "toolbox" for married woman, particularly newlyweds, and function as a "sexual life guide" that may assist and support them as they attempt to actively steer their relationships toward a place they find to be sexually desirable.

## **5.2 Research Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

Along with the contribution offered by our study, we are also aware of its limitations. Firstly, our study was based on a small number of interviews with Israeli women from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, the study leaves some questions unanswered, which subsequently suggest potential additional research directions. It is imperative to hear female voices that were not heard or represented in this study, since it is men's voices who are more often heard and solicited. This will make it possible for us to learn how many more women perceive sexuality during mid-life in long-term relationships.

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# Lived Menstrual Experiences of Blind Menstruators: Empowering Blind Menstruators for Sustainable Development



Kavita Gupta and Balvant Somabhai Parimal

**Abstract Aim:** The objective of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of Blind menstruators.

**Method:** An in-depth interview with five Blind menstruators was conducted from February to March 2022. The data collected through interviews was transcribed and then translated for the report writing purpose.

**Results:** After thematic analysis, six themes were identified, namely, Menstrual experiences, Knowledge and Skills, External support, Internal support, Independence, Interdependence.

**Conclusion:** The study determines that lack of or limited prior menstrual knowledge before menarche, their menstrual experiences, the role of external and internal psychosocial support, the societal expectation of menstruating females to hide menstruation, and the unpreparedness of girls for this transformation all affect the Visually impaired menstruators.

**Implications:** In the light of the experience of Blind menstruators, they can be educated about menstrual management and taught how to use pads, tampons, and menstrual cups thereby mastering them in pertinent skills. Counselling is necessary for Blind menstruators to deal with depression, guilt and how to handle emotions before and during menstrual phase.

**Keywords** Blind menstruators · Menstrual experience · Hygiene management · Internal and external support · Independence · Interdependence · Knowledge & skills

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## 1 Introduction

Visual impairment is defined as a broad category which includes people with limited vision as well as people who are blind. This is in keeping with the World Health Organization's most recent revision of their International Classification of Diseases, which separates "visual impairment including blindness" into five categories,

- mild or no visual impairment, presenting distance acuity  $<20/70$ ,
- moderate visual impairment, presenting distance acuity  $<20/200$ ,
- blindness, presenting distance acuity  $<20/400$ ,
- blindness, presenting distance acuity  $<20/1200$ , and
- blindness, no light perception (World Health Organization, 2011).

Onset of menstruation is one of the vital changes happening in all females during their period of adolescence. Menstrual hygiene means necessities and requirements such as the use of sanitary pads or clean and soft absorbents, adequate washing of the genital area, proper disposal of used absorbents, and other special healthcare needs of women during monthly menstrual cycle. In woman's life, good hygiene practice during menstruation is very important which prevents from adverse health outcomes. Though menstruation is a normal physiological process, it is still surrounded with social taboos, supernatural beliefs, misconceptions, and malpractices, which is very challenging for women. Due to these social stigmatic, cultural, and religious restrictions, menstrual practices are regarded as big limitation for menstrual hygiene management. Menstrual hygiene is very important; however, it is still a neglected area of concern in many parts of the world. If menstrual period is not properly handled and safe hygiene is not practiced, this may lead to poor quality of life resulting from distress, reproductive tract infection, genitourinary tract infections, smelling, guiltiness, cervical cancer, poor academic performance. Poor menstrual practice is also connected with many other complications such as premature births, stillbirths, miscarriages, infertility problems, and carcinoma of cervix.

Despite the emphasis on gender, the Sustainable Development Goals do not explicitly address the natural biological occurrence of menstruation, something experienced by almost 2 billion people globally, or its effects on the health and development agenda. There is increasing global attention to the importance of menstrual health and hygiene for differently abled menstruators. Addressing menstrual health may enable progress in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as, Education, Gender, Health (Sexual and Reproductive Health; Psychosocial Wellbeing), and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH).

The term 'menstrual health and hygiene (MHH)' is used to describe the needs experienced by people who menstruate, including having safe and easy access to the information, supplies, and infrastructure needed to manage their periods with dignity and comfort (menstrual hygiene management) as well as the systemic factors that link menstruation with health, gender equality, empowerment, and beyond.

## 2 Rationale

This exploratory study aims to understand how the Blind menstruators' experience is different and issues that they face during menstruation. The study will assist in finding what support such menstruators need and what interventions could be planned. Through literature review, it was observed that they face discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation in daily life. Issues related to menstruation related discrimination, problems, and plight among Blind menstruators is less documented. Understanding the phenotypical differences and unique challenges for blind menstruators has garnered increasing attention in recent years. However, blind menstruators' specific reproductive health continues to be a poorly understood area. For the present study, we are labelling them as Blind menstruators, as they are vulnerable population and face challenges of dependency on others, limited or no access to information about their own body, menstruation and menstrual hygiene. It is important to highlight that Blind menstruators' health, sanitation and hygiene during menstruation could be linked to four goals of sustainable development.

## 3 Method

The present exploratory *qualitative study* included in-depth interviews of five Blind menstruators in the age range of 20–25 years through purposive and snowball sampling. The sample included females having regular menstrual cycle of 28–35 days, no history suggestive of PCOS, PCOD and hypothyroidism and willingness to consent. After data collection, data analysis was done by using *Interpretative Phenomenological analysis*. The total minutes of interview was 450 min. The total number of Transcript pages were 25. The participants have been quoted where relevant to bring in their perspective in their own words. However, respecting their privacy, their identity is not revealed, and the five participants are coded as Participant-1, Participant-2, Participant-3, Participant-4 and Participant-5.

## 4 Data Collection

### 4.1 Interview Design: Semi-structured Interview

Opening Question—‘Tell me about your menstrual experiences’. It was then followed up with open ended questions to encourage the participants to describe their menstrual experiences in their own terms.

## **4.2 Interview Process: Individual In-Depth Interview**

At the beginning of the interview:

- (a) Objective of the research study was explained.
- (b) Consent form was read and signed (Audio recording with consent was obtained).
- (c) All questions regarding the interview process were answered.

## **4.3 Interview Technique: Open Ended Questions**

The pace of the conversation was customized in order to establish rapport. Participants were encouraged to take as much time they needed to articulate their thoughts, regain composure in case of an emotional reaction, and to take breaks if needed. They were offered to contact the researcher for mental health resources in case they experience any emotional difficulties.

# **5 Data Analysis: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis—Steps of Data Analysis**

## **5.1 Step 1: Reading and Rereading**

To understand the lived experience, concerns and understanding of the participants about menstrual experiences from their perspective. It was ascertained that the participant was the focus of analysis by developing a general understanding of the research participant's narrative.

## **5.2 Step 2: Initial Noting**

Initial coding of the data was done which helped to understand how the participants discuss, contemplate and comprehend their menstrual experiences. While marking the important content, the researchers made a note of:

1. *Descriptive Comments*: How the participants articulated their thoughts, what they emphasized as important and their personal understanding of what happened.
2. *Linguistic Comments*: The distinctive use of language which characterizes the participants' private experience of menstruation (e.g., key phrases, metaphors, idiosyncratic vocabulary).
3. *Conceptual Comments*: It consists of the researchers' personal reflections and development of their personal ideas of the participant's menstrual experiences.

**Table 1** Socio-demographic details of participants

Parameter	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Age	20	21	20	22	23
Ethnicity	Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian
Socio-economic status	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
K-12 experience	Public schools; high school at school for the blind.	Public schools; high school at school for the blind.	Public schools; high school at school for the blind.	Public schools; high school at school for the blind.	Public schools; high school at school for the blind.
Postsecondary enrolment at time of interview	University (Bachelor Program)	University (Bachelor Program)	University (Bachelor Program)	University (Bachelor Program)	University (Bachelor Program)
Origin of visual impairment	Blind from birth	Blind from birth	Blind from birth	Blind from birth	Blind from birth

In Table 1, the socio-demographic details of the blind menstruators who participated in the research study is illustrated. It could be depicted that the age-range of participants was between 20 and 23 years, belonged to middle class family, attended blind school, presently pursuing bachelors programme at the university. All the participants were blind since birth.

The above Fig. 1 illustrates the major themes of ‘Lived Menstrual experiences of Blind menstruators’ in a diagrammatic view.

From the above Table 2, following subthemes were derived:

#### 1. MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCES

Characteristics: Physical & Emotional Distress

#### 2. KNOWLEDGE & EXPERIENCES

Characteristics: Orientation & mobility, Braille.

#### 3. EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Characteristics: Education & learning, Technology, Family- Mothers.

#### 4. INTERNAL SUPPORT

Characteristics: Self-Confidence & Positive reframing

#### 5. INDEPENDENCE

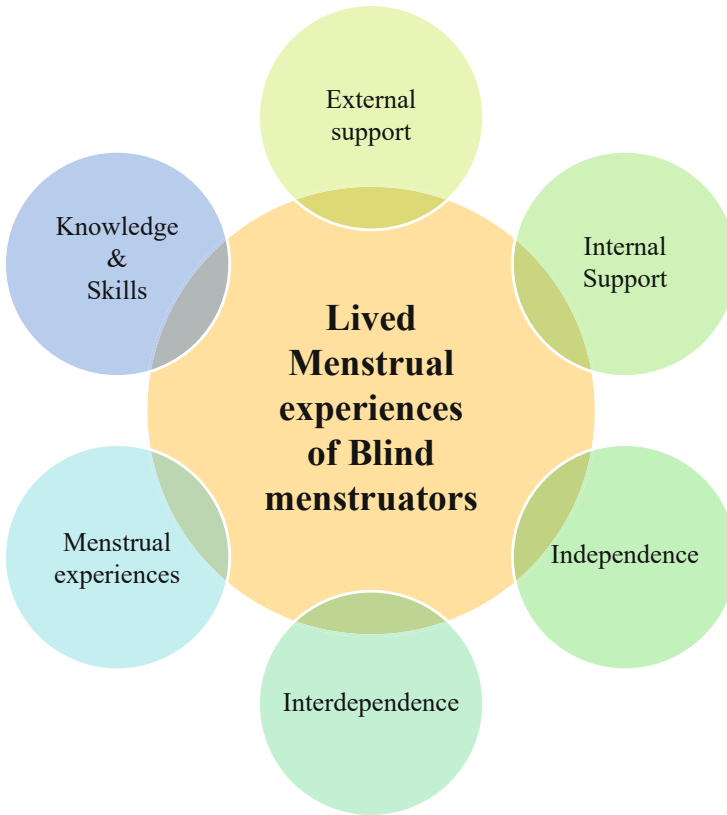
Characteristics: Self-determination & Self-reliance.

#### 6. INTERDEPENDENCE

Characteristics: Accepting help, being social, being accepted & included.

### **Theme 1: Menstrual Experiences**

Findings reveal that blind menstruators do face issues of Abdominal cramps, acne, cravings, sensitive breasts, etc. that help them in knowing that their periods are around the corner. By using other senses like smell. Period blood has a metallic smell due to the presence of iron in blood. According to many participants, there are many



**Fig. 1** Lived menstrual experiences of blind menstruators themes

myths and taboos prevailing in the society that exaggerate their emotional symptoms during menstrual phases.

*“I struggled a lot initially, how to do such things, how to manage, how to fix the sanitary napkin is a challenge for the visually challenged. . . By using sense of smell, I could sense that my periods has started” (P1).*

*“I have moderate mood swings, abdominal pain, but sometimes I feel like very low. I feel like very low, very sad, feel like crying without any reason.” (P3)*

*“Like you can’t touch something, you can’t go into temple, you cannot enter into the kitchen and take water by self. But I am lucky enough that despite of visually challenged, no such restrictions are being practiced at my home.” (P4)*

### **Theme 2: Knowledge and Skills**

Findings reveal that blind menstruators agreed that knowledge and skills were derived from education and learning, but the impact of their knowledge and skills to deal with menstrual and premenstrual distress extended well beyond the

**Table 2** Sub-themes observed in the transcripts

Menstrual experiences	Knowledge & skills	External support	Internal support	Independence	Interdependence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doing something meaningful to manage mood swings</li> <li>• Menstrual hygiene</li> <li>• Being in motion</li> <li>• Physical &amp; Emotional symptoms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Braille</li> <li>• Daily living skills</li> <li>• Orientation &amp; mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education &amp; learning</li> <li>• Blind peer group</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• “Blind-friendliness of surrounding</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Safety &amp; security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• Positive reframing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-determination</li> <li>• Self-reliance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting help</li> <li>• Being social</li> <li>• Integrating with sighted people</li> <li>• Being accepted and included</li> </ul>

instructional experience, such as, orientation and mobility, learning braille, engaging in daily living skills.

*‘I struggled a lot about (“where am I and where do I want to go?”) and (“how do I get there?”). I learnt to navigate through campus buildings, but I always struggle and need external support to reach to washroom when I am in my menstrual periods. . . . Though I feel confident and independent but I think that skills are something which I could learn only through experience’. (P2)*

*“I was provided knowledge about menstrual bleeding via embossed braille and or computer braille displays. I did not know much about menstruation initially. But gradually I am becoming aware of it that menstruation is a biological process which is normal for every female to undergo.” (P3)*

*“We can’t, won’t learn visually, but there are other methods through which demonstration happens. My mother helped and guided me. I can hear what she’s explaining. So, the assumption that, once your sight is gone, environmental and incidental learning becomes impossible is nonsensical.” (P5)*

**Theme 3: External Support**

Findings reveal that blind menstruators have to rely on people (Social support), not only for specialized and adaptive assistance, but also to access and receive menstrual products that people with full vision can easily access. For many participants, the process of education helped them to empower during their menstrual phases. With the advancement in technology, they can easily navigate through websites for necessary information related to menstrual health and hygiene.

*“I’ve been lucky enough to gain a lot of knowledge about how to navigate the websites. Even if they’re not accessible. . . . I can find information related to menstrual phases. . . . I think that, for me at least, I’d say 80% of websites that I’ve navigated are pretty accessible. . . .” (P1)*

*"I cannot trust people during my periods as they will make fun of me. . .even I doubt my best friend. . ."* (P2, P3)

*"I think Just doing it. . .I would say generally. . . my family and my friends have done a pretty good job helping me learn, you know. I just have to buckle down and do it. I think that's what life is most about, you know? You learn and you read. You read the stuff, and you read how to do and you learn from friends and family."* (P4, P5)

#### **Theme 4: Internal Support**

Blind menstruators also relied upon internal characteristics such as, confidence, acceptance & adaptability, and positive reframing, in order to face the challenges during menstrual phases.

Confidence was related to participants' ability to act independently (self-determination) and interdependently (being social, accepting help, etc.) and enabled the blind menstruators to take advantage of experiences and external supports and to both gain and apply knowledge and skills. The positive aspects of confidence included self-awareness and self-acceptance. Self-confidence also benefitted participants in responding to insensitivity or misconceptions.

On the flip-side, there were times when fear and self-doubt prevented participants from being as confident as they would have like to have been.

*"I maintain, I can maintain my hygiene. I can use sanitary napkins and I can discard them the way it should be. I can clean myself. . .my disability doesn't make any kind of change in cleaning and maintaining hygiene."* (P2, P4)

*"Before I figured out about my menarche, I thought I was the only blind person who have experienced it, however, since accepting and becoming confident in myself and my strengths and limitations, I have become more assertive and articulate when pursuing assistance or independence during menstrual phases".* (P3, P5)

*"I just divert my thoughts. I just listen to music, I talk to somebody, I read stories, music therapy and chocolates/sweets for coping with menstrual distress. as it prevents me from taking help of medications to manage symptoms. . . Me, I like exercise, I like homework, I like occasional, you know, music or books or whatever so that I can feel normal."* (P1, P2)

*"I think that it's just a matter of presenting yourself as confident. You know, making the choice to advocate. . . speak loudly and be really proud of who you are. I mean that whole thing, and you know maybe the sighted individuals around that person will have more respect. You know, they'll be a bit more understanding of their situation, and then the visually impaired menstruator is able to interact with them without any problems."* (P2, P4, P5)

#### **Theme 5: Independence**

Blind menstruators addressed the idea of independence that included: self-determination, self-reliance, multiple times during the interview. The freedom to make decisions for oneself was a major subtheme of independence. For participants, self-determination required both having options to choose from and being permitted to choose. Another important subtheme of independence is the ability and opportunity to depend on oneself for menstrual health and hygiene needs.



*“Blind menstruating females should really learn braille so that they can make a choice for themselves with respect to sanitary napkins, tampons, menstrual cups, etc. . . . I prefer to be able to prioritize what I want to prioritize within my space” (P1, P2, P3, P4)*

*“I was growing up and attained menarche, not knowing the skills that I’m learning now, to be able to be independent. . . . I used to have to depend on my mom for every little thing, which I did not like it all. . . . And I’m not—I really don’t want to become one of those women who needs sympathy and pity, and the fact that I might be on my way to becoming one of those women scares me. . . . If you really need that for a season, in your life, okay, but, the menstruation thing is going to be there until we reach menopause, if that’s all you’re ever going to do, you know, I don’t want to become a burden on anyone.” (P3, P4, P5)*

### **Theme 6: Interdependence**

Blind menstruators discussed about their challenges and issues such as, accepting help, being social, integrated with sighted people, being accepted and included, in social experiences during menstrual phases.

The notion of “interdependence” includes social decisions, interactions, and dispositions, both of the participants and of the people they interact with, which comprise the person’s overall experience of being inter-reliant with others especially during menstrual phases.

*“I understand that we all depend on one another to some degree, that’s fine. But when that choice of how much you depend on someone else is taken away from you, without—I don’t care how harsh your circumstances are. . . . The unfortunate thing is, whenever you’re blind, you’re going to have to rely on a lot of people for a lot of things”. (P3, P4).*

*“I know the importance of finding friends who appreciates me as a person, rather than pitying me or seeing me as a “service project”. (P1, P3, P4, P5)*

## **6 Discussion**

The present study’s aim was Empowering Blind Menstruators for Sustainable Development by exploring the lived experiences of Blind menstruators. The present exploratory qualitative study included in-depth interviews of five Blind menstruators in the range of 20–25 years.

For interpretation the data Interpretative Phenomenological analysis method was applied. The present study also aimed that the study will assist in finding what support such menstruators need and what interventions could be planned.

Since the time immemorial the menstruation phenomenon has been a taboo in many cultures and thus various restrictions are imposed on normal menstruators during their menstruation. If normal menstruators have to face many challenges what would be the coping strategies and support system for blind menstruators? This research study tried to search the answers of these questions so some concrete and productive measures could be recommended for the subjective well-being of blind menstruators.

After in-depth interview, information was transcribed and after analysis some important themes have emerged in this study which can be sources for various stake holders connected to this field.

Theme no. 1 is a reflection of a pain experienced by the blind menstruators. Their experiences speak that despite their limitations of disability, they were not spared from social and cultural restrictions. It shows ensuring safety and dignity of for blind menstruators needs wider awareness in the society.

Theme no. 2 indicates that they are very much in need of advance technology to maintain their menstruation health and hygiene (MHH). Though they are not sighted their inner eyes are waiting for someone to stand by them during this period. In this study difficulties experienced by menstruators give message to educationists and policy makers to introduce Menstruation health and hygiene subject for girls students in elementary level so that with this scientific knowledge before, during and after menarche they could be facilitated to overcome many challenges and avoid adverse effects on their academic performance and health. Similar findings can be observed in study conducted by Ibaishwa and Achakpa (2016), Joshi and Joshi (2015), Beril et al. (2019).

Learned helplessness has since become a basic principle of behavioral theory, demonstrating that prior learning can result in a drastic change in behaviour and seeking to explain why individuals may accept and remain passive in negative situations despite their clear ability to change them. Seligman (1974) argued that, as a result of these negative expectations, other consequences may accompany the inability or unwillingness to act, including low self-esteem, chronic failure, sadness, and physical illness and disability (Seligman & Peterson, 2001). In this study in the Theme no. 3 Learned helplessness has been endorsed that from the birth blind people learn that they are dependent on others. Though they feel helpless they feel compassion, emotional support of non-menstruating members will enhance their self-esteem. Similar findings can be observed in study conducted by Dündar and Özsoy (2020).

Visually impairment has been always difficult to accept as the reality of life for the blind people and for blind females Menarche becomes as adding fuel in the fire. In this study it has been observed as mentioned in theme no. 4 that if they have internal support that is strong will power and high self-esteem, even they face many setbacks in their life they can bounce back. This study also led to think to many counsellors to develop resilience in blind menstruators to overcome their limitations. It has been also found that if they are accepted unconditionally and compassionately, they accept that though the life is full of adversities it is also full of overcomings. They should be trained to accept that menstruation period is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable because of adverse life events. They may need to re-invent themselves, re-imagine their dreams, and re-define goals with acceptance of this natural change which they cannot change and with their sixth sense and by focusing on circumstances they can change. Similar findings can be observed in study conducted by Dündar and Özsoy (2020).

External support another theme defines Connections with friends and family are their most valuable resources. It was through their supportive family, devoted

friends, and relationships with others, experiencing vision loss that they mounted the strength and courage to accept blindness and move on. Many studies show the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family and similar findings are observed in studies conducted by Rodgers and Lipscombe (2005), and Abdul Karimu (2017).

Overall observation from this study and from last thematic analysis, it is concluded that blind menstruators have their own needs and fundamental rights of equality, education and privacy. All human beings are neither dependent nor independent but interdependent to each other. Instead of visualising them visually impaired if their strengths are majorly focused, many weaknesses would be overcome and lead to their sustainable development in all the areas of their life.

## 7 Conclusion

Study findings explain that the blind menstruators face the problems related to menstrual phases distress. The findings in this study are therefore expected to become the source of information in order to develop the psychosocial support to blind menstruators so that they can be enabled and empowered to deal with the issues and challenges and maintain menstrual health. Creating awareness about the realities of menstruation in wider society and developing blind-friendly physical infrastructures are key interventions that may reduce the cultural taboo surrounding menstruation.

The main result of this study that was conducted to determine the perception of the blind menstruators is that they initially experienced difficulties in managing their menstrual periods independently, and therefore their menstrual hygiene practices were not at an optimal level, however, they are now learning the skills to manage their menstrual phase distress. Furthermore, they used various indicators to realize the start and end time of menstruation. Many of them could not understand that their menstrual cycle had ended. One out of five blind women needed support for many issues during menstruation and received this support mostly from their mothers and other family members. In line with these results and to enable blind menstruators to manage their menstrual hygiene better, training regarding menstruation should be provided before menarche using appropriate training materials. The training should mainly include audio-tactile materials, and it should help them to notice the physiological symptoms that indicate menstruation is about to start, has started, or has ended (Dündar & Özsoy, 2020). The menstrual hygiene of visually impaired women is an under-researched field. Therefore, more studies of this subject need to be carried out. Developing new products to reduce their difficulties with menstruation is also recommended.

## 8 Recommendations

Menstrual cups could be promoted to blind menstruators. That will make their periods manageable and it can fit them irrespective of their visual limitations. Pad aisles in markets can be arranged for visually impaired women. In addition, virtual market applications can be supported with audio commands, so visually impaired women can buy pads without going to the market. Caretakers, teachers, family members of visually impaired menstruators should be sensitized and trained how to work with them. They can be trained from early adolescence that will help them ease handling periods and their emotions during menstrual phases. Counselling is also necessary for blind menstruators to deal with depression, guilt and how to handle emotions before and during periods.

## 9 Limitations

The study was limited to small sample size and transcription of only five in-depth interviews were transcribed and translated for report writing purposes. Also, their caretakers should be contacted for further insights. As these menstruators take time to open up, many difficulties they face might not be captured. A mixed method study could be done to gain deeper insights into the problem statement.

## 10 Implications

The findings do propose a model of perceptual experiences of young menstruators who are blind, thus providing a basis for a mixed-methods line of research, including future quantitative instrument development and dissemination, to assist the international efforts to develop evidence-based interventions for improving the menstrual health and hygiene of blind menstruators.

By reflecting on the six themes of this study, we can consider the extent to which new and existing programs and services:

- help people acquire desired knowledge and skills
- bolster individuals' internal support systems
- promote healthy interdependence
- enhance independence
- offer access to menstrual materials
- and improve access to and delivery of necessary and preferred external supports.

The experiences and voices of the five participants in this study could be of great value in the fields of education and special education (including school districts and teacher preparation programs) and in diverse public and social arenas. Community

planners can be better prepared to support menstruators with blindness if they recognize the importance of their roles in the external support system.

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# Between Forcefully Surrendering and Willingly Submitting: Implementing the 12-Step Programme in Treating Women Suffering from Sexual-Related Trauma and Substance Use Disorder



Sharon Eytan  and Tuly Flint

*If I will acknowledge it, if I will humble myself, if I will give in and bow in submission to that SOMETHING and then try to lead a life as fully in accord with my idea of good as possible, I will be in tuned.*

*Alcoholics Anonymous: the original 1939 edition, p. 201*

**Abstract** This chapter describes the application of the 12-step programme's principles of powerlessness and submission to Higher Power in treating women survivors of both sexual related trauma (SRT) and substance use Disorder (SUD). SUD is often a deterioration of self-medication following PTSD. Among women substance-users the rate of SRT survivors is especially high. Therefore, in treating women with a diagnosis of SUD or of SRT, the existence of the dual diagnosis should be considered. One of the most common treating method for SUD is the 12-step, a spiritually-oriented programme, established initially in self-help groups for treating substance users and later adapted to many others disorders. Though the majority of participants in 12-step groups are women, it is somewhat controversial when it comes to treating women. The overarching principle of the programme is admitting one's powerlessness and submitting one's will and life to the care of the Higher Power; this principle might be perceived as problematic when dealing with victims of SRT who were forced to surrender to their perpetrators. While admitting one's powerlessness can be challenging for men as it conflicts with their masculinity, it might even be more complicated for women, as some feminists scholars argue that this principle is merely a reconstruction of the patriarchal model of submissive women. However, others prioritize the spiritual aspect of the principle and recognize the importance of admitting and accepting one's powerlessness in order to be empowered. Similarly to the 12-step programme, the theory of Spiritual Victimology suggests that the principle of submission can be a source of strength and

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empowerment. Findings from interviews with female survivors of SRT and SUD who practise the 12-step programme show that they experience empowerment and recovery from this dual diagnosis.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Spiritual victimology · Sexual trauma · Substance use · 12-step

## 1 Introduction

When she was 14, Dora was raped by her older brother. She experienced a great sense of powerlessness and lack of control as she surrendered herself to him. Symptoms of posttrauma took over her life, and she increasingly identified with the pain of victimization. A few years later, she started consuming substances and found that it numbed the intensity of her pains. To her surprise, the substances gave her a sense of control over her life, which restored her some of the power she had lost, and soon enough she became addicted to the substance she used. After failing several rehabilitation attempts, she started practicing the 12-step programme and began to recover. When she was about 8 years in recovery, she became a single mother. The stress of raising two girls brought her to therapy, where her initial trauma emerged, as did many other sexual traumas. According to Dora, what mostly helped her cope with the trauma was the submission of her life and will to the care of the Higher Power, which transformed her sense of powerlessness into a source of empowerment.

Dora's story represents the tale of many victims who were forced to surrender themselves—their bodies, their dignity, and their wills—to the will of their perpetrators (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015). The immense sense of powerlessness and loss of control that victims experience when facing their trauma and its consequences (Ronel, 2015), along with the loss of their personal and social coping resources (Chen, 2018), causes them great suffering and leads some to substance use (SU) as self-medication (Tuchman, 2010; Ullman & Lorenz, 2020). However, SU often deteriorates into SUD and dual diagnosis (Gueta & Addad, 2015; Tuchman, 2010), resulting in a similar pattern of powerlessness and loss of control—this time to the substances. When female survivors of sexual violence become addicted (from here referred to as survivor-addicts) “hit rock bottom”, and recognize that they have surrendered control over their lives to their addiction (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987), they often seek recovery for their SUD in the spiritually-oriented 12-step programme (Chen, 2018). As they submit to the programme, they often find recovery for their SRT as well. This chapter describes the journey of spiritual recovery for survivor-addicts via the 12-step programme, emphasizing the basic principles of the first three steps, which echo throughout the programme—admitting powerlessness, asking for and accepting help, and submitting to the care of the Higher Power.



## 2 Spiritual Victimology

One of the many descriptions of spirituality is of a journey from self-centeredness towards the Sublime (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987; Pargament, 2007; Ronel, 2000). Since self-centeredness is the preservation of a coherent perception of the self through the adoption of cognitional, emotional, and behavioural patterns (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011), it is considered to be the spiritual root of maladaptive behaviours such as addiction (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987), criminal activity (Ben Yair, 2021), and patterns of victimization (Bensimon & Ronel, 2012). The victimizing event distorted trauma survivors' perception of themselves (Lanius et al., 2020) and of all life occurrences, and brought them to a standpoint of a unique self-centeredness—a victimized one (Eytan & Ronel, 2023c). The victimized self-centeredness causes compulsion behaviours (Van der Kolk, 1989), that can be explained as attempts to control the uncontrollable (Flint & Ronel, 2022).

However, spiritual teachings suggest that control is merely an illusion since it is not in the hands of people, rather in the hands of the Sublime (Fromm, 1942; Firman & Gila, 2012). Seeking for the Sublime is a part of any spiritual journey, be it religious or not (Shults & Sandbage, 2006). However, religions offer a clear perception of God, while non-religious, spiritual teachings, offer a personal understanding of God (Flint & Ronel, 2022). Additionally, spirituality consists of many applicable principles, such as giving, forgiving, compassion, acceptance, devotion, commitment, personal-responsibility, and above all—love; for love is considered to be the root of all spiritual principles (Seinfeld, 2012). Hence, the perception of spiritual principles is a perception of loving-God (Eytan & Ronel, 2023c). In Spiritual Victimology (SV), Eytan and Ronel (2023c) describe the journey of spiritual development of survivors, from the depth of their victimized self-centeredness and towards loving God.

Accordingly, a growing body of research shows that traumatic events can lead to spiritual transformation (Aten et al., 2019; Najovits et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2021). SV suggests that spiritual transformation begins with the recognition of the massive pain caused by being victimized, and willingness to let go of the resulting suffering. Through the application of spiritual principles, survivor-addicts begin to peel off the layers of their victimized self-centeredness, and find an inner core of a true, uninfluenced self, whom they identify as the immortal soul and a reflection of the Sublime (Eytan & Ronel, 2023b). Their will to discover their true self further encourages them to continue with the journey of spiritual development.

## 3 12-Step

The 12-step programme (Appendix) offers a practical, relatable method for applying spiritual principles in order to let go of self-centeredness and move closer to God, of each individual's understanding (Najavits et al., 2015). The programme, who was

established initially in self-help groups for treating SUs (Bill & Dick, 2011), was adapted later to many other disorders with compulsion elements such as eating disorder (Berrett et al., 2007); domestic violence (Ronel & Tim, 2003), or PTSD (Najovits et al., 2015). Paradoxically, the programme suggests that when the individual recognizes that they are powerless in face of the substances they feel empowered by their growing belief that they are capable of change (Ronel, 2008). Likewise, when survivors admit powerlessness in face of the trauma and its consequences, they feel empowered (Aten et al., 2019; Flint & Eytan, 2023; Miller, 2002). To the consternation of survivors, the programme suggests not only that they should admit that they are indeed powerless, but that they should also submit their life and will to the care of the Higher Power (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987; Chen, 2018), and that this submission will be the source of their empowerment (Miller, 2002).

Herndon (2001) questions how survivor-addicts can embrace powerlessness and willingly submit themselves when they have previously been deprived of power and forced to surrender to another. The programme emphasizes that while substances and victimization patterns forcefully surrendered survivor-addicts, their submission to God of their understanding is by choice. The two terms are often used interchangeably; however, the difference lies in the acceptance and choice elements in submission versus the forceful coercion in surrender. The first three steps lay the main foundation of the transformation following participation in the programme (Donovan et al., 2013). In an overview of the application of the 12-step programme in therapy, Donovan et al. found that these first steps describe the acceptance of the disorder as a chronic illness and provide hope that there is a way to recover. The following steps are the breakdown into practice and action of the spiritual principles and constitute the additional actions that the survivor-addicts must take to recover.

## 4 Method

The personal stories presented in this chapter were taken from a series of qualitative studies aiming to develop a theory of spirituality in victimology. The studies examined the spiritual perceptions of SRT survivors about victimization and its consequences. Interviewees were 15 recovering survivor-addicts who attribute their recovery to spirituality. The study followed the principles of qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004); participants were interviewed at a secure place of their choice and signed an informed consent form. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed according to the phenomenological approach. Participants' privacy was preserved according to the required ethics rules. The interviews were analysed using the themes of the 12-step program and especially the first three steps.

## 5 First Step: Admitting Powerlessness

The 12-step programme has been criticized for its principal of admitting powerlessness (Donovan et al., 2013; Herndon, 2001), which is presented in the very first step (Ronel, 2008). In her study of the paradox of recovery and powerlessness in the 12-step programme, Herndon (2001) argues that it is gender insensitive to invite female survivor-addicts to admit their powerlessness, since women are already groomed by society to accept this via their gender role. Herndon calls for 12-step groups to find a way to act without the destructive gender stereotypes. Despite the challenge presented by Herndon, studies show that the majority of participants in various 12-step groups are women (Grella 2008; Grim & Grim, 2019). Furthermore, research shows that the perception of powerlessness evolves and transforms as individuals progress in their recovery (Flint & Eytan, 2023; Flint & Ronel, 2023a; Matheson & McCollum, 2008). In their study of women in 12-step groups, Matheson & McCollum suggest that accepting powerlessness after hitting rock bottom is an evolving recovery process.

An examination of the evolution of perceptions of powerlessness found that after survivor-addicts hit rock bottom, they are able to accept their powerlessness fully and therefore become open to recovery (Chen, 2018); they move from perceiving their powerlessness as a reminiscent of their forced surrender to their perpetrator, to a sense of being relieved of their illusion of control (Flint & Eytan, 2023). In their despair, survivors realize that they are powerless but not necessarily helpless, a realization that increases as they meet more survivor-addicts who have shared similar experiences (Wuthnow, 1994). As they experience transformative powerlessness (Flint & Eytan, 2023), survivors are able to turn to the help of a greater power.

Sherry, who was sexually victimized by a family member in childhood and now practises the 12-step programme, recounts the moment when she acknowledged her powerlessness. Sherry had just engaged in an unprotected orgy with 4 men who provided her with drugs. In a moment of clarity, she thought of her three-year-old daughter and realized that she was endangering her by endangering herself—if something were to happen to the mother, the child would suffer. She hurried to the clinic to take an urgent HIV test, demanding an immediate result from the nurse. When she realized she had no control over the waiting time, she began to feel utter powerlessness. This led her to seek help in the 12-step programme for both of her addictions—drugs and sexual compulsive behaviour.

For Sherry, the time she had to wait for the result, not knowing if she was indeed endangering her daughter, was an unbearable experience of wallowing in her victimized self-centeredness until hitting rock bottom. In these moments, Sherry realized the extent of her powerlessness and lack of control over her life. She acknowledged how much she had surrendered to her compulsive need for substances and compulsive sexual behaviour, and to the dire consequences of her condition. She accepted that she was trapped in a vicious circle, and that she had to admit powerlessness, seek help, and submit herself to a power greater than herself.

## 6 Second Step: Accepting the Help of Another

After survivor-addicts have come to terms with their powerlessness, the 12-step programme suggests that they should now trust a greater power to help them regain some sanity. A greater power can be an experienced member of the programme, with whom they converse their powerlessness and is helping them to break free from the vicious circle of a compulsion to repeat maladaptive patterns (Van der Kolk, 1989). The experienced members rely on their own past experiences to encourage identification, as described in the Wounded-Helper principle (Reissman, 1965). By asking and accepting help survivor-addicts begin building a social network, which marks the foundation of their recovery capital (Chen, 2018). Still, the second step can pose a challenge for survivor-addicts, as the SRT they have experienced often brings on a sense of distrust in themselves and in others (Rossetti, 1995), leading them to doubt that they can ever trust again.

Moreover, since most SRT is perpetrated by a person close to the victim, many survivors blame themselves for the assault (Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2018), which creates confusion, shame, and a sense that they voluntarily surrendered to the attacker (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015; Luoma et al., 2019). Furthermore, Ben-Amitay et al. found that survivors describe the vicious cycle of revictimization using a metaphor of captivity, emphasizing that they felt trapped by their own sense of powerlessness. This confusion between self-blame and knowing that they were forced into surrender keeps survivor-addicts wallowing in their victimized self-centeredness (Eytan & Ronel, 2023c), and therefore obscures survivors' ability to distinguish between surrendering to an external harmful negative-power and trusting a beneficial positive-power (Pietri et al., 2020). As a result of proximity to the perpetrator, a deep and severe breach of trust is created (Park & Monaghan, 2020), making trusting another an even greater challenge.

Yet, a key element of the 12-step programme is forming a bond of trust with an experienced member (Pietri et al., 2020; Wuthnow, 1994). The personal stories of overcoming obstacles in recovery that experienced members share with their peers creates a safe and secure environment (Pietri et al., 2020) which evokes a sense of identification in the hearts of the newcomers. This empathy opens up space for the prospect of future recovery (Miller, 2002), and gives them hope that they too can live a calm, serene life. The stories shared by experienced members encourage survivor-addicts to believe that they are not alone; that there may be somebody who can understand and relate to what they have gone through. Nonetheless, survivor-addicts constantly test the member they choose to appoint as their sponsor (Kreidler et al., 2000), in order to assess whether they are indeed trustworthy. The non-judgmental love and compassion they receive allows them to open up and unload the burden of their deepest and darkest secrets, and eventually to submit to the care of another.

When Naomi, a recovering addict and prostitution survivor who was molested by her father as an infant, first joined the 12-step programme she was in her late twenties. She was clean for almost a decade before relapsing for the first of many times to drugs and prostitution. Now, in her mid forties, she has been clean for two years, and for the first time feels she can

trust. When she told her current sponsor that she practised unprotected sex with a client—again, and that she felt as if every bone in her body was crushed—again, and that she could not bring herself to buy a morning-after pill—again, her sponsor showed up at her apartment with the pill, some medicine for the pain, comfort food, and a hug. Naomi then realized that she was truly loved by this woman.

Every client Naomi accepted provided her with proof that she was only good for selling her love. However, after learning about the 12-step programme, she became aware that her victimized self-centeredness was preventing her from recognizing that she was not only surrendering to the will of her clients, but that she was also surrendering to her compulsive desire to be loved at all costs. When she felt defeated she asked for help again, and every time her sponsor helped her she received further proof that she could be loved without judgment and without conditions. Gradually, she truly opened up to her sponsor, allowing her to see her in her most vulnerable moments. From the sponsor's view, she was only doing for Naomi what was once done for her. This chain of unconditional love and non-judgmental compassion embodies the essence of the 12th step—lovingly paying forward what was lovingly received.

## 7 Third Step: Submission to God

Recovery in the third step goes beyond the cognitive-emotional understanding of the survivor-addicts and aims towards spiritual awakening. In this step, members are suggested to decide to submit their wills and lives to the care of God of their understanding (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987; Chen, 2010). Since survivor-addicts' cease to engage in compulsive repetition of maladaptive patterns they are forced to face a void within themselves (Beveridge & Cheung, 2004; Van der Kolk, 1989), causing them to experience existential anxiety (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015). Paradoxically, Ben-Amitay et al. found that while external substances do invoke some sense of existence, the act of filling in itself exacerbates the sense of emptiness survivor-addicts experience. When they despair from reoccurring failed attempts to fill the emptiness and reduce their existential anxiety with substances, survivor-addicts look for a more sustainable solution; more often than not, they find what they are looking for in spirituality (Berrett et al., 2007; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013).

Because past experiences have taught survivor-addicts that it is better to be guarded in their connections with others (Kreidler et al., 2000), submitting to God might come more easily for them (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016). Moreover, as opposed to religious dictated perceptions of God, the spiritual concept of "God of our understanding" gives survivor-addicts freedom to choose their perception of God. This element of choice was found to be a crucial component in submission to God as a positive spiritual coping strategy for child sexual abuse survivors (Gall, 2006). Hence, the personal understanding of God allows survivor-addicts to overcome any religious prejudice they might have had in regard to God.

Though it might be easier to trust God than another person, the third step still present a challenge for survivor-addicts, for the disappointment they feel is not only with themselves and others, but also with God (Flint & Ronel, 2023b; Strelan et al., 2009). Mainly, their disappointment with God involves blaming God for not protecting and even neglecting them (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013; Walker et al., 2021), and not understanding why did God allowed such thing to happen to them (Bowland et al., 2011; Eytan & Ronel, 2023a). The attempts to search for reasons fuels the illusion of control, attaching survivor-addicts to maladaptive patterns (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011), leading to craving and increasing substance dependence (Chen, 2010). In the 12-step programme this phenomenon is referred to as “distorted security in familiar pain” (Narcotics Anonymous, 1987, p. 33). considering that God is perceived as the highest authority (Kim & Enright, 2014), confronting God represents an extreme heating rock-bottom experience.

Hitting rock bottom arouses in survivor-addicts an awareness to a new, transformed will, a will to reorganize their identity and live a meaningful life (Chen, 2010), reconstruct personal and social resources (Chen, 2018), and to take a leap into spirituality (Flint & Ronel, 2023a). In reconstructing their resources, survivor-addicts strive to build benevolent interpersonal connections with others, as well as a transpersonal connection with the Sublime. Survivor-addicts recognize this will as a deep desire, one that comes from their true will, their soul (Eytan & Ronel, 2023b). Just like the deeply emotional stories survivor-addicts hear from experienced members about hitting rock bottom touches their hearts and inspires them to recover; stories recounting deep connection to the Higher Power similarly touch their souls and encourage them to submit to God’s will. As they progress with the programme, they discover that their true will corresponds with God’s will for them.

From a young age, Dora felt that there was more to the world than met the eye; the trauma and its consequences only assured her that this must be so. The detachment she experienced subsequent to her SU allowed her to explore the spiritual world, causing a conflict between the physical world and the spiritual one: in the spiritual world, she found God and felt at one with all existence; in the physical world, she was still being victimized. Dora came to a point of not knowing who she was and what she wanted for herself. When she joined the programme, she learned that she did not need substances to feel close to God of her understanding. Today, Dora explains that while she was using she wasn’t ready for God’s love. Dora has already relinquished a great number of her maladaptive patterns and recognizes that there is still a lot of work to do. She describes her spiritual work as building a bridge towards loving-God while walking on it, and that the work must therefore be done one step at a time. Dora knows that this is God’s will for her, and that God’s love is like a compass that will always guide her on her journey.

What Dora experienced during her active addiction were fragments of recognition of God (see Sandoz, 2014). However, because she was not prepared to receive God’s love, she suffered from self-implosion (Eytan & Ronel, 2023a). As Dora further consumed substances, her victimized self-centeredness deepened, and the drugs furthered her from her true-self and from all she held sacred. With practicing the 12-step programme, Dora has found another way to connect with God. When she listened to the personal stories of experienced members about their relationship with God, she recognized the resonance of a familiar, deep feeling from her childhood

(Walker et al., 2009). Because the 12-step programme does not rigidly define God, rather encouraging each participant to understand God personally, Dora felt comfortable submitting to God. Her walk on a bridge that is not yet built expresses her willingness to fearlessly submit to God. Kierkegaard referred to this as “a leap into faith” (McKinnon, 1993), or as stated in the programme—beginning to believe.

## 8 Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to describe the empowerment of survivor-addicts via the spiritually oriented 12-step programme, emphasizing the basic principles of the first three steps. The first three steps move survivor-addicts from a position of surrender to a position of submission. Their willingness to submit is a process of growth: it starts with admitting defeat; continues with transforming powerless to strength, rebuilding trust and learning how to love and be loved; and ends with forming an alignment with loving God. Survivors often turn to SU to numb the pain and suffering caused by the SRT. However, the void they experience is not filled, rather increases as the SU becomes SUD (Beveridge & Cheung, 2004; Ben Amitay et al., 2015). Research shows that survivors of SRT, as do addicts, turn to spirituality to fill this void (Berrett et al., 2007; Gall, 2006; Najavits et al., 2015; Pietri et al., 2020; Ronel, 2008; Sandoz, 2014; Walker et al., 2021). Survivor-addicts’ recognition of their powerlessness is a realization that they best learn to trust again; Though the programme avoids defining God, it suggests that the perception of God will be of a loving, understanding and comforting one. The connection with loving-God, a familiar concept from their childhood (Walker et al., 2009) gives them the confidence to trust others, and to submit their lives and their will to the care of God. Their perceived connection to the infinite power of the Higher Power empowers survivor-addicts, encourages them, and allows them to thrive.

Because the 12-step is not yet established as a treating method for survivor-addicts, further research is required on the subject, such as a deep understanding of the entire programme, or the differences between male and female members survivor-addicts and their experiences of the programme.

## Appendix: The 12 Steps of Narcotics Anonymous

As published in the NA website: <https://12step.org/the-12-steps/>

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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**Part V**  
**Women's Empowerment in Minority**  
**Contexts**

# Experiences of Being a Muslim Hijab-Wearing Woman in Estonia: Personal Stories from Immigrant and Local Women



Syeda Reema Zakir and Anastassia Zabrodskaia 

**Abstract** This qualitative research investigates Muslim women’s lived experiences, grouping the views of the local Muslim women on one side and the immigrant Muslim women on the other. To work toward social change and empowerment of Muslim women, it explores what it means to be a hijab-wearing woman in Estonia and reveals that racism, discrimination and social exclusion emerge as common themes that all these women had to encounter in different settings.

**Keywords** Women’s empowerment · Experiences · Identity · Intercultural communication · Muslims · Estonia

## 1 Introduction

The United Nations Population Fund Issue 7: Women empowerment (2022) stipulates, “The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development.” Previously, Western feminism governed the definition of ‘empowerment’ as the effects women have on their societal environment, ‘circumventing, changing, or eliminating the society’s values, practices, norms and laws in order to lessen the extent to which they constrain her activities and choices’ (Ackerly, 1997, p. 141). When studied in depth, it has been seen that the migrant and refugee women and girls have been a target of many kinds of violence in their own country or during their journey or stay in Europe, which is why the Council of Europe has founded Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2023 to support and protect the immigrant women’s rights and to encourage gender equality. To do that, the main actions taken include ensuring the easy access to human and social rights which comes with individual freedom for the immigrant,

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refugee and asylum seeking women. This also includes providing relevant employment chances, healthcare, housing and social protection and welfare.

In this chapter, this term ‘empowerment’ is approached when analysing the personal stories of Muslim hijab-wearing women in Estonia. The research question is: *what are the empowerment challenges Muslim women face when they retain their religious identity?* The issue of Muslim women’s empowerment through participation in Estonian society has become sine qua non, since among Tallinn’s total population of 435,839 there are 1300 Muslim residents. We aim to investigate the identity construction and social standing of Muslim women in Estonian society, which, according to the Gallup Surveys, is one of the least religious societies in the world. We highlight why some Muslim women opt to wear hijab even if it means hindering their empowerment. We discuss what Muslim women experience when they try to expand their base of empowerment.

## 2 Theoretical Background

One of the most recognized clothing for Muslim women in Islamic culture is hijab—a headscarf that is wrapped around the head and the neck, only to reveal the face. The word hijab is also used in exchange of a scarf or a veil (Elmarsafy & Bentaïbi, 2015). There are many reasons determining the choice to wear hijab in Muslim women—one of the strongest reasons being their religious devotion. Many observers think that all Muslim women are obligated to wear hijab, though that is not entirely true, as hijab is a personal choice (Arar & Shapira, 2016). However, not all Muslim women feel to define themselves with hijab and that makes it quite a debatable issue. It is true that the origin of hijab was through Islam and its history can be dated back to many centuries. Hijab has been a part of culture in all Islamic countries and though the style may vary from country to country, the concept is usually the same. Hijab signifies modesty and chastity in women and it is a requirement in many Muslim countries to protect themselves from sexual attention (Alghaffi et al., 2017).

The Muslim Holy Book describes how Muslim women should make modesty an important part of their identities (Othman et al., 2015). In the same verse, Allah also commands Muslim women to protect their private parts and to draw their head veils to cover their chests as well. The wearing of hijab has been consented from the many schools of thought (Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki, and Hanbali) about hijab being an important part of religious obligation but controversy still remains for this matter. Clothing is an important part of identity, it defines a person’s personality, and gives meaning to the person who chooses to wear it, in the way he/she views himself/herself and the way in which others observe him/her (Twigg, 2014). Hence, it is extremely important for Muslim women to have their own unique identities as Muslims whereas none of the other religious groups aims to classify themselves in accordance to their religion. This constitutes problems, which create the sense of “otherness” and social or ethnic exclusion for the local Muslim women in relation to their religious identities, which, in its turn, highlights the problem of racism

(Islamophobia? Discrimination?). In this chapter, we also explore the ‘othering’ of the Muslim local women after their identity is changed.

To understand the process of ‘othering’ of Muslim women with hijab, we will apply Social Identity Theory, which derives the Muslim women’s social identity with the group membership. According to this theory, an individual sense of belonging to a particular group develops one’s self-concept. An individual has several identities that are connected to the associated group and since they belong to that group, which is an in-group whereas other groups, which they do not associate themselves with, are called outgroups. When people relate themselves with the group, they try to adopt its identity (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Individuals are likely to have their self-esteem to be dependent on their identity the same way a group member has.

Hijab is an important identity marker for women to express their Muslim identity. The assumption that Muslims are religiously, racially and culturally different from the conventional population relates with social identity theory, and since local Estonians and Russians are less likely to relate with them, the Muslim minority is viewed as an ‘out-group’. The Muslim minority’s exclusion outside the mainstream Estonian society defines the urgent need for Muslim women empowerment. Otherwise, they will remain socially and or culturally marginalized.

According to Samier and ElKaleh (2021), who offered a culturally appropriate model of Muslim women’s empowerment in leadership related to key UN sustainability development goals, wearing hijab and fasting make Muslim women vulnerable at the workplace. The authors view empowerment as a multiple construct where, for women’s personality, important dimensions are: agency, confidence, and passion; vision and sense of purpose; conscientious, self-regulation and reflection. The identity and sense of self of Muslim women is under influence owing to the prevailing stigma and existing prejudice directed towards the Muslims living in West. The main settings for these negative encounters of prejudice, stereotyping, hate speech and discrimination emerge when women seek employment and show up in public places. These disadvantages are faced because of the conflicting identities and cultural differences (Norris & Inglehart, 2012; Alghaffi et al., 2017).

### 3 Methodological Background

A phenomenological study was chosen for this research strategy. It falls under the qualitative method of research; it is best suited for explaining the phenomenon of “being a Muslim hijab-wearing woman in Estonia”. According to Merriam (2009, p. 13), qualitative research aims to understand “the meaning people have constructed, that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world”. In addition, it helps us to interpret the experiences and feelings, which a person has obtained from a certain phenomenon. In this study, it facilitates the understanding of the feelings associated to participants’ experiences.

The criteria for the participants was that, they should be aged minimally 18 and should be identified as females and Muslims who wear a hijab. The age range of the women who participated was 19–40. The women should have the capacity to understand and converse in English.

The religious inclination of the recruited participants was observed to be religiously committed and consistent in practicing, in a way that they indicated regular involvement in religious practices, by highlighting their daily routine to include wearing headscarf/hijab; maintaining five-time prayers; reading the holy book and religious texts; and in attending religious sermons in the mosque or the Islamic cultural centre. This depicted that the women interviewed played a part in social activism and believed in strengthening their community as a whole on behalf of their cultural and religious orientation.

We employed a phenomenological methodology, which aims to describe, understand and interpret the meanings of Muslim women's lived experience. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 Muslim women who wear hijab to gain insight into their personal stories. Six of the participants, speaking either Estonian or Russian as their first language and being locally born, had converted to Islam. Seven participants were immigrants who moved to Estonia for several reasons, such as gaining advanced education (two), finding better job opportunities (one), fleeing from the war situation in their home country (one), accompanying spouses who got admission/work in Estonia (three). The immigrant women belonged to a diverse range of cultural backgrounds: Pakistani (one), Afghanistan (two), Nigerian (one), Syrian (one), Sudanese (one), and Kuwait (one). The length of time spent in Estonia of the immigrant women was roughly 1–5 years.

Before starting with the interviews, the respondents were educated about the topic of this study and were assured that their names will not be disclosed. They also verbally consented to record their interviews so they can be used for transcribing later. The frame for the interview was kept as open-ended so the conversation will flow naturally. For the same reason, we asked additional questions where the answer was not clear and we requested them to elaborate.

## **4 Findings**

Since this research is of a highly sensitive nature and it is vital that the anonymity of the participants is maintained, we invented codes so the real names and identity of the women will be kept discrete.



#### 4.1 *Interaction with the Locals in Estonia*

The problem the majority of the **immigrant** women faced when interacting with Estonians was quoted such that “Estonians do not accept that much people from different culture”. A few of the women already formed a view that it is difficult to interact with Estonians, but unable to identify the reasons. This is evident with their repetitive use of words such as ‘I think’ or ‘kind of difficult’. Definitely, lack of knowledge of the local language is at the heart of everything. For instance, MAR admits that non-existence of communication has to do with the language, as she does not speak Estonian or Russian:

To be honest, it is really really not easy. Of course I am trying. I don’t know the language as well—neither Estonian nor Russian so I am having some problems.

BAR already describes the severe difficulty in interacting with the locals using “Very very difficult. . .” twice and further claims they are not even ready for friendship. Her statement implies as though she has tried but failed. BAR also feels that Estonians are not willing to help her when she asks for help and they are purposely avoiding her. BAR can serve as one of the examples of perceived discrimination because she has based her judgments only on her perceptions—though Estonians have not explicitly or directly told her they are not willing to help or avoiding her:

Very difficult. Very very difficult. They are not even ready to be friends with you. I do not really integrate with them so much. Alternatively, maybe when I am asking them for anything, like directions, they are not even ready to help me. Therefore, they just say, “I do not speak English.” . . . How can you say you do not speak English when you can say you do not speak English in English? This means they do not want to talk to you. I only have a Finnish friend here. I don’t make Estonian friends.

However, PAL already constructs her idea about how the interaction will be, based on the acquired knowledge provided by her university. In her statement, she distinguishes herself as a ‘we-group’ member and the Estonian society as a ‘they-group’. PAL does not talk about her own experience in interacting with the local people but entirely narrates her judgment upon the information provided to her. Due to that, PAL already has a prejudgment about Estonians and perhaps has not made any effort in interacting with any as she draws a distinction that ‘we’—the people of her country, greet and interact with elders as a part of culture. Also, PAL chooses to narrate how she was warned on not to be too friendly and perhaps PAL has already built a stereotype due to the knowledge and would continue to perceive all Estonians as such before she engages in real communication to change her point of view:

Well, that was kind of difficult. . . I don’t meet greeting unknown people on the road of streets but we still are friendly which not the case in Estonia is. They told us that Estonians are a bit reserved. . . .this and that. . . . and it is because of the historical reason. We should try not to be so friendly . . . They like space that they try to maintain and after a while when they understand you they will be friendly with you.

On the other hand, when the same question is put in front of the **local Estonian Muslim participants**, the construction of multiple identities can be noticed. For

example, KRI attempts to categorize herself using a mix of multiple ethnic and religious identities saying that she is “an Estonian and also a Muslim”, defining herself as “not so sensitive”, and terming it as one of the reasons for her successful interactions with everyone in Estonia. KRI says it is easy to do if one is “open to widening your circle”. KRI also describes herself as being “used to of cultures” due to her multi-ethnic background, which helps her to communicate flawlessly without giving up her identity as a Muslim. However, the extract also reveals an interesting fact when KRI mentioned, “through work, I started to make friends” which raises a question if work was one of the main reasons that lead towards knowing local people and befriending them (note: the host country work exposure is quite absent from the immigrant respondents’ life):

I think it is very personal. People are different. I am a very outgoing person and people and I am used to of cultures. I know I am also different so I am not that sensitive so for me, it was not. . . . I cannot say it was difficult. For me it was quite easy. Because I already stood out—I was an Estonian and also a Muslim and I felt like the combination for me, I didn’t see a problem in it and I dealt with people who didn’t see a problem in it either. Through work, I started to make friends, people I knew. Whether students and certain situations you had to deal with people. You learn about them, and if there is a way to connect with them and if you are open to widening your circle, then it is something very easy to do.

## 4.2 *Sense of Belonging*

Next, we continue to draw comparisons between the Muslim immigrants and the local women and examine their feelings towards Estonia and their belongingness. The severity of denial in all **immigrant** women when considering Estonia as their homeland is quite extreme—expressed with the emotional usage of “Not at all”, repetitive “No, no, no” and also with the usage of “never” which also exposes traces of acculturation stress the respondents might still be facing. The respondents who express especially hard negation have one thing mutually common—their length of stay in Estonia is 1–2 years. The respondents’ lack of desire to stay in Estonia for a longer period was traced. Moreover, they mentally compare Estonia to their home country. The Muslim immigrant women also stress on the differences and seem to hold them responsible for not feeling a sense of belonging.

For MAR, it was due to the religious and dressing differences:

Not at all. I cannot feel like this because I am from a very different culture. My religion, the way of clothing is totally different so I cannot feel like this.

For BAR, it was due to the local people who are constantly “they-group” in her eyes:

Belonging? Like you mean mingling with them. No, no, no, I have never felt Estonia is like home. I am planning to go home as soon as I get an opportunity. Estonia is not home.

NAD cannot relate anything about Estonia with her home country in a very categorical way:

No. Not at all. It is very different than my home country in everything.

On the other hand, PAL admits being in Estonia for a temporary period but also expresses the positive sides about her stay in Estonia and explains why she likes it here. She values the peace Estonia offers to her and that is something missing in her home country. “Other than people, I feel belonging to the place”—clearly indicates that she needs time to integrate with the local people but she likes the place itself:

I personally think that I belong for a moment here. Since I from Afghanistan . . . it is not a peaceful place. I like my country and I am proud of it but the things happening in our country: the political and security situation that has different reasons but overall I am still very proud of it. But we cannot ignore that the life situation is not good there and we have a lot of problems. . . Even we have no control over it or life is not very private because we have many bigger problems there. . . when I came here I was very peaceful. . . . People from my country can understand how peaceful it is, no one disturbs you, and you can go out late at night. It was quite interesting. This is not the case in Afghanistan. I belong here now. At first, it was difficult but then it became easy. I got used to . . . and now I feel I have adapted. Other than people, I feel belonging to the place.

When **local Estonian Muslim women** asked how they feel a ‘sense of belonging’ having lived in Estonia for a life time period, Russian-speaking participants, like MIA below, point to their Russian-speaking background as a major reason of their non-acceptance into Estonian culture, despite having born in Estonia:

Actually I am a Russian . . . so being a Russian in Estonia is also little bit different . . . Because some Estonians do not really enjoy Russians being here so actually I have faced this kind of racism in our lives. . . . Also, I am a Muslim and I cover myself now so my clothes and behaviour is different from the people that live here.

ANA identifies herself as an out-group member when she says, “you never really become an Estonian and they never see you as an Estonian” under any circumstances. ANA feels Estonia is her only home but her ethnic identity as a Russian cannot be accepted at all, hinted by her use of the word “never”, twice:

. . . it depends . . . you never really become an Estonian and they never see you as an Estonian. I feel myself great in Estonia and I see it as my um . . . how to say . . . it is my country because I do not feel home anywhere else.

### **4.3 Challenges in Adaptation**

This section explores how Muslim immigrant and local women express the difficulties and challenges they face in their adjustment journey. The **immigrant** women add more detail to their identities by specifying the challenges they face. When talking about what causes the difficulties to adapt here, MAR describes the development status of her country and, in comparison to Estonia, describes it as a third world Muslim country.

Everything starting from traditions, clothing, and religion. Everything is different from my country. Since I came from third world Muslim country, everything is different here.

BAR individualises herself with her personal identity saying that her hijab or the woman's headscarf differentiates her from the rest and that this invites the difficulties.

My hijab. There is not everyone who uses hijab all the time.

SHM tries to differentiate herself from Estonians saying that 'we'—her in-group—has a stronger belief system. SHM also tries to make a point to indicate her in-group is better than the out-group by saying that Estonians have no religious beliefs:

I guess everything ... definitely here the people are less religious ...

As for the challenges faced by **local Estonian Muslim women**, the next extracts reveal that religion becomes a main marker of identity: LIZ interweaves two elements and constructs her new identity: being a Russian and then a Muslim, the latter gave her a different social identity due to her religion and clothing. AIR, who is a native Estonian, completely excludes herself from her in-group and marks her individual identity. This might have happened after her religious identity underwent a change that she faced ... the negative suspicions and racist mentality.

## 5 Discussion

This study was an effort to provide a platform to the voices of Estonia's Muslim women. Taking into consideration the study by Abu-Ras and Suarez (2009), which suggested that Muslim women experience a distinct fear of being in public places, we can find similarities where the interviewed women expressed feeling unsafe while being alone in public places. Our study has commonalities with the one conducted by Franks (2000) in the context of racism being free of race because both immigrant and local Muslim women are placed under one umbrella to be excluded. Norris and Inglehart (2012) argued that Muslim immigrants move to the West with flexible attitudes and most of them adopt an assimilation model, as they grasp most of the host culture features. However, our results indicate that Muslim women do not give up their religious identity for the sake of integration, let alone assimilation. This study is an effort to provide a platform to the voices of Muslim women, not without its limitations. We collected qualitative information from 13 Muslim women and relied on them to help us guide how the situation in Estonia is for them. We interviewed women from both immigrant and local backgrounds but we must note that the above presented findings are strictly synchronic, representing a snapshot that does not reflect possible dynamics in acculturation processes. Considering the rising number of the Muslim minority in Estonia, it is instructive to study the root cause of negative stereotypes attached to their dress code, lifestyle and religious practice, and the role Estonian media plays in the portrayal of Islam to help the Muslim women stay strong amidst the negative associations and racism and to help protect their identity from collapsing. Otherness might damage the identity of Muslim women and result in psychological distress for this minority group. The

creation and propagation of stereotypes against Muslim women might rob them of their empowerment, voice and agency that they have spent years to gain and use.

## 6 Conclusion

The interviewees defined the interaction with locals as limited due to the immigrant women's lack of Estonian skills and a perceived sense of discrimination by locals. These factors have seriously affected the women's openness and sense of belonging. Both groups express social exclusion as they feel that Estonians are unfriendly and unwelcoming. In addition, local Russian-speaking Muslim women admit that Estonia is their true home but they can never be accepted here like Estonian citizens.

Kalin (2011, p. 11) states "Islamophobia is not racially blind". This idea can be confirmed, as only two of the women described in this chapter were black (among immigrants). Islamophobia in Estonia is not entirely prejudice or fearful of Muslims, but rather it is discrimination of people based on their different clothing style especially the hijab.

This study is important as it helps to explain the phenomenon of racism when the already assimilated women are 'othered' (Nagra, 2018). The locally born women described their astonishment on how they are perceived as 'foreigners' and cannot free themselves of that view. This unveils the fact that for the situation to improve in Estonia for the minority groups and make it easier for them to adapt to the environment, both the Muslim minority group and the Estonian society need to join hands to make it possible.

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# Empowering Widows in Low-Resourced Communities: Rethinking Multidisciplinary Interventions for Widowed Women in Low-Resourced Communities



Misheck Dube 

**Abstract** Women empowerment is well documented and topical globally in human service professions. While that is the case, the same cannot be claimed about the empowerment-focused interventions for widowed women. Widows have been sidelined and excluded from deliberate mainstream women empowerment endeavours yet bearing a host of psychosocial, socioeconomic and cultural challenges. This chapter aims at illuminating on the empowerment of widowed women through a multidisciplinary approach in low-resourced communities as relevant in interventions. The chapter discusses power, empowerment, empowerment strategies and the multidisciplinary model for empowerment. Following the strengths-based intervention approaches, the relevant roles of the social service professionals are explored. The chapter draws its rethinking approach to interdisciplinary interventions for the widows from integrating literature with the findings of the qualitative study which engaged widows, traditional, indigenous social service providers as well as trained professional social service providers in individual and focus group interviews in the poor communities of Binga District in Zimbabwe. The findings indicated the gaps in empowerment of widowed women with less prioritisation in deliberate interventions. Empowerment interventions of widowed women were found to be fragmented and an afterthought yet critically important in low-resourced communities with interventions indicating the need for a multidisciplinary approach. This chapter is relevant as it discusses empowerment-focused interventions for widows who are an afterthought in human services. Drawing information from contextually relevant environments and participants, it explores strategies, a multidisciplinary integrative model and roles of social service professionals in empowerment interventions.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Widows · Empowerment strategies · Integrative model · Low-resourced communities

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## 1 Introduction

In lieu of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) women empowerment remains a topic of interest internationally. Women's empowerment is now 1 of the 17 global goals and established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021). Goal number five (5) targets to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and to ensure reforms that will see women gain power over economic resources, own and control land, property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources as governed by law (UNDP, 2021, 2). Drawing from Perkins' (2010, 207) work, empowerment is described as "*an intentional ongoing process centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources; or a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment*".

Whilst women empowerment is well-documented in literature, (Bryan & Garner, 2020; Galano et al., 2021; Must & Hovorka, 2019), empowerment-based interventions for widows is yet to gain formal recognition and literature coverage (Dube, 2021; Witting et al., 2020). There is also ample evidence from the global community on the need to protect women and empower them through ratification of international conventions and instruments from the United Nations. With examples such as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW), of 1979 and the Beijing Platform of Action of 1995 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa of 2003 also known as the Maputo Protocol having been ratified to provide legal protection and empowerment of women. Zimbabwean laws, evident in the new Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (Zimbabwe, 2013a) and the modified Gender Policy of 2013 (Zimbabwe, 2013b), adopted a generic approach to the protection of women albeit without specifics on widows to domesticate the international instruments into national policies and laws. A widow is "a woman in civil or customary marriage who experiences the death of her husband and has not married again" (Dube, 2016, 7). Zimbabwe made efforts in the advancement of women's rights through the amendment of 200 other pieces of legislation in 2013, but the nation's performance on the 2015 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Protocol Barometer, which measures the nation's progress toward ensuring gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment, declined in 2014 (Made, 2015).

Women in Zimbabwe still face marginalisation and exclusion from many platforms and social spheres. Most women, especially in the low-resourced communities are functionally illiterate and economically dependent on men with 67% of women working in the informal sector and even unpaid care work (Civicus, 2022). Vengesai (2019, 3) describes some cultural practices that violate women's rights and are still



practiced in Zimbabwe which include “*kuzvarira* the practice of pledging a young woman to marriage with a partner not of her choosing, *lobola* the customary obligation of a groom to pay a bride price to the parents of a would-be wife; and *Ngozi*, the customary practice of offering a young girl as compensatory payment in interfamily disputes”. This reduces women into commodities and violates their human rights in Zimbabwean communities.

Zimbabwean widows face even further extraordinary discrimination and vulnerability. The most discriminatory practices are that women may have rights to utilise land, these rights frequently depend on their marriage and upon the death of the husband, widows face the risk of being deprived inheritance without any recourse (Walsh, 2018). With many of the deaths of the widows’ husbands being ascribed to the Human-Immunodeficiency Virus and the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV and AIDS) in Zimbabwe, widows face the blame for having infected their husbands. This creates misunderstandings between the in-laws and the widows which then degenerates into alienation and isolation of the widows. Widows are then deliberately isolated from critical decision-making on their welfare, economic resources, and amenities for their sustenance. Many of widows in Zimbabwe face evictions from the property and land and disinheritance of their accrued wealth by their in-laws leaving them psychosocially distressed, socioeconomically destitute, and vulnerable to violence and abuse (Walsh, 2018). Due to the complexity and multifaceted problems faced by widows, a multidisciplinary approach to interventions is significant to meet the needs of the widows in low-resourced communities.

Whilst it is agreeable that the necessity of legal protection of women cannot be questioned, however, it is also overemphasised in literature that they are less accessible to the poor widows in low-resourced communities (Dube, 2011). In Binga District, women in general are frequently excluded from key decision-making, alienated, and oppressed. The most vulnerable are those in traditional marriages, which climbed from 82% in 1997 to 84% in 2013, and legislation has failed to safeguard them from many forms of abuse and violence such as widows’ levirate marriages and property grabbing, (Mubaiwa, 2019), in the context of customs and traditions. Widows are unable to meet their personal and health needs, as well as those of their orphaned children, on a psychosocial and economic level, leaving them impoverished. Like many other widows in Zimbabwe, many HIV-positive widows in Binga are victimized and blamed for infecting their husbands by a slew of in-laws and unsympathetic community members, predisposing them to even more vulnerability, helplessness, and powerlessness (DuBois & Miley, 2014). The district’s widows endure a wide range of serious challenges, which are aggravated by institutionalised oppressive cultural norms and insufficient professionalised initiatives to alleviate their condition. Unless a multidisciplinary approaches for interventions can be adopted, widows in Binga District may remain neglected and unserved with needed interventions.

The phenomenon of widowhood has been described as one of the world’s “epidemics,” (Widows for Widows, 2011, in Dube, 2019, 1). Widowhood is a demographic phenomenon that affects people of all races, ages, ethnic groups, tribal groups, and religious groups. Due to the immense and complex nature of the

empowerment needs of the widows in low-resourced communities, it is critical that a multidisciplinary approach that is empowering and able to meet the psychosocial and socioeconomic needs of the widows be utilised. Further, it is noteworthy that interventions on widowhood have inclined themselves to the traditional notion that widowhood is a human development phenomenon associated chronological age, (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013; Moss & Moss, 2014, Moor, 2016; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2013), yet current research reveals that in low-resourced communities, many of the widows are young constituting approximately 1, 36 million of the widows population globally (Chami & Pooley, 2021; Nwadinobi & Khanna, 2019; Watson, 2018). Astonishingly, despite the currently growing body of research in widowhood, practical scientific models for interventions in contemporary trends for the plight of the widows in low-resourced communities are lacking, therefore inviting the research community to rethink on plausible multidisciplinary interventions. Teater (2014, 3) defines a model as a “theory or method depicted logically and or graphically and is concerned with what and how something happens” or some aspect of the world or phenomenon. For the plight of the widows, a model, which is described later in Fig. 1, can be practically implemented in low-resourced communities such as those in Binga District in Zimbabwe.

## 2 The Challenges Experienced by Widows

Widows experience myriad of challenges when their husbands die. *Psychological challenges* have been noted among widows when they lose their husbands as they possess emotions of attached to their deceased husbands. Dube, (2016) shares that widows endure mental difficulties at a higher rate than those who are still married and also experience sadness and anxiety especially young widows who are generally not prepared with emotions of widowhood.

Research has also found significant *social problems* associated with widowhood. Widowhood is mainly associated with loneliness in terms of social functioning. After spending time with a partner, the widow’s spouse’s place in her life is lost, and she experiences loneliness (Jones et al., 2019). Young widows, who are predominantly in Sub-Saharan Africa, are socially isolated. Martin-Matthews (2011) believes that social isolations among widows are means to adaptation of the widows’ new social positions in society.

A large portion of challenges experienced by widows in low-resourced communities relates to *economic challenges* for various reasons. After being widowed, many women find themselves in financial difficulty (Herbst-Debby et al., 2021). The fundamental reasons for this is that in many cultures, particularly in African countries, males are responsible for providing for their families while women are responsible for caring for the children at home (Van de Walle, 2011). After the death of the husband, economic and financial resources dwindle drastically as the man who was the sole provider has passed away leaving the family without a provider.

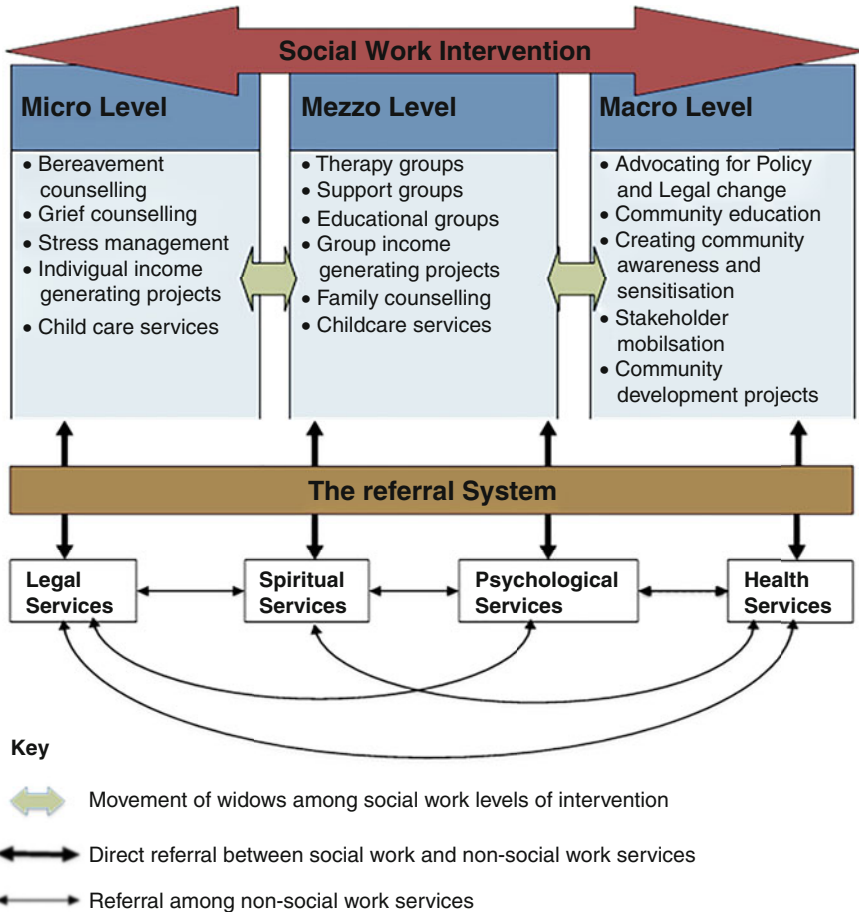


Fig. 1 The Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model

Some economic challenges also arise when widows are embroiled in property disinheritance and eventually lose property to in-laws (Global Press Institute, 2011; Moyo, 2019). Sometimes the widows face evictions and leave behind everything they owned (Kebede & Zeleke, 2019).

It is noteworthy that widows in low-resourced communities are contorted with *health challenges*. Widows are vulnerable to a variety of opportunistic illnesses and ailments that affect persons living in poverty due to their typically deplorable socioeconomic circumstances. According to Dube, (2016), the death of a spouse has substantial consequences for the surviving partner’s health and well-being and discovered that widows some suffer from a variety of health issues with Tuberculosis and asthma attacks being most prevalent. The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (2021) has found a direct link between stress, strong emotions, and breathing-related problems such as asthma. In Sub-Saharan Africa, research has

found that most young widows are infected by HIV/AIDS (Cooper, 2014; Tenkorang, 2014).

## 2.1 *The Strengths-Based Perspective and Widowhood*

The strengths-based approaches use principles of empowerment, cultivating capabilities and draw interventions from key concepts which social service providers should apply in low-resourced communities (Langer & Lietz, 2015). Many of the key concepts should be understood to be also embedded in the practice of the strengths-based approaches by practitioners in service provision to clients.

As the title of the approach suggests, *strengths* when working with widows looks at mobilising resources and capacities, both internal and external, that aid widows in the transformation process. This will require social service providers to assess internal strengths and external resources that can be tapped to facilitate widows' optimal social functioning. This happens in collaboration between the widows and practitioners to ensure a power-equalizing relationship and partnership in decision-making between the social service interventionists and the widows. This means the knowledge and skills of a social service provider are integrated with the experiences of the widows to produce an atmosphere favourable for the empowerment of widows in the intervention processes (Langer & Lietz, 2015).

*Hope within the strength-based perspective is understood to be a driver of energy as there is a belief in the likelihood of good things happening in the client. This is critical to the circumstances of the widows as hope will inspire adjustment and coping to the adversity experienced by the widows (Boddy et al., 2018). Hope then a significant contribution towards resilience which seeks to draw on the ability of the widows to persevere in the face of hardship while maintaining or even improving their functioning. Widows have shown some degree of resilience in moving on with life and taking care of their children with minimal resources (Dube, 2016).*

The context of practice within the strength-based perspective becomes critically important for helping practitioners using the strength-based perspective. Taking cognisance to the *culture* in the communities of practice is of significance as clients cannot be separated from their cultural practices. This helps practitioners understand the traditions, beliefs and norms that inform the daily lives of the widows and people in their communities of domicile. It is therefore imperative for the social service providers to ensure that there is a cultural inventory and are culturally competent if the strength-based approach has to be effective in assisting the widows to cope with their problems (Barzykowski et al., 2019).

The strength-based perspective draws much from the six guiding principles as listed by Kondrat (2014, 41) who informs that:

Every individual, group, family and community has strengths,

Trauma, abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity,

Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously. We best serve our clients by collaborating with them,

Every environment is full of resources,  
Caring, caretaking, and context-care is essential to human well-being.

## 2.2 *Empowerment Strategies from a Strength-Based Perspective*

The strength-based perspective provides an essential viewpoint in intervention efforts to assist the widows. In lieu of the empowerment focused interventions, two strategies that interventionist can use are discussed in this chapter. Two essential strategies discussed in this chapter include the exit strategy and the voice strategy.

The exit strategy's point of departure is an understanding that widows often get entangled in the pain of losing their husbands coupled with associated grief and mourning (Kentucky Counseling Centre, 2021). These are understood to be normal processes of adjustment, but proper adjustment can be facilitated by activation of the widows' inner strengths to allow coping to take place.

In the exit strategy, borrows its ideas from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and encourages widows to confront their difficulties and transform them into new positive views actions (Teater, 2014). Social service practitioners' roles include facilitation of new thinking by the widows, new ways of living and being brokers and linking the widows to appropriate service providers for their diverse needs (Dube, 2015). This will then provide and open various avenues for exiting their pains and social frustrations associated with widowhood.

The voice strategy is also another strategy that can be used when empowering widows. The strategy is premised on advocacy work and rights approaches. The strategy necessitates an environment in which widows feel free to express their concerns. It is a process that is person centred, (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2020), aimed at helping people find support, explain their needs, acquire the resources they require in the social system, and protect their rights (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2017). The Voice strategy is associated with self-advocacy and related to the values and needs of widows (Moe, 2021).

Where the widows' voices need to be heard by persons who appear to be unresponsive, the social service provider may take on the role of an *advocate*, according to Trevithick (2012). The social service professional in the advocacy role, according to Dube (2015), is not an unbiased *enabler, broker, expert, consultant, guide, or social therapist*: he is a partisan who supports and fights for the widows' rights. An advocate's role can be compared to that of a *biased supporter*.

### 3 Multidisciplinary Interventions for the Challenges Experienced by Widows

Dube (2016)'s study in low-resourced Binga District in Zimbabwe on "*the psychosocial plight of widows in Binga District in Zimbabwe: the efficacy of social work intervention*" provides lens on the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the challenges experienced by widows. The study aimed at examining the psychosocial plight of widows in Binga District in Zimbabwe and then developing a relevant social work intervention model. The objective was to develop a social work intervention model that can be used to address the plight of widows in the Binga district in Zimbabwe.

#### 3.1 *Methods and Instruments*

A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used to gather information needed for the creation of the social work integrated model (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hennink et al., 2011). This method was essential in getting first-hand information from widows who had faced psychosocial issues as a result of their spouses' deaths. Furthermore, the method proved effective and acceptable for gathering data from social service providers who interacted with widows to satisfy their welfare requirements. This presented a subjective account that was consistent with the widows' experiences (Padgett, 2017). A component representing the widows' subjective situation was added into the model for interventions into their dilemma.

The population of the study included widows and social service providers in Binga District in Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe. Widows in Matabeleland North constitute 15% of the population and were found to be young between the ages of 15–49 years in 2012 national census (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2012). There has been higher mortality rate among the male as compared to the female population, especially in Binga District in the province where the study was conducted. A non-probability homogeneous purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture the subjective lived experiences of the participants. This was done to meet the needed selection and eligibility criteria (Denscombe, 2014; Gray, 2014).

A total of 33 participants were interviewed, 24 of whom were widows and 9 of whom were key informants. Ten widows out of a total of 24 took part in individual in-depth interviews, while 14 widows took part in two independent focus groups interviews (Dube, 2016). The study's questions focused on the participants' widowhood experiences and interventions (Dube, 2021) During the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to learn more about the individual widows' experiences. Data were analysed thematically and then presented textually backed up by existing literature to provide depth in the lived experiences of the widows, the service

provision of social service providers and relevant interventions for the psychosocial and socioeconomic circumstances of the widows (Dube, 2016).

## 3.2 Summary of Findings

The findings exposed gaps and eminent inclusions in the interventions for the empowerment of widows in low-resourced communities. Emphasis is on the need for emotional well-being of the widows, dealing with loneliness among widows, caring for their children and spiritual support (Jones et al., 2019; Ndlovu, 2013). The findings are twofold: those from the social the widows themselves and those of the social service providers to the widows.

### 3.2.1 Findings from the Widows

Information gathered from the widows presented interesting findings regarding the widows plight in low-resourced communities. The findings from their biographical information showed that widows lost their husbands at a young age, with some of them below the age of 30 years. When their husbands died, widows were left with the responsibility of taking care of their own children together with the burden of taking care of extended family members. The widows were functionally literate and could not find jobs with most of them resorting to substance farming and roadside fruit and fish sales for sustenance.

The problems of the widows from the findings were bio-psychosocial and economic in nature. From a bio-psychosocial perspective, the widows had health issues as most of them were HIV/AIDS positive. Their husbands died from the HIV/AIDS related illnesses and hence they were also struggling with their health. Some, due to intense psychological stress related to the experience of widowhood, were medically diagnosed with hypertension. Psychologically, they experienced emotional stress related to the loss of their husband together with the lonely burden of family care. In some of the interviews, some verbatim responses of the widows revealed that:

Currently, I am deeply and stressed. I am disturbed by thinking about and taking care of my children. I think I am getting mad especially I am alone in taking care of the children and my husband's relatives do not want to help! (Nancy).

I sometimes have High Blood Pressure. The doctor said I have High Blood Pressure. People talk a lot and it pains me a lot. At night I don't even sleep. All this comes strong in my mind and troubles me (Choolwe).

In their social circles, the study found that widows were lonely in most instances as they were stigmatised and seen as unclean and associated with the spirit of the death husbands. They had to be exposed to cultural cleansing believed to help in exorcising the spirit of the dead husbands. The widows also experienced economic and

property disinheritance as in-laws grabbed property and other economic and financial resources left behind by the deceased. The general sentiments from the in-laws from the widows' revelations were that when they were married, they came with nothing and should leave with nothing when the husbands die leading to dwindling of economic resources needed for daily living.

In seeking interventions, the study found that widows used the services of the village heads and Chiefs in the communities whilst those closer to law enforcers sought the services of the law enforcement agencies such as the police and the magistrates. They also sought the services of health care professionals for health issues and social workers where social services were concerned. Spiritual services were also sought in instances where widows needed the spiritual leaders' interventions. This is what the widows revealed in the study:

This issue went as far as Chief Sikalenge for intervention. The land, the donkeys and the cattle were taken away from me and I had to leave and re-join my family, (Otilia).

We approached the police and the magistrate who advised us on how to share the property, (Zamani).

My Pastor who has now moved to Australia was surprised about the issue and tried his best to intervene but we could not get hold of them. They moved from one place to another, (Braitha).

### 3.2.2 Findings from the Social Service Providers

Social services providers who comprised of villages heads, chiefs, social workers, police officers, the magistrate, and the district development officer also shared their experiences with the assisting the widows in their problems. The findings from the social service providers confirmed the problems widows faced and emphasised the interventions they provided to the widows and the gaps identified in the intervention processes in Binga District.

The social service providers revealed that widows faced problems such as property grabbing, custody battles of children and suspicions that widows killed their husbands which created acrimony between the widows and the in-laws. These problems formed the major problems that social service providers for the widows intervened in the district. One village head emphasised:

On property inheritance, THERE IS A BIG WAR. . . . YES THE WAR IS VERY, VERY BIG! ((adding emphasis)). But the law says the surviving spouse should inherit whatever is left behind. But there is a lot of NOISE there! (Village Head).

Findings from the social service providers on the interventions they provided to the widows revealed that village heads and chiefs provided mediation services in instances of disputes in then villages with regards to property grabbing and evictions from the land. Such interventions were popular among the widows in the communities of domicile as cases of property and land grabbing were notorious.

Professional social service providers such as the social workers, magistrates, police officers, and district development officers provided counselling services,



childcare and support, and dispute resolution services. Whilst they provided those services, they cited difficulties in service delivery attributed to various pieces of legislation and policies that were fragmented and difficult to implement. With regards to the difficulty in implementing fragmented pieces of legislation, the social service provider responded this way during the interviews:

The policies are there, for example the Wills and Inheritance Act is there, but that is a piece of legislation. Are the people aware of the Act is another thing? On implementations, I feel that there is still a gap that needs to be holistically addressed in order to protect the women, (District Social Welfare Officer).

### 3.2.3 Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study from the widows and social service providers provided essential discussion points. It is clear from the findings that whilst challenges experienced by widows are widespread in low-resourced communities, there are also spaces and opportunities for empowerment-focused interventions to aid widows draw on their strengths to deal with their experiences of widowhood.

From the study, the biographical information of the widows showed that most widows lost their husbands at a young age, with some of them below the age of 30 years. When their husbands died, widows were left with the responsibility of taking care of their own children together with the burden of taking care of extended family members. Loss of financial security stemming from the death of their husbands coupled with illiteracy and inability to find jobs increased the widows' inability to cope to the loss of their husbands (Chami & Pooley, 2021; Undlin, 2019).

In the study, the problems the widows presented were bio-psychosocial and economic in nature. This is because the most of the widows' health issues were related HIV/AIDS positive. Many of the widows' husbands died from the HIV/AIDS related illnesses and hence they were also struggling with their health. Lebuso and De Wet- Billings (2022) submit that intense psychological stress episodes related to the experience of widowhood were also related to medical diagnosis of with hypertension among young widows as they deal with development issues, financial issues and the lonely burden of family care.

Stigma associated with uncleanness due widows being seen having the spirit of their dead husbands made most people to isolate the widows leaving them lonely. Because they were seen as dirty, widows were exposed to cultural cleansing believed to help in exorcising the spirit of the dead husbands. In cultural cleansing, the widow is expected to have sexual inter-course with another man, normally one of her brothers in-laws to let the spirit of the deceased rest in peace among the dead (Saguti, 2016). Whilst cultural cleansing of the widows could be seen a way to free the widows in their communities of domicile, it is dehumanising and strips away the worth and dignity of the widows.

Economic problems among the widows were also found to be common among the widows. Most of the economic issues were exacerbated property disinheritance as in-laws grabbed property and other economic and financial resources left behind

by the deceased (Sulumba-Kapuma, 2018; The Loomba Foundation, 2015). Such property grabbing was done by greedy in-laws. Perpetration of such violence by the in-laws further ignored the burden of caring for the children by the widows by themselves. The in-laws generally felt that the widows were “outsiders” who came into marriage with nothing and should leave with nothing when the husbands die leading to dwindling of economic resources needed for daily living.

Some widows who sought interventions for the plights revealed that they approached the village heads and Chiefs in the communities. The widows had to brave the traditional leaders’ approach to intervention as these leaders hold strongly to cultural ethos inherent in their dispute resolution methods. The same leaders in the communities encourage members of the community to adhere to their cultures with some of the cultural practices detrimental to the widows. One can only question as to whether the widows really trusted the traditional leaders in seeking their interventions in the problems.

Others accessed interventions from the law enforcement agencies such as the police and the magistrates. They also sought the services of health care professionals for health issues and social workers where social services were concerned. Spiritual services were also sought in instances where widows needed the spiritual leaders’ interventions. However, the interventions needed to be more helpful to the widows as the interventions sought were fragmented with lack of integration to ensure a multidisciplinary holistic approach. This then pointed to the need for an integrative model to interventions to meet the needs of the widows.

The discussion on the services of the social service providers to the widows provides insights on the interventions for the plight of the widows. It provides a balanced and comprehensive approach when combined with the experiences of the widows. It draws attention on what needs to be maintained or improved to empower widows on their psychosocial plights emanating from widowhood.

In lieu of the findings, the social service providers exposed that the property left behind by the deceased husbands were grabbed by in-laws and custody battles of the children were also common. Where the widows succeeded in taking care of the children, the family of the deceased husband would not help the widows in caring for the children. The study revealed feud and acrimony between the in-laws and the widows on matters on property and custody of children (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2015). Issues around property and children are precarious, sensitive and need properly organised professional interventions as they are very sentimental to the widows and in-laws (Parmar, 2021).

Despite their traditional approaches to mediation services, the central service providers in the communities where widows lived were the village heads and chiefs. Regardless of the need for most chiefs to adopt a paradigm shift towards human rights approaches to the needs of the widows, the traditional leaders were generally accessible to the widows and provided mediation services in instances of disputes in then villages with regards to property grabbing and evictions from the land (Human Rights Watch, 2022; International Justice Mission, 2014). This perhaps should be viewed as a “slow paradigm shift” from paying much respect to culture that disadvantages widows towards contemporary human rights approaches.

Professionals who provided support to the widows included social workers, magistrates, police officers, and district development officers. Pertinent services provided to the widows included counselling services, childcare and support, and dispute resolution services. Whilst these were critical services for the widows, the major drawback in the service provision was that they covered large catchment areas within minimal resources which reduced their visibility in the service areas. Under-provision and allocation of resources are typified problems for many low-resourced communities (Eberhardt et al., 2020). Also, the social service providers revealed that there were various pieces of legislation and policies that were fragmented and difficult to implement in a restrictive cultural and political environment as most of the policies were under testing and development (Mapuva & Muyengwa, 2012; Landman & Shumba, 2020; Sithole & Dziva, 2019).

The social services provided to the widows were less prioritised in the views of the social service providers. Evident from the findings were that the social services providers lamented the fact that widows were left behind in programming services and budgeting for intervention programmes. The social services sector has been widely criticised for the widespread lack of formidable intervention efforts as lack of financial resources increased the probability of the exclusion widows from deliberate professional interventions.

It is within the context of the findings of the study and the need for improvement of service provision to the widows that the study's findings and conclusions pointed to the necessity for an intervention model that emphasises a multidisciplinary approach. The model is drawn from the works of Dube (2021) which illuminates how social work and other professions can work together to assist the widows who face psychosocial and socioeconomic challenges. The model was called "Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model" (Dube, 2021:351).

## 4 The Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model

The gathered information from widows and social service providers lead to the development of an intervention model to address the widows' psychosocial and socioeconomic issues. The recommended model, named the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model for Widows, is sensitive to widows' psychosocial difficulties (See Fig. 1).

An explanation of the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model for Widows can be viewed as a conception of the widows' and social service providers' ideas and information on the intervention needs of the widows. This was put together with information derived and built on the concept of empowerment (Dube, 2021). Because social work was the primary field, the concept was dubbed the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model. The model is integrative in two ways: first, it was built on the amalgamation of useful information from various sources, including theoretical and scholarly sources, practice experience of social service providers, and lived experiences of widows; and second, it takes a holistic approach that involves

the unification and integration of various services. Some of the services may not be given by social workers directly, but rather through referral services, teaming approaches to practice, and forming relationships with other professionals (Dube, 2021).

The model is based on the major themes that arose during the study, which gave useful information on the widows' coping requirements as proposed by the widows themselves and by social service providers. The widows had personal issues that required micro-interventions and some professional service providers emphasised that group intervention would be necessary for the empowerment of widows; as a result, group work at the meso-level was recognised as a significant component, with various sorts of groups being highlighted.

In the study, it was discovered that some widows were unable to seek assistance because they did not know where to look for assistance, highlighting the need for community education and awareness, both of which are components of the macro-level interventions shown in the model (Dube, 2021). In the model, the concept of care refers to the basic sympathetic reactions that social service providers must employ when aiding widows. The level of care required is directly related to the three levels of intervention, namely micro, meso, and macro. These intervention levels are depicted in Fig. 1 on the model.

As emphasised by Dube (2021), the referral services are critical in the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model. Social work practitioners can recommend widows to legal services to satisfy their social welfare requirements, while legal practitioners can also refer widows to social work interventions. As depicted in Fig. 1, social workers can direct widows to spiritual, psychological, and health services to address their other needs. Practitioners from spiritual, psychological, and health sectors can also help widows access social work. Widows can also be referred between legal, spiritual, psychological, and health services in this proposed approach which is holistic and aims at meeting myriads of widows' empowerment needs.

## 5 Conclusions

Various conclusions have been made regarding the plight of widows in this chapter. Regarding the personal experiences of the widows, this chapter concludes that widows in low-resourced communities experience oppression in its various forms resulting in powerlessness and hopelessness. This is disempowering to the widows making them even more vulnerable to further abuse in the communities.

Another conclusion evident from the findings of the study is that much of the oppression of the widows stem from cultural practices endemic in the low-resourced communities. The oppressive practices are fuelled by misunderstandings between the widows and in-laws on very sensitive matters of socioeconomic in nature with property inheritance, evicts on land and properties, child custody battles and levirate marriages being significant issues.

Further, conclusions can also be drawn regarding practical interventions and policy. It can be concluded that oppression of the widows is exacerbated by inadequate professional intervention due to lack of resources and policy directives. In some instances where some pieces of legislation and policies are available, they were found to be fragmented. This makes them susceptible to multiple interpretations and improper implementation which is equally a disservice and injustice to the widows.

## 6 Recommendations

Important recommendations are made in this section regarding theory, policy, practice, and future research on the plight of widows. This is essential as it positions interventions and discourses on widowhood in future contexts.

Theoretical positions on widowhood need to focus on the new phenomenon of young widows mainly common in low-resources communities. Many theoretical positions discuss widowhood as an old age phenomenon, yet a new phenomenon of young widows is a serious concern for low-resourced communities with minimum theoretical discourses. Further, helping professional theorists have also focussed attention to bereavement and grief theories and abandoned the phenomenon of widowhood itself which has also crippled intervention efforts due to lack of valuable information for theories that inform interventions. Therefore, it is recommended that more effort should be made to further focus on existing theoretical positions towards and beyond the current discourses on widowhood to inform developing trends on the phenomenon of widowhood.

The study found that the policies to address widowhood in low-resourced communities are fragmented and difficult to implement. This study therefore recommends a constant review of policies that can inform practice. This review should consider input of the implementing agencies and departments to inform review aspects of the policies, such as geographical and cultural contexts and resource allocations, to reinforce and ensure enforceability, accountability and sustainability in practice. This can be made possible through the use of task teams to review policies.

The study found that social interventions for the plight of the widows in Binga District lacked priority due to lack of resources both financial and human capital. Subsequent to that, there has been lack of programming for activities related to interventions for the plight of widows. It is recommended that a review of financial and human resources be done to ensure that programmes that empower widows are successfully implemented and form part of the mainstream social interventions in Binga District and other similar communities where the phenomenon of widows is common.

Further, the interventions in the plight of widows should be inclusive of traditional leaders of the communities as these are closer to the people and a custodian of traditions within the communities. Lack of dialogue and involvement with

traditional leaders may further suffocate professional interventions as traditional leaders can better inform traditional practices that are problematic to the psychosocial health and welfare of the widows.

A multidisciplinary approach is needed to meet an arsenal of needs of the widows as monodisciplinary approaches have significantly lacked traction in interventions. Collaborative effort is recommended among many interventionists with proper and effective referral system.

It is important to describe what future research should focus on. This chapter described the plight of widows in low-resourced communities, the plight of widows in communities with better resources still needs investigation and should be a priority for future research is recommended. Further research on widowers is needed to draw comprehensive results and conclusions on the experience of widowhood with different genders as current research focused only on widows.

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# Toward Autonomy and Empowerment: An Examination of Identity Amongst Iranian Migrant Women in Canada



Maryam Hosseini and Saba Safdar

**Abstract** In this chapter we examine how the experience of migration influence Iranian immigrant women's self-image positively. We illustrate that Women who had immigrated from Iran, a society with patriarchal values and norms, to Canada, a society with relatively gender egalitarian values, encounter lower gender limitations and more legal rights during acculturation. This in turn provides women with more resources and opportunities to develop a sense of agency, competence, and independence; strengths that construct psychological empowerment.

Employing an instrumental case study, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with four Iranian women residing in Canada. Interviews were conducted via Skype and Zoom in two separate sessions. The first session centers on their background, family structure, encountering values and norms during development, the role of the family in transmitting the cultural ideas, values, and norms, and self-image formation through development. The second session consisted of their immigration story; which covered issues like encountering new values and norms, experiencing conflicts and challenges, coping and resiliency during acculturation, the transformation of self-image, and the psychological changes they had experienced following migration.

Analysis of cases showed that women who immigrated from Iran to Canada obtained strengths such as agency, independence, autonomy, and competence during the process of acculturation which made them more empowered.

The findings indicate that migration provides Iranian women with opportunities to change their self-images in a positive way. Consistent with previous studies, immigrant women could benefit from new opportunities and resources to gain empowerment.

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**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Psychological empowerment · Autonomy · Independence · Agency · Acculturation · Identity · Iranian immigrant women

## 1 Introduction

The study of immigration and acculturation provides a rich opportunity to examine the intersectionality of identity, gender and cultural identity (Lindholm, 2007). It has been well-established that the intersectionality of multiple social identities shapes the experience of migrants in the society of settlement; experiences that reflect broader historical and cultural contexts of the countries that immigrants travel from and to (Kashima & Safdar, 2020; Naber, 2000).

Gender as an inseparable dimension of identity and self-image is deeply influenced by cultural and familial socialization. Stereotypes and gender roles are internalized during the earliest developmental stages of socialization and shape the self-image of women (Hall, 2013; Ting-Toomey, 2014). Although, all cultures define differentiated gender roles to some extent, in a patriarchal culture, gender roles are more distinct and pronounced (Sigal & Nally, 2004).

Iranian women who had immigrated from Iran, a society with more patriarchal values and norms compared to Canada with less patriarchal values and norms and more equal legal rights may experience changes in their identities. Based on identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 2014), During acculturation people experience identity change process; a process which might lead to favorable or unfavorable changes. During the process of change, immigrants may experience stress and negative emotions such as guilt, shame, sadness, anger, and fear when negotiating multiple identities (Akhtar, 1995); emotions which reflects intrapersonal conflicts between internalized values and norms reflecting heritage culture and the new ones that the new culture offers (Akhtar, 2022). However, it has been reported that in many cases the outcome of this challenging process, might be leading to the positive construction of self and an enriched sense of identity (Berger & Weiss, 2003, 2006). According to studies, many immigrant women gain more freedom, autonomy, independence, and confidence, as they negotiated traditional gender roles in a new social and cultural context (Jamarani, 2012; Nevins, 2022; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Rezazadeh & Hoover, 2018; Zentgraf, 2002); strengths which play a crucial role in empowering women (Hall, 2013; Kabeer, 2021).

### 1.1 *Patriarchy & Formation of Powerless Self-images*

The term 'patriarchy' has been used within post-1960s feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female inferiority (Makama, 2013; Rawat, 2014). Iran is a relatively traditional country with patriarchal socio-cultural values, norms, and rules where the family unit plays a critical role in a person's life (Jamarani, 2012); in Iranian society family could be considered the primary site of

women's submission and men's dominance (Asiyanbola, 2005; Rawat, 2014). A typical Iranian woman through the eyes of culture, family, and society must play the role of a devoted mother and a loving wife who prioritize her family, take care of them, and ignores her ambitions (Toolo & Shakibae, 2000).

In a society governed by patriarchal norms, rules, and values women may not experience the sense of being effective in modifying their environment (Kabeer, 2005). Being disempowered repeatedly by cultural constraints, unjustified legal rights, and unbalanced distribution of resources (Kabeer, 2016), yields in the formation of self-images of being psychologically disempowered. Indeed, the experience of empowerment is rooted "in how people see themselves—their sense of self-worth. This, in turn, is critically bound up with how they are seen by those around them and by their society" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15).

In a patriarchal system, decision-making, autonomy, powerfulness, assertiveness, and ambition are considered masculine while affection, love, nurturing, dependency, compliance, and passivity are considered feminine (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020). These stereotypes of femininity (and masculinity) are internalized by both women and men. A woman living in this system, during socialization, and through interaction with community, family, school, and peers internalizes patriarchal socio-cultural values. The family, as the first institution in which a person becomes social, is of fundamental importance in Iranian culture (Azadarmaki & Bahar, 2006; Malekan, 2016). Within the family unit, the internalization of punishing authority (usually the father) contributes to girls' self-image of compliance, passivity, and dependency. Within the larger family unit and the community, girls are encouraged to be more like the 'ideal' woman who is nice, kind, nurturing, compliant, polite, and dependent. Although there is a universal gender difference that relates to the different ways parents interact with boys and girls. For example, Parents tend to channel the girl's ambition toward marriage and motherhood while they encourage their boys to be more professionally successful (Akhtar, 2018).

It is worth mentioning that sometimes "the family advocates egalitarianism and defends the empowerment of women" (Malekan, 2016, p. 93). In this case, girls might internalize and identify with supportive, open-minded, strong, and assertive parents which made them ambitious and independent. However, there are still societal norms, rules, and laws that stigmatize women who do not fit gender expectations. As Malekan (2016) stated: "In nearly all traditional and patriarchal societies, gender roles are taught to men and women in a way that they internalize such roles. Any violations of these specified roles are considered a deviation of the normal standards and will be punished" (p. 122).

## ***1.2 Immigration & Changes in Self-image***

Migration from a patriarchal society (e.g., Iran) to a less patriarchal society (e.g., Canada) provides opportunities for women to gain more freedom, independence, and confidence, as they negotiated traditional gender roles in a new social and cultural

context (Jamarani, 2012; Nevins, 2022; Pessar & Mahler, 2003; Rezazadeh & Hoover, 2018; Zentgraf, 2002). During acculturation, new norms, values, and roles are accessible and potentially acquired. The immigrant women have the chance to acquire new knowledge about their old destroying cultural beliefs which made them disempowered psychologically. The women must be given the opportunities and be provided with conditions, in which they can develop more powerful self-images (Lazo, 1995; Stromquist, 1999). Kabeer (1999) suggested that migration from a less to a more democratic country provides women with more equality in legal rights, cultural norms, and values and a more balanced distribution of power and resources. Such empowerment involves obtaining knowledge about legal rights (Stromquist, 1999), recognizing the pattern of behavior which creates dependency and passivity, and identifying the new gender relation structure (Hall, 2013). Arguably, for some Iranian women migrating to Canada, there are opportunities to exercise power and agency.

In this chapter, we attempt to clarify the role of cultural norms and family tradition in Iranian women's self-image. We examine the role of immigration in the transformation of self-image amongst a sample of Iranian-Canadian women with a focus on empowerment.

## 2 Methodology

The experiences of Iranian migrant women in Canada were examined within four theoretical frameworks (see below). Using women's narratives, we illustrate how the participants perceive themselves before migration and after migration through the process of acculturation and how the changes in their perceptions related to being empowered.

### 2.1 Selection of Cases

The current study is a part of Ph.D. thesis (the first author's) concerning the acculturation of Iranians using grounded theory methodology. Data was collected between 2020 and 2022 by a purposive sampling method. The sample consisted of ten Iranian women migrated to Canada. For the current study, employing an *instrumental case studies* design, four cases among ten women were selected. Based on instrumental case studies design, the aim of the selection of cases is to identify 'the ideal case to grasp the object of study (Hamel et al., 1993: 43). The cases were considered ideal for the purpose of this study because they clarify how the experience of migration changes their self-image in a way which made them more empowered psychologically.

## 2.2 Procedure

In a qualitative study, using a case study methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with four Iranian women who immigrated to Canada voluntarily. Four Iranian women residing in Canada were selected using advertisements on social media. Those who volunteered to participate signed up for the study and signed consent form. We let the participants know that their identities were protected via a pseudonym. Also, Participants were allowed to not answer any questions they did not want to. After collecting demographic information (age, marital status, length of residence, age at the beginning of immigration) interviews were conducted through Skype and Zoom. Each interview lasted between 3 and 4 h. The semi-structured interview involved the use of open-ended questions. Participants were asked to talk about their “life story” and “immigration story”. The following topics were explored under life story: developmental history, values, and norms during development, self-image during development, and the role of the parents in the transmission of gender norms. The following topics were explored under immigration story: reasons for immigration, decision-making process, self-image during the process of acculturation, challenges and conflicts which they have experienced during the migration process, and changes they feel psychologically through the migration process.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

The role of theory is crucial in ‘case study’ methodology in order to direct the researcher’s attention to what is to be examined within the framework of the study (Willig, 2013, p. 311). In the present study, four major theoretical frameworks were used to analyze the findings: dynamic theories of migration and identity (Ainslie et al., 2013; Akhtar, 1995; Tummala-Narra, 2011), feminist perspectives on migration (Jamarani, 2012; Malekan, 2016; Zentgraf, 2002), acculturation literature (Berger & Weiss, 2003, 2006; Kashima & Safdar, 2020; Tabor & Milfont, 2011), and women’s empowerment theories (Hall, 2013; Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2016, 2021).

## 3 Findings & Discussion

The first case analysis (*Sima*) is centered on the agency initiating the migration decision-making process. The second case (*Sarah*) illustrated experiencing freedom, confidence, and psychological separation from the father following migration; Also, Sarah’s story represented how the distribution of power between the couple had changed through acculturation and how they managed to resolve these conflicts by facing their biased gender stereotypes. The third case (*Mary*) illustrated how she managed to re-establish a personal sense of control, autonomy, and responsibility

during the process of acculturation and became psychologically separated from her mother. The fourth case (*Raha*) illustrated the heightened conflict between motherhood, marriage, and work-related success in the context of immigration and how she managed to accept her new reshaped motherhood values.

### 3.1 Case Illustration: *Sima, 38 Years Old, Married, Migrated to Canada in 2017*

#### 3.1.1 Taking the Control of My Life: Agency and Control Over Decision Making

Agency can be defined as “an inner state of awareness and choice of action” (Akhtar, 2018, p. 8) and is a significant component of empowerment (Kabeer, 2021); A strength that enables a person to know what she wants and what action should take to contemplate her needs or wishes.

In the context of migration, the decision to immigrate can be considered the first step in that people observe their needs, will, and ambitions and evaluate their capacity to fulfill their wishes. In the patriarchal system, women learn to ignore their needs and prioritize the authority figure. A woman growing up in a patriarchal society doesn't perceive herself as a capable, powerful, competent, and agent person. She used to give up the right of choice and let others decide for her. Being disempowered implies that someone's power is dismissed or denied (Kabeer, 2021). According to Naila Kabeer (2005) 'power' is defined as “the ability to make choice” (p. 13). In this regard, being disempowered implies that women who formed a powerless and incapable self-image, cannot trust themselves to make strategic life choice (Kabeer, 2005).

In the case of immigration decision-making, when it comes to couples, it is expected that the husband takes the “driver” role, who initiates the migration process and the wife plays the “trailer” role (Tabor & Milfont, 2011). The following case illustrates a sense of agency by one participant who was aspiring to migrate to Canada for a long time, but she couldn't trust herself as the driver of the process. *Sima* expressed doubt about her ability to initiate the migration process. She had been aspiring to migrate for a long time but in her opinion it was just a dream that wouldn't come true by her, and expects her husband to be the “**driver**” of the migration process. She describes her passivity in the following manner:

I was educated but didn't have a job and it bothered me. I had been on a stage, that I can describe as the darkest part of my life. I was depressed, helpless, and numb. I can't describe the extent I hated myself because I literally “did nothing” I had been a housewife which was not my desired role. At a moment in my life, I aspired migration. I couldn't picture myself as a woman who can get control over her life. I didn't have any paid job or any skills to act on my wish for migration. . .I solely aspired to it but I couldn't consider myself a woman who can do something for her aspiration. Although I was educated, I view myself as an incapable woman.

When she was asked about the origin of her passivity, she linked her helplessness to being observant of her parents' fight. She portrayed her mother as a passive woman with whom she also identified. She recreated her mother's role in her own marriage even though she described her husband as not a controlling and aggressive man.

In the middle of the Iran-Iraq war, there was another fight in our house. After many years of fighting, my father eventually left us. Mom was a sad, powerless woman who had been depressed most of the time. At the same time, she controls us with her sickness. I can say, I got married very soon (at 18) to run away from the family. My marriage worked relatively well... but I was frustrated and unsatisfied with shattered self-esteem.

She further described how she was angry at her husband because he refuses to initiate the process:

I was very angry at my husband because I thought he is the one who can decide, choose, and take action. It was so obvious to me and it annoyed me when he was refusing to accept the role that I was giving him. But he told me if "you want to go, you do something about that. It is your wish. I would be supportive but don't expect me to fulfil your wish".

she continues describing her early efforts for migration and how it was disappointing:

I consulted some immigration lawyers and all of them frustrated me... they approved my incapability in some way. after a long-term process of hating myself and depression at some point, I became angry at myself in a good way. I realized how I became like my mom and I hated that. One day, I had just initiated learning the English language and began to communicate with an international professor to take a position in Master degree in Data analysis. It was the first time in my life that I could be in charge of my life... It was the first time I took the initiative... the one who chooses, tries, and who migrates instead of wishing for it... It was as if I had made a revolution, so to speak, and I felt much better. I felt like I was doing something, that I am useful... I have an outlook of the future now... a future that would be created by me.

Sima's story shows how the process of decision-making for migration can be related to the sense of competence, agency, and internal locus of control; strengths that constitutes psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995); a term which refers to the experience of empowerment. As Sima mentioned, her dependence on her husband as the main provider makes her powerless. She was compliant with the stereotype that men should make important decisions and that women are not capable enough to pursue their wishes.

### ***3.2 Case Illustration: Sarah, 31 Years Old, Married, Migrated to Canada in 2014***

#### **3.2.1 Suffocated by My Father's Restraints: From Independence Toward Autonomy**

In a patriarchal system, which is based on male supremacy, women become dependent in two general ways: implicitly or explicitly. Explicit dependence is the obvious



way that women are dependent on men. In societies where men are the head of the family, they control the family members. In a patriarchal family, the father is the head of the family (Asiyanbola, 2005; Jalali, 2005). In these families, it is expected that family members be submissive and compliant to the father's needs and wishes. Implicit dependence occurs when the girl is over protected from the "dangerous" society because she is considered "a tiny fragile creature" by the family. We discuss the explicit form of dependency in the third case illustration.

In Sarah's story, two themes were evident: independence and marital conflicts around gender roles following migration. The latter theme is discussed in detail in the "marital conflicts around gender roles" section. Sarah portrayed her family structure as a space ridden with gender-based limitations, stereotypes, prejudice, and gender inequality. In her family, her father was the commander who put limits on her outgoings, clothing, and dating.

It made me sad how my father's manner was different toward my brother. . .It wasn't equal. It was Ok for him to be away until 2 am but for me being away at 10 pm was crossing the line.

She talked about how the sexism in the house and the society was "suffocating" and how she chose migration to "get free from chains" and to prove herself as an independent woman. She sarcastically appreciated her father's important role in her migration decision-making:

Once I told him he made a great favor to me with all the pressure and limitations. If being independent wasn't that hard and if it wasn't for him maybe I never think of migration. He pushed me toward migration but fortunately, it worked well for me.

Sarah considered turning 18 a critical age as her father became even more strict, controlling, and oppressive. In contrast to western cultures, the age of 18 is when the person became independent from family by moving away from home (usually going to college), in Iran, many parents increase their restrictions because it is an age that dating, sex, and social gathering became more prominent, hence a traditional family might put more limits on their youth, especially their daughters. In this matter, Sarah explained how her father was kind and playful when she was a child:

All the problems began in my adolescence. . .although he is not a religious person at all, he had been controlling every detail of my romantic life, Hijab, and outgoings with my friends.

She talked about how she viewed herself as a promiscuous woman while growing up. She was ashamed of her sexual desires. Also, she viewed immigration as a turning point in her life which helped her to realize that her sexual needs derive from her healthy part.

After my migration and through the process of therapy, I realized that I was not a prostitute because of my sexual desire, I was just a healthy, normal girl who wanted to explore her needs, to fall in love, to have sex.

Her narration illustrates how migration helped her to negotiate a new identity as a "healthy normal girl". Sarah also talked about the challenges she had after migration. She struggled with anxiety, fear, and doubts through the immigration process which

motivated her to see a therapist to accept her new self and to learn how to be independent. Eventually she managed to dis-identify with her father.

### 3.2.2 Gender Role Conflicts in a Married Couple

#### Who Is the “Breadwinner”?

Another major theme in Sarah’s story was gender role conflicts in her marriage. Marriage and migration happened at about the same time for her. She and her husband started living together in Canada. Her story depicts gender role conflicts that occurred between her and her husband after migration. She described how financial problems in the early stage of migration, triggered deep conflicts around gender roles in her marriage.

According to the first author’s unpublished thesis (Hosseini, 2022) economic struggle is one of the major challenges that many immigrants encounter and is a significant stressor during acculturation. When it comes to couples experiencing financial problems, triggers interpersonal conflicts and is a powerful predictor of marital crisis (Akbari, 2008; Jibeen & Hynie, 2012).

In her story, Sarah’s expectations from her husband in the first 3 years of their emigration were influenced by the traditional and patriarchal gender roles of Iranian society which define the man as a breadwinner. From a traditional view, women don’t need to have a job and be financially independent. The definition of a man as a breadwinner is rooted in Iranian culture. A well-known Iranian saying that children learn at primary school as part of their reading and writing exercise is: *Baba gives water. Baba gives bread!* This is perceived as factual as saying *the sky is blue*.

She narrates the situation in the following manner:

Most of the problems between my husband and I was financial. In the early stage of resettlement. We felt burdened by financial problems but it was not the main problem. It went far beyond. It was related to a deeper problem in my identity. I strangely expect my husband to be the main provider. Now I find it very sexist and stupid. It is funny that I have been always fighting gender inequality and distinct gender roles, but in the middle of the crisis, my behavior was contradictory. I saw him as a loser who can’t provide for my needs. . . Now, I find it very embarrassing because I hate all the traditional roles.

Sarah’s comment reflects her family structure in which his father was the main provider and breadwinner so he was the one who made decisions. She clarified how her controlling and over-protective father creates a picture of male supremacy and female passivity. Despite rejecting the over-protective role of her father, she unconsciously replicated the role of a passive woman in her marriage. This was a “huge surprise” to her.

Sarah’s story illustrates, that during the process of acculturation the person would confront her ideal self-image and the actual one. While she was in Iran, she had been criticizing patriarchy, sexism, and gender inequality. When she migrated to a society with more gender equality, she faced her own biases and stereotypes around gender but this time she had to fight with her internalized traditional culture; a process that

was stressful. Negotiating these two conflictual values eventually led Sarah to view herself as an active participant and an equal partner in her marriage; a perception that motivated her to start a job. This change not only helped her marital relationship but also, helped her to be economically liberated which led to psychological empowerment (Heaton et al., 2005; Swain & Wallentin, 2009; Taghipour et al., 2016). This finding is consistent with studies that show playing an active role in earning, leads to more power in decision-making which contributes to the perception of competence, agency, and responsibility (Akbari, 2008; Batool et al., 2016; Zentgraf, 2002).

### **3.3 Case Illustration: Mary, 29 Years Old, Single, Migrated to Canada in 2017**

#### **3.3.1 From a Spoiled Girl to a Mature Woman: Separation from the Overprotective Mother**

As we suggested earlier, dependency in a patriarchal family occurs in explicit or implicit forms. In many families, the transmission of male supremacy and female inferiority notions occurs in a subtle and implicit manner. There may not be an obvious expectation of girls to be submissive and passive but they are considered “tiny fragile creatures” who need careful attention. When girls are overprotected and pampered there is a perception that girls are fragile, dependent, and incompetent which yields to the formation of a passive, fearful, and powerless self-image. Iranian families, especially, Iranian mothers, may adopt behaviors that encapsulate girls and make them “spoiled” or “dependent”.

Mary was one of the Iranian women who grew up in an over-protective family in which gender norms were in place more subtly. According to her, there weren't any obvious patriarchal messages from the family. However, her mother over-protected her since her childhood. She was expected to focus exclusively on education and received subtle messages that she doesn't need to be in society as much as her brother. She had been living in a fantasy world created by her “too good” mother which contributed to her encapsulation. Her encounter with “painful” reality, began when she began her professional career in Iran. according to her, her “beautiful world was torn apart after facing corruption, lies and bribery” in her job. She attributes her migration motivation to this realization:

Shattering my beautiful world which was created by my mother was very devastating for me. She created a beautiful unreal picture of the world. . . I was shocked at my job which contributes to recreating my world by immigration.

Mary migrated to fill the gap between her ideal world and her real world. She chose to alter the environment to meet her needs. She narrates her journey as a process of “separation from her mother” which was the hardest part of her migration. In her case, the identity transformation following migration was “from spoiled, dependent girl to an independent woman”. Through her journey, she learned to be an active

participant in her life which is the biggest achievement she could obtain through her migration.

Some people perceive me as a spoiled girl. . . I think despite the hardship of being separated from my mother, immigration serves as an opportunity for me to become independent. I could figure things out without my mom's help and I think it made me a capable and mature woman. . . of course, I miss her a lot and once I recall her face, I find myself crying and needy. But in a long run, it was an opportunity for me to grow. . . to manage things. . . because there is no powerful and capable mother whom do your tasks and solves everything. I learn to handle difficulties. Of course, in the beginning, I felt scared and helpless but now I feel capable. . . I think I learn to care for myself.

As Mary's story portrayed, the expectation to conform to gender norms was not performed by his father. When a society has strong gender stereotypes, the values and expectations are rooted in people's minds. In this case, Mary's mother viewed her daughter as a tiny, beautiful creature who needs special protection from an unsafe world.

### ***3.4 Case Illustration: Raha, 38 Years Old, Married, Migrated to Canada in 2020***

#### **3.4.1 Am I a Bad Mother?**

Raha, who at the time of the interview had a 12 years old son in Iran, got admission to a Ph.D. program in Canada. Her husband and son initiated the process of getting a Visa, but the process took longer than expected. Subsequently, she moved to Canada alone. Raha described one of her biggest motivations that compelled her to migrate, was her son's safety. Indeed, migrating "for my children's sake" is one of the top reasons most Iranians choose to migrate (Hosseini, 2022). Their fear of the unpredictable future of Iran makes parents worried about their children's future. In addition to her son as a motivating factor, Raha was angry at herself because she had "just" played the role of a housewife and a mother, and "for her was like ignoring her potential to move beyond the traditionally defined role as a mother and wife. She talked about how her financial dependency on her husband was a trigger for her to feel humiliated and ashamed.

It really irritated me that I had no jobs, no earning no personal hobby. . . nothing. I was educated but I didn't have any role in society. Can you believe that I even imagine if 1 day my son gets married, how can I give him a present?! I couldn't consider my husband's money, my money. I was disgusted by the fact that my husband provided me with money.

At the time of the interview, Raha was waiting for her son and husband to join her. Although she was away from her son for a temporary time, she talked about how she had been accused of "abandoning" her son and husband.

My mother keeps telling me why did you migrate? What was your problem? you had your husband and son. Your husband provided you with a house, car, and everything. . . why did you abandon your life in Iran. . . the whole family, except my husband and my son, view me

as a bad mother who left her son for her own sake. . . They can't see how much pain I tolerate, I know, my son will join me soon, but I really try to ignore the judgments from my society and my family.

Raha talked about her struggle with conflictual norms and expectations. She realized that in the eyes of her family and community she was not a devoted mother and was not considered a "good" mother.

Sometimes I try so hard to get up and continue living. Deep down I want to hide in a corner and don't talk to anyone; but once I look further and remember my motivations for migration, I get hopeful. . . Now I have a vision of my future and it makes me alive and hopeful. . . they will join me soon.

In Raha's story, migration provided her with opportunities to create a safer place to live for her son, to be a more professional successful woman beyond the traditionally accepted roles, and to be more independent personally and financially from her husband. At the same time, she was struggling with the feelings of guilt and shame because she didn't conform with stereotypes around motherhood in Iranian culture. In cultures with patriarchal gender values, being a mother is the most valued job a woman could have. A perfect woman is a committed mother, who sacrifices all her capacity for her family. This finding is consistent with Malekan's (2016) writing that if an Iranian woman "is not a committed mother and does not devote all of her capacities to her children, she will not be punished by laws, but she will be punished by the Iranian culture via stigma, behavior, and rejection by other members of the community" (p. 124).

## 4 Conclusion

In-depth interviews with Iranian women residing in Canada illustrated immigration provided opportunities for these women to negotiate their traditional gender roles. Migrating to a society with more egalitarian values helped these women to negotiate their identity in a positive way. Negotiating multifaceted and conflictual identities may lead to creating strategies that are adaptive and effective (Ting-Toomey, 2014). Consistent with researches (Kashima & Safdar, 2020), we found that migrant women adopted new gender roles, and new communication styles with family, and abandoned previous goals and values in order to achieve feeling valued and empowered.

Although the process of acculturation and identity change resulted in conflicts, anxiety, loss, and guilt amongst some participants, all participants talked about gaining strengths such as autonomy, competency, and agency. The process of migration enables these women to re-evaluate their gender roles and negotiate a self-image that fits their potential better. This is consistent with previous findings that indicate migration can provide new resources and new knowledge to women about gender relations while empowering them to reject beliefs that contribute to the formation of powerless self-images (Kabeer, 2005; Stromquist, 1999).

The findings indicate that although migration, a potentially stressful experience, might challenge identity and self-image, it could provide an opportunity for self-growth. This finding is consistent with literature that shows migration can contribute to the prosperity of migrants ranging from economic and professional to psychological and identity development (Berger & Weiss, 2003, 2006; Kashima & Safdar, 2020).

This study shows that Iranian immigrant women could benefit from opportunities and changed cultural norms and values to gain autonomy, independence, agency, and competence following immigration.

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**Part VI**  
**Women's Empowerment from a Gender**  
**Perspective**

# Vignettes of Equality, Wellbeing and Teaching



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**Abstract** Substantive progress has been made in recent decades to ensure gender equality as a fundamental human right. More girl children are attending school, there are more women in key leadership positions in business and government, and child marriage is declining. However, still, no country in the world can claim full gender equality. Women experience disadvantages in many sectors of society. Women are predominantly bearing the brunt of household responsibilities, income inequalities are pervasive, and lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic increased the risks of violence against women and girls. Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality highlights the fact that in 18 countries of the world husbands can still legally prevent their wives from working, that only 13% of agricultural land holders are women, and that laws that protect women from domestic violence, despite high prevalence rates, are lacking in 49 countries. The aim of the chapter is to contribute to the global discourse on gender equality as it pertains to sustainability, wellbeing, teaching and teacher education. The chapter draws on the experiences of an all-women research team from South Africa and Austria within the Teach4Reach project, which explores the ways in which teacher education can be leveraged to support the goals and targets on gender equality in the 2030 Agenda. By utilising the theoretical lens of eudaimonic wellbeing, the study adopts vignette research as a data

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collection strategy in this multi-national research project between Europe and Africa. Hence, data is analysed phenomenologically and presented as vignettes of scenes from, and of experiences, in educational settings. The study posits that, similar to gender, wellbeing can be non-binary and also multi-layered. Wellbeing may thus manifest on a continuum which in itself presents in a multi-layered way. The study foregrounds the complexities of gender representativity and the importance of intentional research design decisions.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Gender equality · SDG 5 · Sustainable development · 2030 Agenda · Eudaimonic wellbeing · Education · Vignette research

## 1 Introduction

The importance of gender equality has gained significant traction within the global agenda for sustainable development (Klinkenberg, 2021; Smith, 2021; UNESCO, 2012). Engaging women on matters of sustainability seems to contribute to progress and development on multiple fronts. Even preceding the current global agenda for sustainability (United Nations, 2015), there was recognition that women play a pivotal role in overcoming societal challenges and that a prioritisation of women's economic participation may yield broad benefits. For instance, a 2010 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that women's 'economic participation and their ownership and control over productive assets speeds up development, helps overcome poverty and reduce inequalities, and improves children's nutrition, health, and school attendance. Women usually invest a higher proportion of their earnings in their families and communities than men' (OECD, 2010: 5).

Similarly, the increased participation of women and girls in education has shown benefits that extend well beyond the individual level. Studies (Murphy et al., 2009; Sperling & Winthrop, 2015) have shown that investment in girls' education has positive impacts on growth in developing nations; it increases agricultural productivity, saves lives, leads to smaller and more sustainable families, increases women's political leadership, and reduces harm to families from natural disasters.

As such, the importance of gender equality in the sciences broadly has also been emphasised. Investment in women and girls is not restricted to the younger years and should extend throughout all stages of life and across scientific disciplines. One way to measure this would be to look at the participation rates of women in the sciences, and specifically science academies, which are widely regarded as the pinnacle of scientific excellence. Recent surveys (IAP, 2021) indicate that some progress can be detected in terms of representation of women in academies of science around the globe (IAP, 2021, p. viii–ix). However, analysis of discipline-based gender transformation, indicates that of nine broad disciplines, the mean share of women members ranges from '28% (biological sciences) and 27% (social sciences, humanities and arts) to as low as 10% (engineering sciences) and 8% (mathematical sciences)' (IAP, 2021, p. viii).

In this regard, teacher education can play a crucial role. Teacher education has the potential to impact the education of students, including women and girls, at all stages of life, as well as to change societal perceptions about gender. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities, particularly in terms of gender. With the implementation of Covid-19 restrictions by national governments to curb the spread of the virus, learning had to take place remotely for millions of students. With the academic environment changing from the classroom to the home, there have been increasing reports of gender-based violence, mental health problems and teenage pregnancies amongst girls of school-going age (Willie, 2021; World Health Organization, 2021). In many countries, early pregnancy and motherhood often result in girls being forced to drop out of school, being trapped in a cycle of poverty, dependent on social grants, stigmatised by society for being teenage mothers, or forced into early marriage (Willan, 2013). Studies have shown how disruptions to acquiring quality education have increased, particularly for the girl child who has had to take on the responsibility of domestic duties while contending with the challenges that come with remote and online learning (Burki, 2020).

In addressing these challenges, teacher education programmes have the potential to intervene at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Dittrich, 2020; Fischetti et al., 2021; La Velle, 2021; Ogude et al., 2020) to support all children, improve gender equality and to ensure wellbeing.

## 2 Eudaimonic Wellbeing

Eudaimonic wellbeing is broadly articulated as the realisation of full human potential (Ryff, 2018). The essence of eudaimonia is nurturing ‘meaningful, fulfilling and socially responsible lives’ (Ryff, 2018, p. 375). In this regard, teacher education programmes can play an integral role in shaping curricula that will optimise eudaimonic wellbeing in all children and, ultimately, also in shaping policy and education reforms that will support gender equality. In this study, we explore dimensions of gender equality that relate to eudaimonic wellbeing, as articulated by Ryff (2018, p. 377) when she defines the components of wellbeing as environmental mastery, positive relationships, purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy and self-acceptance.

Eudaimonic wellbeing is also critical in the achievement of several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequality (SDG 10), Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) (Odell et al., 2020). To achieve gender equality (SDG 5) in terms of widening educational opportunities and better employment for girls and women, a transformative paradigm of education that sees all genders as equal and deserving of the same opportunities in society, is needed. The training of pre- and in-service teachers which infuses content on sustainability and gender equality in its curricula planning and execution may assist

in the development of the twenty-first century skills and a future where gender parity has been achieved.

Teacher educators are one group of powerful agents of change with the ability to support the educational mission needed. Their knowledge and competences are crucial for sustainable teaching and learning and can shape values and perspectives for pre-service or in-service teachers.

### **3 Background to the Teach4Reach Project**

The Teach4Reach project aims to reflect on the role of teacher education programmes and the SDGs within a 2-year webinar series between researchers and teacher educators from the Global South and the Global North. It is led by an all-women team of researchers from the University of Pretoria (South Africa), the University of Innsbruck and the University of Vienna (Austria). The project views teacher education as a critical pivot to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals in the 2030 Agenda. Though all 17 Global Goals (SDGs) are relevant within the field of education, this project is focusing on four SDGs: Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Reduced Inequality (SDG 10). The project seeks to raise awareness in teacher education on sustainability broadly, and these four SDGs specifically, by designing future-focused research agendas and international collaborative networks as well as by producing and spreading scientific knowledge.

The empirical study is conducted within a series of webinars which are led by thematic experts on the four identified SDGs. The webinars for educational stakeholders (teachers, teacher educators or students) provide the opportunity to share ideas on the ways in which teacher education curricula can be reformed or shaped to contribute towards the achievement of the identified SDGs. Various aspects at the intersections of sustainability, quality, wellbeing and teacher education are investigated. For instance, the ways in which the SDGs currently feature in teacher education programmes from the Global South and the Global North are explored. The study also investigates how teacher education programmes can be improved to support sustainability and seeks examples of good practice which support implementation. Data is collected during the webinars through group interviews, artefact gathering and vignette research.

## **4 Methodology**

### ***4.1 Research Approach***

This chapter reports on the vignette research section during the second Teach4Reach webinar on SDG 5 (Gender equality). The research approach and paradigm is

phenomenological (Husserl, 1989). Vignette data (experiential protocols) was thus collected during the breakaway sessions of the webinar for the phenomenological vignette research (Agostini, 2015, 2016; Schratz et al., 2013).

The complexities of the synergies between teacher education and the SDGs necessitates a multi-layered understanding of the dynamics at play. Within these dynamics, the vignette research methodology is regarded as a highly suitable methodology to capture experiences as teacher educators and students engage with SDG materials and discourses, even in virtual settings such as interactional webinars. Vignette research has the potential to ‘make the invisible, visible’. It is a deeply nuanced approach to research, and it seeks to elucidate moments of pause within education settings.

## ***4.2 Aim of the Chapter***

Within this framework of the webinar series, the status quo of the SDGs and teacher education programmes from the Global South and the Global North are investigated and discussed, in order to expand the critical mass of researchers and future teachers. Besides this overall goal, the particular research question in webinar 2 is: How can gender equality be improved via teacher education programmes? For the purpose of this chapter, the research team zoomed in on the experiences of the participants during high-level webinar discussions on the role of teacher education programmes to support the 2030 Agenda. The questions in this chapter therefore are:

- (i) *How do teacher educators experience online discussions on gender equality in relation to understandings of eudaimonic wellbeing?*
- (ii) *What can be derived from the experiences of teacher educators to inform gender equality in teacher education?*

## ***4.3 Context of the Webinar***

The second webinar on gender equality took place in November 2021 and was hosted by the University of Vienna. Registered participants (n = 57) included virtual delegates from Austria, the Caribbean, Germany, Italy, Singapore, and South Africa. Hence, the audience of the webinars and the sample for the data collection for the project are stakeholders for the SDGs in Teacher Education from Africa, America, Asia and Europe, and include pre- and in-service students (undergraduate and postgraduate), researchers, and practitioners from different scientific disciplines but especially teacher education. The participants engaged interactively during six breakaway sessions, communicated with panel members and the keynote speaker via the comments section, as well as verbally and synchronously during the webinar itself.

#### 4.4 *Vignette Research*

The rationale for this chapter is the assumption that teacher educators play a pivotal role in the way in which future teachers will engage with gender equality (SDG 5). Deeper understandings of lived experiences may therefore potentially contribute to more equal learning environments in the future. The study also aligns with emergent calls for a shift within gender studies from a focus on ‘numbers’ towards institutional and knowledge transformation. As indicated by the IAP (2021), the gender transformation journey ‘needs to be about more than just “numbers”; it needs to focus in addition on institutional culture and knowledge production to ensure that the needs and perspectives of women as well as men are considered’ (IAP, 2021, p. xi). It is within this space that the current study seeks to contribute.

In the vignette methodology, observation data is condensed into concise descriptions of scenes of experience, known as ‘phenomenologically oriented vignettes’ (Agostini, 2016; Schratz et al., 2012). The vignettes are thick descriptions of the lived experiences of the researchers and as close as possible to the experiences of the participants in the field. Vignettes were collected during each of the six breakout group sessions of the webinar by six different vignette researchers with a special focus placed on experiences regarding gender issues.

A ‘raw vignette’—which could also be called a ‘rough cut’—is the first version of a vignette. This raw vignette is presented to a (research) group and, if necessary, to the stakeholders who were present in the situation. In a process of ‘resonance reading’, the vignette is read out loud to a group and comments and feedback are invited. However, the vignette writers always retain control of the narrative—after all, it is their intersubjective experience. At this stage of the process, the account can be supplemented with contextual information or quotes, or corrected if necessary. The aim of this process of validation is not to reconstruct the experience as a whole, searching for the ‘truth’ of a case, but rather to clarify the language and the experiential context. The words, sentences or passages are chosen to express what is (co-)experienced, perceived, heard or in the atmosphere, and bring the vignette to life; in this context, particular attention is paid to the language of the body. Once vignettes have been finally crafted, they become the primary data for phenomenological analysis, a process referred to as ‘vignette reading’. In this context, one researcher will reveal and ‘point to’ (Finlay, 2009, p. 11) the different meanings that can be ascribed to what is perceived by him/her after reading the vignette. No interpretations are ‘pointed out’, i.e., no definitive answers or explanations are given that lie ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ what is happening in the short scenes. The vignette ‘speaks’ for itself. Vignettes do not ask what is—or would have been—‘better’, but rather what different experiences reveal, and how this can be dealt with from a pedagogical, experiential, and, not least, practical point of view. The readings of vignettes raise questions that cannot be answered conclusively but allow for a diversity of perspectives and thus for reflection and expansion. In this study, the vignettes offer a vehicle to understand the potential for learning about SDG 5 as it is experienced by the individuals, from a distance, differently, or ‘anew’, at the event.

Vignettes are based on observational data and therefore depict an ‘embodied’ experience of a phenomenon, in this instance, discussions on gender equality in an online environment.

Vignettes are presented simultaneously as an analytic tool, and also as findings. They point towards experience, and then also achieve prominence in terms of claiming a space for distinctive research findings to emerge.

## 5 Findings

As already outlined, vignettes were used as research instruments to capture the experiences of the participants in the webinar and present a participant-oriented perspective on gender equality (SDG 5). For the purpose of this chapter, six vignette researchers crafted sets of raw vignettes, presented them to critical readers, and then refined the vignettes. In some breakaway sessions more than one vignette was generated. Iteratively, the final vignettes then also present a new level of data sources which, in the process of ‘vignette reading’, can be analysed in all its potential ambiguity. In this chapter, four of the vignettes that emanated from the breakaway group sessions during the Teach4Reach webinar on the 2030 Agenda and especially SDG 5 are shared below. The first vignette is from the breakout group session that was conducted in German, and which asked the question, ‘*Welchen Beitrag können Lehrer\*innenbildungsprogramme zukünftig leisten, um die Agenda 2030 sowie die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung zu unterstützen?*’ In English, this question is, ‘How can teacher education programmes be leveraged in the future to support Agenda 2030 and the SDGs?’ The second, third and fourth vignettes are from the breakout group session where this English question was posed to guide the discussions.

### *Vignette 1*

In the German-language parallel breakaway session on the future contribution of teacher education programmes to the 2030 Agenda, the facilitator Ulrike, the researcher Manuela, and the student Mina, are already present ten minutes before the official start. The researcher-observer thanks her student Mina for coming and wants to know how her recently born child is doing. Mina explains happily that the little boy is doing well. Punctually at 12.00 pm, Ulrike opens her PowerPoint presentation and says in a calm tone of voice, addressing those present, “We are now looking again at gender justice”. Two more people, Anna, a young blonde woman, and Lucas, a greying man, join in a little late. By now there are eight people in the virtual room, and they briefly introduce themselves or their areas of work. They all have their cameras switched on and are clearly visible and audible next to the activated presentation on the screen. Ulrike calmly introduces the topic with her first question: “How do you define this Goal 5 for the time being? What do you understand by it?” Time passes, no one answers. A little restless, Ulrike speaks up again and suggests that the participants should speak freely. Now Anna clears her throat, introduces herself briefly, then the words burst out of her while laughing and she is shaking her head: “I’m sorry I’m late, I’ve just had a newborn baby with me, we’ve just had slight problems.” She gives a short laugh, then continues laughing, “I’m afraid I have to take a bit of a sho. . . leave again in the meantime.”



Anna pauses briefly before starting to answer the question. The participants smile understandingly into their cameras.

### *Vignette 2*

Vanessa is the first participant to join the breakout group session about the ways in which teacher education programmes can support the 2030 Agenda. The facilitator's screen is on and one researcher-observer is also present. Vanessa's camera is off, but her full name shines brightly in white on the screen. The facilitator, Federico, smiles and welcomes her to the session. She greets them both. Soon, others are joining. Cameras are off. Tiny, red microphones are muted in the bottom left corners. Federico smiles and starts the session. He asks for introductions by introducing himself first. He then reads the question for the session in an informative way: "How can teacher education programmes be leveraged in the future to support Agenda 2030 and the SDGs?" There is a long silence. Longer. Federico looks down. He looks up. "I'm sure you can still hear me?" he asks, smiling into the camera. "Okay, I will be brave," Vanessa says hesitantly.

### *Vignette 3*

The facilitator of the breakout group session is waiting in the online session. 'Federico Rossi', it says on the screen. He wears a light blue shirt and a dark blue jersey. The background on the screen behind him is blurred. Bright light shines on the ceiling. He checks his notes and welcomes the participants as they start to join the session. When it seems that everybody has joined, he explains the order of the proceedings and asks for a round of introductions. Only two participants switch on their cameras while they introduce themselves. Alessandro wears black-rimmed glasses and a black-and-maroon sports jacket. He gazes downwards at the camera, a big orange wall behind him. Chiara also clicks open her screen. She sits in close proximity to the computer. She wears a fluffy, cream jacket and looks to the left while she speaks. The wall behind her is a soft white. Folded washing is in the background. Federico listens attentively with his hand on his chin. When everyone has introduced themselves, he says collegially to Alessandro and Chiara, "You are Italian, like me". It lightens the atmosphere in the online room. Now he shares some of his own professional work: teaching wellbeing, working with teachers, quality education, SDG 3 and SDG 4. He speaks about bottom-up approaches, civic engagement, Fridays for Future. Suddenly the screen freezes mid-sentence. The connection disappears. The 'Connecting' screen pops up automatically. A tiny circle goes around and around on the screen. 'Recording in progress', says an automated voice. The screen opens back up again. Now Alessandro is talking. He is saying, in a serious tone, that in Italy there is a lot of teacher autonomy, but weak school autonomy. Federico nods his head as he listens. It goes quiet. "You are on mute, Alessandro, I am not sure if you were still talking," he says inquisitively. "I was finished," says Alessandro in a monotone.

### *Vignette 4*

Chiara smiles as she speaks. The breakout group session on the ways in which teacher education programmes can support the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals is winding down. "Teachers are very, very tired for another project and another project," she sighs. She looks straight into the camera. Her face fills most of the screen. A bright green line all around the block frames her face as she speaks. The inside of her jacket is fluffy. "Mmmmm. . .," she mutters. "They are very, very tired from all the extra work," she says again.

## 6 Discussion

The vignettes depict poignant moments during online discussions of gender equality in teacher education. The participants are diverse and negotiating the online environment within a global discussion. The vignettes depict wellbeing, even as they also present subtle challenges to wellbeing.

The first vignette illustrates the beginning of the German-language breakout group session: before the topic of gender equality can be explicitly addressed, it has inadvertently come into focus in a circle of especially young women. First, gender equality is inadvertently touched upon in the experience of student Mina. It does not seem to be a matter of course for the researcher-observer that Mina is able to participate in the session so soon after the birth of her baby boy, which is why she explicitly thanks her for it. Mina, however, seems to have found a way to reconcile motherhood and her professional interests. At another time in the vignette, gender equality also comes into view via Anna: she seems to feel compelled to immediately give a reason for her late appearance before answering the question of the facilitator Ulrike. Luca, ‘a greying man’ who is also late, on the contrary, seems to see it differently, at least in the way that he does not apologise for his late appearance. Even though all participants ‘smile understandingly into their cameras’, it becomes clear that not all participants have the same opportunities to take part in the discourse on sustainability from the start. Mina’s eudaimonic wellbeing presents in the proactive reconciliation of her roles as a mother, a discussant and as a researcher (sense of purpose), but it is also challenged in terms of demands from her environment/s.

In the second vignette, the universally familiar experience of initial non-responsiveness during groupwork or group discussions is presented. It is the discomfited, self-conscious silences that are typically found when introductory questions are presented. In this vignette, the ‘bravery’ of Vanessa, who not only logged into the session first, but then also initiates the first response in the discussion, is presented. She is, at once, *assisting* the facilitator, but simultaneously also *taking the lead* within the group of participants. This dual assisting-leading role is often defined as purely ‘supportive’, whereas the ability to ‘break the ice’ potentially also falls within the ambit of leadership. Eudaimonic wellbeing presents in terms of her overcoming initial hesitancy and initiating the participant discussion.

In the third vignette, the transcendent social connections that are created in the online discussion come to the fore, when the facilitator points out the fact that some of the participants are Italian, like himself. In the case of Chiara, her close proximity to the screen, creates further closeness with others, despite the challenges of engaging on the technological platform. The folded washing on the couch behind her is bearing silent witness to her multiple roles on the given day.

In the fourth vignette the ‘intersectionality’ of exhaustion presents. The reader again meets Chiara. In contrast to the earlier vignette, she now looks straight into the camera. She speaks of the utter exhaustion of teachers. She is communicating the exasperation of teachers at the never-ending demands from the external environments and she is doing it in both her verbal and non-verbal communication to the

others in the breakout group session. Is she projecting her own feelings of exhaustion? Is she speaking on behalf of all teachers? Both? None? Somewhere in between? In this vignette, the reader is presented with a distinctly brief account of an excruciatingly long-lasting phenomenon—the tendency to position teachers as the solution to all educational challenges. In this profession, where the majority of the workforce are women, this phenomenon may need deeper interrogation. Eudaimonic wellbeing is challenged, yet at the same time the ‘exhaustion’ that is described is reminiscent of instances where aspects of wellbeing (meaning, sense of purpose) have been actualised.

The study used the theoretical lens of eudaimonic wellbeing to analyse the experiences of the teacher educators. Predominantly, eudaimonic wellbeing refers to ‘sense of purpose’ and ‘meaning in life’ and the realisation of human potential (Ryff, 2018), but it is also connected to continued growth and quality relations with others (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The components of wellbeing are presented in nuanced ways in the study. Varying degrees of environmental mastery in the online environment, positive relationships as shown in the supportive interactivity between participants, and experiences of ‘purpose in life’ through working in the education sector, are presented. In addition, personal growth (parental/caregiving duties), autonomy (‘being brave’) and self-acceptance also emerged.

## 7 Conclusion

The vignettes in this study present a case for non-binary interpretations of wellbeing within gender equality discourses in the domain of teacher education. Components of eudaimonic wellbeing (sense of purpose, meaning and the realisation of potential) present, even as challenges to wellbeing (task-overload, fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously) exist. As depicted in these vignettes, wellbeing may thus be high in some ways (enthusiasm for education), whilst also being low in other ways (exhaustion).

In this study, eudaimonic wellbeing also presents in a multi-layered, and socially connected, way. By therefore opening up a continuum of understandings of eudaimonic wellbeing, intentional research decisions to support gender sensitivity in teacher education, can be encouraged.

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# Using Position of Power to Empower Women: Men in Action



Soyhan Egitim 

**Abstract** Despite the former prime minister Shinzo Abe's *Womenomics* initiative in 2013, women in Japan represented only 3.5% of senior government jobs and 9.2% of the corporate sector's director-level positions and ranked Japan 131st of 153 countries in terms of women's participation in management roles. These data indicate that policies have fallen short of bridging the gender gap in the workforce as the deep-rooted gender norms in society have persevered. The present study explores the gender disparity from men's perspectives and demonstrates why there is a need for men to use their position of power in women's empowerment for the intended policies to succeed. The data was obtained through open-ended interviews with six male participants situated in Japan. The participants were asked to reflect on their leadership identities, the privileges their gender and position brought to them, and how they used their position of power to empower women. These findings should raise awareness of the role men can play in bridging the gender gap in the current patriarchal power structure.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Equality · Gender gap · Gender norms · Men · Privilege · Stereotypes · Women empowerment

## 1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, women have made significant educational and economic strides across the globe. Yet, they still remain excluded from leadership positions in many countries. The exclusion is evident in Japan where rapid economic growth has not translated into gender equality in leadership positions despite governmental initiatives (Liao & Luo, 2021). Previous studies attributed the gender gap to deeply ingrained gender norms in society, which imposes strict expectations on men as the primary breadwinner and women as the primary caregiver. The resulting gender gap

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further reinforces the gender norms, and the vicious cycle leaves change efforts in vain (Nakamura et al., 2021; Makino, 2014; Yamamoto & Ran, 2014).

The present study attempts to explore the gender gap issue by bringing men into the spotlight through their personal experiences as inclusive and equitable leaders in their respective roles. The research questions investigated by the study include:

1. How does introspection influence men's perception of power and privilege, and lead to inclusive and equitable leadership practices?
2. What role do men in power positions play in women's empowerment?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *The Current State of Gender Equality in Japanese Society*

The deeply entrenched Confucius gender ideologies are still hindering women's liberation and empowerment in Japan. These ideologies associate leadership with men who demonstrate masculine traits with an authoritarian style (Rhee & Sigler, 2015). According to Nakamura et al., "During the Edo period (1603–1867), women were expected to learn from their mothers how to manage household chores, while men engaged in academic, literature, and cultural activities to lead Japanese society" (2021, p. 4). The ideology of *ryosai kenbo*, which means *good wife*, and *wise mother* in English, continued to dictate the gender roles during the Meiji restoration era (1868–1912). As a result, leadership roles for women remained limited. In 1986, the Japanese government enacted the *Equal Employment Opportunity Law* to promote equal labor opportunities for women with higher education (Kobayashi & Horimoto, 2021). The law was the first step toward promoting more women in leadership positions during Japan's rapid socioeconomic growth.

The 57th Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe introduced his *Womenomics* initiative premised on rapid economic growth through women's economic advancement to address Japan's labor shortage problem. Since its initial introduction in 2013, the *Womenomics* initiative has done little to address the gender disparity in leadership positions. According to the data revealed by the Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office in 2017, Japanese women represented a mere 3.5% of senior government jobs and 9.2% of the corporate sector's director-level positions. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2020), ranked Japan 131 out of 153 countries in terms of women's participation in leadership and management roles (Nakamura et al., 2021, p. 5).

The situation does not look any brighter in the education sector. There appears to be a shortage of women in school management positions, albeit the recent reforms. According to data from the Ministry of Education, "Women account for only 21.3% of elementary school managers. In junior high schools, only 8.4% of managerial personnel are women; in high schools, only 8.1%; and in universities, only 10.8%" (Ogawa & Tominaga, 2021, p. 193–195). The gender gap in positions of power still exists and governmental policies haven't done much to address the issue.

## ***2.2 The Role of Men in Women's Empowerment***

When leadership is perceived as a position of power, the idea of sharing power can be daunting for power holders and requires a significant mental shift (Egitim, 2021). Given that most power positions are held by men, unpacking the advantages of power-sharing to both men and women is critical to accomplishing gender diversity in leadership roles. Multiple studies indicated that gender diversity at the top management enhanced organizational operations and business performance in South American, North American, Japanese, and European firms (Binder et al., 2020; Moreno-Gómez et al., 2018; Lafuente & Vaillant, 2019; Nakamura et al., 2021).

Kobayashi and Horimoto (2021) noted that Japanese organizations established a growth mindset through a higher degree of talent utilization, attraction, and retention when they promoted gender diversity at the top management. Zhang (2020) made a distinction between normative and regulatory acceptance of gender diversity and argued that organizations with normative acceptance of gender diversity achieved higher levels of productivity compared to the ones with mere regulatory support.

As Blanchard (2018) famously noted, “None of us is as smart as all of us. The power of collaboration is real, and people in positions of authority have vastly benefited from empowering others” (as cited in Egitim, 2022, p. 7). Perhaps, the benefits of gender diversity in leadership positions are recognized by those of whom are in power positions. However, there appears to be a psychological hurdle for men to embrace power-sharing. In order to overcome the hurdle, men need to indulge in introspection, reflect on who they are in relation to others in their external environment, and recognize their biases and privileges.

As a result, men can develop an empathetic lens that will not only help them understand the social norms and expectations women are burdened with but also, stimulate their desire to join women on their quest to challenge the deep-rooted gender norms. As Franklin (2014) noted, reflective practice involves “unpacking our backpacks” and closely observing our life experiences, which account for who we are and how we perceive ourselves as leaders (p. 69). Through reflective practice, men can recognize their vulnerability and empathize with others in vulnerable positions.

## **3 Method**

### ***3.1 Participants***

The present study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) by uncovering the essence of participants' lived experiences and how they made sense of those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is performed based on a detailed analysis of information produced by a small sample size between six and nine



participants (Smith et al., 2009). Six men, who were based in Japan at the time, participated in the study. The researcher employed a purposive sampling strategy and relied on his own judgment when selecting participants for the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). He chose participants who were of interest and have knowledge and expertise in equality and social justice. Although the majority of the participants were foreign nationals, nationality was not a factor in the selection process. The researcher was aware that all participants had experienced being underprivileged in different circumstances and took leadership roles in their respective positions. This knowledge allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the realm of introspection and how it influenced the participants' attitudes toward gender equity.

### ***3.2 Positionality Statement***

The researcher perceives himself as a male from an underrepresented background. Hence, he acknowledges his sensitivity toward the issues facing other underrepresented groups in society and feels obliged to promote equity and social justice as part of his commitment to contributing to an open, inclusive, and equitable society. Therefore, he acknowledges his biases, and he is aware that his preconceived ideas influenced his interest in researching leadership and gender within the Japanese context.

### ***3.3 Interview Protocol***

The data was collected through qualitative interviews based on a semi-structured protocol. Open-ended questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perception of leadership, the role of retrospection and introspection in recognizing their own privileges, and how they evolved as inclusive leaders. The participants were also asked to reflect on instances where they used their positions of power to empower others, particularly women they worked with, which allowed them to share various personal anecdotes.

Each interview lasted approximately an hour. As part of the human subject protection protocol, the interviewees were allowed to withdraw at any time without reason and use pseudonyms to protect their identity. The interviews were recorded on video through an online video conference platform *Zoom* due to the global pandemic. Prior to each interview, the participants were provided with the background and the objectives of the study. Each interview started with an open-ended question, and the participants were given ample time to elaborate on their personal stories. The researcher delved into the participants' personal experiences with follow-up questions and props to engage in meaningful conversations.

### **3.4 Analysis**

The seven-step analysis by Smith et al. (2009) was employed (See Fig. 1, Egitim, 2021). First, the recorded data was transcribed and reviewed. Then, each transcript was sent to their respective participants for validation. The researcher reread the transcript and took initial notes with constant referral back to the original text. The next step involved in-vivo coding. During this process, the participants' own words served as a code used by the researcher to look for common words and phrases in each interview transcript. The repeated patterns were identified through the codes and clustered together as emergent themes. Finally, the results were shared with the participants for further validation and contributions. Bringing the participants' own voices into the study through the actual spoken words offered a deeper understanding of the personal accounts, perspectives, and meanings expressed by the participants which should also appeal to the readers of this book.

## **4 Results**

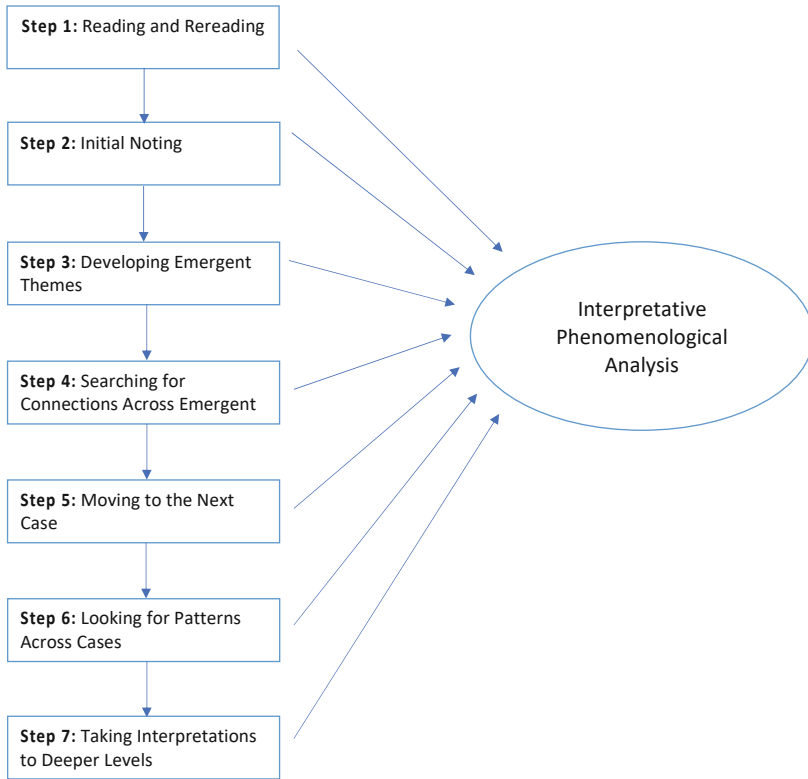
Upon the phenomenological analysis, the following four themes were identified through the participants' personal stories and how they made sense of their lived experiences through their own words.

- Leadership through the lens of men
- Participants as inclusive male leaders
- Men's experiences of working with female leaders
- Women's empowerment

### **4.1 Leadership Through the Lens of Men**

None of the men in this study associated leadership with unearned advantages beyond an individual's control, such as gender, age, or nationality. However, the consensus was most formal leadership roles are assumed by men in Japanese society and challenges exist for women to break through the glass ceiling. In this regard, Mike noted, "Leadership has been formulated around masculine identities. Therefore, it privileges men in a way that disadvantages other groups."

All men in this study emphasized the societal expectations of gender roles created for women in Japan. According to John, men in Japan are taught to be masculine, and women are taught to be gentle and caring from a young age. Thus, women are burdened with social expectations which hinder their career pursuits. Leo, who regularly provides coaching services to executives in Japan, emphasized "limited opportunities" for career women in "science and tech development" within the Japanese context due to the deep-rooted gender norms. Women's lack of desire



**Fig. 1** Seven-step analysis. *Note.* Figure 1 was adapted from a previous study published by the author (Egitim, 2021)

**Table 1** Participant backgrounds

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Degree	Occupation	Leadership roles
Blake	30s	Canada	MA	Assistant professor	Coordinator
Mike	30s	USA	MA	Associate professor	Hiring and curriculum committee
Taka	40s	Japan	PhD	Associate professor	Career committee chair
John	50s	USA	MA	Director	Director
Leo	40s	France	PhD	Executive coach	Coaching
Yuki	40s	Japan	MA	Associate professor	Hiring and curriculum committee

*Note.* The participant backgrounds in Table 1 were verified with their respective participants

to climb the career ladder was also attributed to male-dominant management structures in organizations. In this regard, Taka shared a personal story on the subconscious bias male-dominant organizational culture had created on a female leader despite the changing demographics in the work environment:

When I was working at an English conversation school, there was a female leader. She was the leader of the teaching staff. I was working under her and one day, she said, 'You are looking down on me' and I said 'No.' I had never thought about that before. The reason why she believed that was maybe in Japanese society, or in the company we worked for, men tended to look down on women. If a female leader had male subordinates, that kind of downplaying of female leaders was common. I was approaching her in a very respectful manner but from her eyes, I was looking down on her despite male employees being outnumbered by female employees at the time.

## ***4.2 Participants as Inclusive Male Leaders***

All men in this study identified as inclusive, facilitative, and collaborative male leaders who strived to empower underrepresented groups. The participants emphasized creating "a safe space" for people they lead, "standing with them as opposed to standing in front of them" and "creating the right environment to bring out the best in members of the underrepresented groups."

The participants viewed their past educational experiences as critical to their evolution as inclusive leaders. During his time in the US, Taka participated in cross-cultural communication and indigenous cultural survival courses. He learned about underrepresented communities, collaborated with members of those communities on team projects, and worked toward reciprocity and mutual empowerment. His close interactions with members of underrepresented communities made him recognize his privileges and helped him evolve as an inclusive leader.

Mike also reflected on his educational experiences in his hometown Florida. He received his pre-tertiary education in an integration school where "90% of students were African American." Being a "minority in that social environment" gave him a different perspective on the world and helped him develop a sense of empathy for groups that are marginalized or underrepresented. Introspection was emphasized as a critical element in evolving as an inclusive leader. Blake emphasized the role of his educational experiences in making him understand his strengths and weaknesses through introspection. Blake reflected on his experience as a doctorate student in Canada:

People in my cohort were much further along in their careers. A lot of them were strong writers and had conviction in what they were saying. I really felt like I didn't know what I was talking about compared to other people. I felt I had a bit of imposter syndrome. That was a very humbling experience that let me reflect on my own strengths and weaknesses.

John also shared a childhood story which would help him evolve as an empathetic man:

I bullied a kid when I was in 5th grade. For some reason, I disliked this kid, and it came out in this horrible behavior on my part. I remember being in a very large high school, so I didn't see this kid for quite some time. When I was finishing up a PE class, I went into the locker room, closed the door, looked to my side, and there was that kid. He looked me in the eye, and he was shocked. I was shocked, too. There was some uneasiness there. I felt really bad. I just remember that experience as the symbol of regret and sadness in my life. From that point on, I tried to stick up for people who I thought were being exploited or mistreated.

When Taka was pursuing his graduate studies in the U.S., he studied with a Native American professor, who asked him if they could travel together to Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia. The trip helped him recognize one of his privileges. Taka noted, "During our trip, when we were inspected at airports, the Native Americans, including the professor, a teaching assistant, and a graduate student were stopped many times for further inspection due to their appearance, but myself as a Japanese even being in the same group, I was never stopped, and I realized the power of Japanese passport." Taka also recognized his privilege as a man in the Japanese working environment. He noted that there were occasions where some male Japanese professors referred to female professors as mentally unstable and thus, cannot be trusted for major leadership responsibilities. This experience made him realize that he was trusted and was not subject to the same bias thanks to his gender.

Yuki reflected on the process of recognizing his privilege as a man but emphasized the important role his experience as a grad student in the U.S. played. Living in the US as a minority, and particularly, being an Asian helped Yuki develop a perspective to see issues through the lens of underrepresented people. After he moved back to Japan, he visited his hometown, Yamaguchi for the new year holidays. When they had guests in his grandparents' house, he noticed that all the men were sitting in the living room, relaxing, and watching TV while all the women were in the kitchen preparing food where there were no places to sit and rest. Yuki emphasized that the stereotypical gender roles were considered normal, and he attributed that to the deep-rooted gender norms. The participants' educational experiences combined with habitual introspection appeared to be effective in recognizing their vulnerability and privileges. As a result, they evolved as empathetic and sensitive individuals toward the underrepresented members of society.

### ***4.3 Men's Experiences Working with Female Leaders***

The participants reflected on their experiences of working with female leaders and associated certain traits with female leaders, such as "emotional empathy," "care on an individual level," and "being open to new ideas." Mike shared a story about a female leader he worked with in his department. When he was struggling with his classes, she offered him valuable insights on teaching which was instrumental in changing his pedagogical approaches. Mike reflected on the story:

There is natural anxiety to kind of relinquish a lot of power to students and you are not sure what's really going to happen. I think she was really instrumental in me taking that perspective and allowing our students to do things for themselves in a way to achieve different goals.

Blake also praised his supervisor for creating a culture of learning in the department by actively seeking feedback on her leadership practices as well as showing curiosity about everyone's professional development. Blake noted, "One thing that's impressed me about her is that she would take our ideas, put them into practice and take them to higher-level leadership to have changes implemented."

Yuki described his department head as a very good listener who gives everyone opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns. Yuki noted, "Everyone has their opinion and everyone's opinion matters. Just giving people a voice raises their confidence and it's empowering. That's something that I learned from her leadership."

Blake also shared a story emphasizing the need for more female leadership at Japanese universities:

I had a former student who is now a graduate student at a fairly famous university in the region where I live. She had a professor who told her she should carefully consider whether she wants to pursue a doctorate because it might impede her ability to have children and get married.

The participants' stories indicated the need for more females in leadership positions who can sympathize with the needs of women and act as a role model for them. In addition, gender diversity in leadership positions can also be beneficial for men as the female leaders the participants worked with exhibited leadership tenets that created a positive work environment and helped them work more effectively.

#### ***4.4 Women's Empowerment***

All participants reflected on their personal stories of empowering women they worked with. Their experiences offer a new perspective on the challenges and rewards involved in this endeavor. Taka reflected on his experience of empowering a female colleague and how it affected his department:

I was the curriculum committee chair and there was one female professor who really wanted to teach seminar courses on her own field of study, second language acquisition, and pragmatics. At first, the committee never considered allowing her to teach seminar courses, but I thought her field of study would fit the intercultural communication curriculum. I used my negotiating skills and position of power to include her seminars in the curriculum. Ever since she received more recognition from other faculty members. The two new courses also gave students a greater variety of choices which was beneficial for the whole program.

John empowered a woman who was denied work by her company. At that time, John was in a leadership role in the labor union. He evaluated her case and determined that she was mistreated by the company and the union. John took the issue up to the court

and they won her a major settlement. John, who bullied a weaker boy at the grade school, described this moment as a truly empowering experience.

Leo was coaching a female client who was promoted to a director position in her company. She was married with two children and her husband was a policeman who was often transferred on duty. She was torn between quitting her job and moving with her husband or staying with her two kids and continuing to build her career. Thanks to the coaching sessions, she realized that it was important for her to pursue her career, and thus, decided to accept her new role as a director.

Mike also reflected on his experience as a conference chair and how he used his position of power by inviting three female Japanese keynote speakers to the conference to strike the gender balance. Mike noted that the conference was a success which proved that women needed to be equally represented in academic conferences to offer diverse perspectives and raise awareness of social justice.

Yuki, who is a full-time tenured faculty member in a public university, mentioned that he was one of the advocates of hiring more female teachers. Yuki shared his story below:

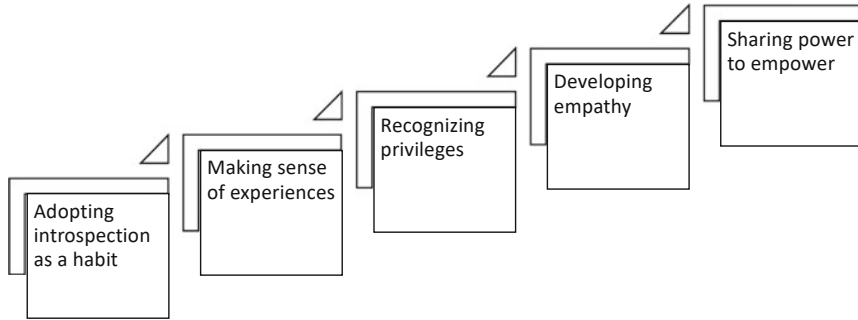
Recently, I've had the chance to get more involved in hiring. We had two final candidates, one was a young female candidate and the other one was a young male candidate. Obviously, they were both well-qualified for the position, but I pushed for the female candidate to get hired. This was definitely something I did to directly contribute to women's empowerment.

The above stories showed that men in leadership roles can play a significant role in creating opportunities for women and encouraging them to thrive in positions of power. Equal representation of women in leadership roles not only brings diverse perspectives on decision-making and organizational management but also more effectively addresses the demographic needs of Japanese society.

## 5 Discussion

The men in this study reflected on how they evolved as empathetic and inclusive leaders. They emphasized the role of introspection in developing an empathetic lens in their personal stories, which enhanced their self-awareness, positive self-esteem, and social responsibility. They also reflected on the important role their educational experiences played in encouraging them for introspection and expanding their knowledge and understanding of why equity and social justice matter for the advancement of society.

In Japan, most leadership positions are held by men (Nakamura et al., 2021; Ogawa & Tominaga, 2021). Thus, it is up to men to challenge the status quo and involve women in positions of authority. In order to recognize the merits of women's involvement in leadership roles, male leaders need to indulge in introspection to understand who they are in relation to others in their surroundings. Adopting introspection as a habit can help leaders recognize their vulnerability and privileges. Through this heightened self-awareness, men can develop an empathetic lens that



**Fig. 2** Step-by-step process of evolving as an inclusive leader. *Note.* Figure 2 was designed based on the participants' personal experiences of how they evolved as inclusive leaders

will not only give them a better understanding of the challenges the marginalized and underrepresented groups are facing but also, stimulate their desire to collaborate with them.

One of the key revelations of this study was that all participants reflected on being either underprivileged or underrepresented at some point in their lives. This self-awareness was critical to adopting introspection as a habit. Some participants also emphasized the importance of their prior educational experiences in recognizing the value of equity and justice. Unfortunately, leadership education in Japan is still lagging behind other industrialized nations (Okamoto & Matsuzaka, 2015; Yokota, 2021). The setback is attributed to the education system's overreliance on conventional wisdom which associates leadership with authority, higher position, and charismatic personality. The study argues that leadership education should start from an early age with an emphasis on retrospection and privilege awareness if we are to foster globally competent leaders who view equity and social justice above the realms of power and authority (Fig. 2).

## 6 Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter was to emphasize the role men can play in women's empowerment in a sustainable world. The chapter illustrated the leadership attributes men in positions of power needed to perceive this endeavor as a win-win solution to address the socio-economic issues facing Japanese society. In this regard, one of the implications of this study is that there is a need for leadership education in Japanese society where leadership is still commonly associated with gender and age. As Japan continues to embrace globalization, bringing diversity into organizational management is critical to fulfilling the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce. One of the findings of this study was that being an inclusive and collaborative leader comes with recognizing one's vulnerabilities and privileges through introspection. When we become witness to our own limitations and biases, we can arrive at a point where



we could take a moment and say, “I am in a position of power, and thus, it’s my responsibility to challenge the status quo for equity and social justice.”

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# Media Contagion Suicides Among Married Women of India: Rethinking Women's Empowerment Practices in India



A.T.P Farisha, Athira Alex, and K.P. Sakkeel

*The woman who follows the crowd will usually go no further than the crowd. The woman who walks alone is likely to find herself in places no one has been before.*  
Albert Einstein.

**Abstract Introduction:** In the last few months there was an increased incidences of suicide among women in Kerala, the top ranked literate state in India. The suicides were committed by married women as a chain of incidents because of the humiliation suffered from the husband's house in terms of dowry.

**Research objective:** To explain the current instances based on contagion effect theorized by social psychologists. Contagion effect refers to the tendency for certain behaviors demonstrated by one person to be imitated by observers.

**Method:** The chapter will be a conceptual chapter based on recent theory and research explained by social psychologist connecting the suicide, domestic violence and positive psychological interventions.

**Implication:** A need for women empowerment is seen in this situation where women should identify that there are alternative ways of responding to a situation. Similarly, a necessity for redefining women empowerment parameters in Indian culture can also be identified from this work. Media, though they are portraying the real news, these are unseen consequences of our tendency for imitation instincts. Moreover, these case studies should be brought into notice of policy makers to create an insight in the dowry systems prevailing in India. Sharing these study findings, empowered women can take initiative to empower the community of women living around her.

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## 1 Introduction

A string of suicides happened in Kerala in 2022 might have surprised many people worldwide, committed because of the domestic violence and dowry-related unsettlement. All of them were young married women aged 19–24 years. Times of India reported all four suicides within a span of 22 days which commenced from 21st June and 11th July. A strong tendency for imitation was seen in this context, having several common factors in all these four incidences happened in same year, such as their marital status, similar age group, problems faced by them, etc.

The previous year, on 21st June 2021, a 24-year final-year student of Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine was found hanging at her in-law's place in the Kollam district of Kerala, because of the tortures she faced by her husband. Another girl, 24 years, who went through a similar situation, was set on fire by herself on the very next day 22nd June 2021 at Trivandrum. After 4 days, a 19-year-old was found hanged on 26th June 2021 at her husband's house in Alappuzha after her 3 months of married life for the same reason. Within 15 days, another commitment by a 20-year-old woman was reported on 11th July 2021 in Trivandrum (Farisha, 2022).

All the victims had faced significant harassment by the husband's family, which was identified as the leading cause of the suicide incidents. Each one of them does not know the other. The incidents happened in different places. But they could make decisions about their lives through the news shared by the media about how each one of them acted in a similar situation. Something like a 'copycat' effect can be inferred from these instances, which social psychologists refer as behavior contagion.

Here, this chapter is a conceptual paper which aimed at identifying the link between behavioral contagion and suicides based on the assumption that the suicides happened recently in Kerala (2022) has unseen link with each other. This chapter details conceptual understanding of behavior contagion as one of the possible explanations for suicide, and the need for women empowerment in India, so that the suicide rate can be reduced.

## 2 Implications of Behavioral Contagion

Behavioral contagion refers to the tendency of people to repeat a behavior after watching others performing it. Prominent Behaviorist Albert Bandura stated that whatever behavior we learn, is what we have observed from others—whether it is normal or abnormal. We often tend to imitate others' behavior when the situation comes, though some learning is latent within us, which was described by Edward Tolman. Most often, even without knowing, we tend to model others despite being an adult who is capable of thinking logically, and has good self-regulation skills. For

instance, we have experienced in many situations that when people clap, though we don't know why they clap, we also tend to do it.

In these incidents cited, behavior contagion seems to be closely connected to the vicarious experiences of the victims as well, wherein individuals learn from the experience of others—what are the consequences of others acting and doing the same in order to have similar consequences. It's found that rather than direct experiences, indirect sources of information like watching news, videos, or even live situations, or listening to someone's story also influence one's actions. From a study by Davidson et al. (2006), it is identified that contagion also depends on the individual's mental health. That is, people with weak mental health, who have poor coping skills tend to copy the behavior of others as some heuristics which can be followed quickly as an effective solution to the problems they are facing. These incidents direct towards exploring more on the suicides in Kerala and the unseen reasons behind them.

### 3 Incidence of Suicide Among Women in Kerala

World Health Organization reported that every year 703,000 people take their own lives because of various reasons. The statistics are much worse in the global scenario. Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities, and entire countries and has long-lasting effects on the people left behind (WHO, 2022).

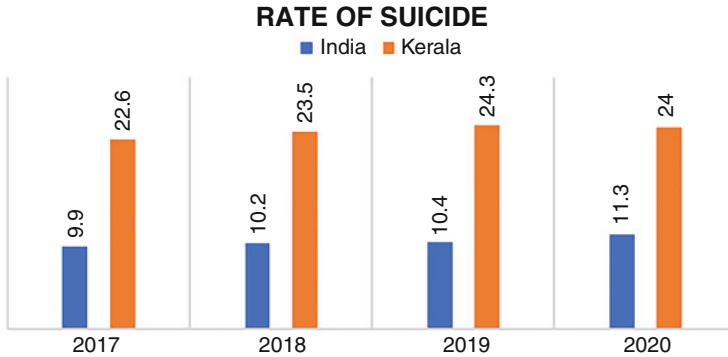
National Crime Record Bureau (2020) reported that 139,123 incidences of suicides were reported in the India during 2019 with an increase of 3.4% from 2018. Moreover, family problems was found to be the major cause of suicide, that is 32.4%.

Naghavi (2018) cites that the total number of deaths from suicide increased by 6.7% globally over the 27 years' study period i.e., 1990–2016. While considering India's rate of suicide, the global tendency is reflected visibly.

Figure 1 illustrates the suicide rates of India and Kerala from 2017 to 2020 based on the National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, India 2021. A stable rise in the rate is evident from the figure. Kerala, more precisely, shows double the rate of suicide than the national average of India, and it holds the fifth-highest rate among Indian states (Naghavi, 2018).

When analyzing the causal factors of suicides in India, particularly in 2020, 33.6% of suicide, which means one-third of total suicides happened due to family problems. Moreover, 5% of suicides were explicitly committed because of marriage-related issues. Unsurprisingly, 14.6% of the people who committed suicide were homemakers. These rates direct the finger toward the vital need for women empowerment in India, to bounce back and survive—rather than giving up.

Suicide prevention is always a challenge for every state. Endless efforts are offered by the governments to improve the quality of life of its citizens by providing better healthcare, education, employment, social security schemes, reducing the criminal rates etc. On the other side, the suicide rate increases because of some



**Fig. 1** Suicide rates in India and Kerala

other reasons that need to be explored in detail. Although it is a global tendency, each state has its strategies and action plans to tie up these hikes. Of course, it is not so easy to achieve the goal—since the diversification of factors leading to suicides are plenty.

#### **4 Domestic Violence as One of the Major Reasons for Suicide Among Women**

Domestic violence is defined as any form of violence (physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal) against women in a domestic setting of a marital home or within an intimate relationship that results in physical or mental harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (Suri et al., 2022).

National Crime Record Bureau (2019) reports that the female commits mainly because of marriage related issues, especially dowry related issues, and is seen among age group 18–30 years. In India the prevalence of self-reported domestic violence against women is high. As per the reports of National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB), the rate of reported cases of cruelty by husband or relatives was 28.3 in 2018, which shows an increase of 53% from 2001. Only 6.8% of the cases completed trials, with offenders convicted only in 15.5% cases in 2018. The non-availability of individual level data in public domain limits exploration of patterns in domestic violence and thus hinder the process of developing effective prevention and intervention programs (Dandona et al., 2022).

As per NCRB published in 2022, in India domestic violence has historically been viewed as a severe threat to women’s life, irrespective of age, religion, and socio-cultural and economic background, owing to the dowry system. The first laws in the country to prevent violence leading to so-called “dowry deaths” were enacted through an amendment to the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. According to

NCRB reports, the total number of cases regarding dowry death in India in the last ten decades comes to around 31,888 (cases pending trial at the end of the year during the decade 2001–2012) and also about 339,902 cases registered and their disposal under Cruelty by Husband or his relatives (IPC Section 498A) during 2001–2012 regarding with dowry (National Crime Record Bureau, 2022).

Furthermore, on 11 February 2022, an NCRB publication titled “Crime in India” published data indicating that the total number of crimes against women during the year 2020 is 371,503, out of which, only 496 cases registered under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) (PIB, 2022).

According to a recent report by Seth (2021), the prevalence of domestic violence in India is around 40%. However, the reporting is less than 8%. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5; 2019–2020) report, which is an independent, reliable, and nationally representative data source, which collects self-reported responses for spousal violence, reveals there is a systematic under-reporting of incidents of domestic violence in 70% of the states (Observer research Foundation, 2022). The reason behind this under-reporting is attributed to the fact that though both men and women are aware that domestic abuse is morally and legally wrong, they choose to ignore this common knowledge. This could be because our social and cultural norms have normalized domestic violence tolerance. Women’s mental readiness, societal attitude, and gender role expectations made them tolerate violence (Seth, 2021). Moreover, it has been reported that the elements that drive women victims to continue to accept abusive relationships are conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependency, social pressure, and family dignity (Aziz et al., 2019).

All of these are supporting the notion of Silencing The Self Theory (STST), given by Jack (1991) which states that women’s depression is closely related to experiences in close relationships, especially if women conform to societal norms for feminine relationship roles (cited from Thompson, 1995).

#### ***4.1 Domestic Violence and Its Social Consequences***

Despite the advancements in education, science, and technology, the way women have been treated by society has yet to change. Domestic violence significantly impacts a woman’s physical and mental health, affecting every role she plays in her life, who as a mother, daughter, or professional. Research by Abishek and Gayathri (2018) showed that women are still treated as second to men, and the incidence of domestic violence and the number of cases that remain non-reported have not changed much. Findings also reveals that educational qualifications and access to jobs are important variables in promoting women’s empowerment. Still the degree of achievement is determined mainly by the general public’s attitude toward gender equality. Even now, only very few women have the final say over how their earnings are spent (Menon et al., 2020).

In a qualitative study done by Kermode et al. (2007), the authors found that the commonest stressors against mental health were conflict with husbands and mother-

in-laws, domestic violence and poverty. The authors also recognized the link between empowerment of women through the means of income generation and educating them, and reduction of discrimination based on caste and sex. However, mental health problems such as suicide and violence were well-described by participants of the study as the significant stressors in their life impairing the mental health, which highlights the importance of women empowerment to improve the mental health among women and hence reducing the suicide rate.

Research carried out by Krishnamoorthy et al. (2020) concludes that if no immediate actions and interventions happened, India is unlikely to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5), which focuses on gender equality and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. Since as per the recent survey reports, one in three women in India is likely to have been subjected to intimate partner violence of a physical, emotional, or sexual nature, and yet only one in ten of these women formally reports the offence to the police or healthcare professionals. The research also found that physical violence was the most common form accounting for 27.4% of victims followed by emotional (12.7%) and sexual violence (6.7%). Several factors which had shown a significant association with one or more forms of spousal violence are higher women's age, religion, low education, employed women, lower socioeconomic status, presence of substance use among women and husbands, lower education and unemployed husbands, history of family violence and women from Central and Eastern states of India.

## 5 Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment

The word empower means to attain power (Jha et al., 2019). Kabeer (2001, as cited in Tandon, 2016) defined empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". Other terminologies defining empowerment are options, and control and choice. There are a range of parameters in order to assess empowerment including autonomy, agency, status, domestic economic power, power, patriarchy, gender equality or gender discrimination (cited from Tandon, 2016).

Parsons (1998) defined empowerment is a "process of internal and external change. The internal process means the person's belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems and the external process is the ability to act and to implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process" cited from Sadan (2004). So, empowerment is a long-term process, which happens as a result of self-reflection of various personal experiences. Hence women empowerment can be conceptualized as encouraging women for autonomy, control, power and choice in one's own life.



## 5.1 Women's Empowerment: Existing Practices in India

APJ Abdul Kalam (Smile foundation, 2023) underlines the importance of empowering women as “a prerequisite for creating a good nation. When women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation.”

August 22 is a historical day for women empowerment in India. The Supreme Court of India had a verdict on ‘triple talaq’, which considered the act illegal from the day. Triple talaq is an archaic practice that gave power to Muslim husbands to divorce their wives instantly. Various other schemes and programs are offered in India with the objective of women empowerment. Few of them are enlisted here,

1. **Educational Empowerment**—The schemes aimed at empowering women in the educational domain are as follows
  - (a) Free education from Primary to Tertiary for female students. A few Indian states also included Higher Secondary and tertiary level free education.
  - (b) Vocational Courses for women by Skill India
  - (c) Female reservations for educational courses (Honawar, 2019).
  - (d) Various scholarships such as AICTE Pragati Scholarship for Girls, Begum Hazrat Mahal National Scholarship, Post-Graduate Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child, CBSE Merit Scholarship for Single Girl Child, Women Scientist Scheme, SOF Girl Child Scholarship Scheme, L'Oréal India for Young Women in Science Scholarship, etc. (Buddy4study, 2020).
2. **Financial Empowerment**—These schemes focus on empowering women in the financial domain
  - (a) Sukanya Samridhhi Yojana: A scheme that encourages the parents to save for girl children.
  - (b) Health Insurance exclusively for women by Non-Banking Financial companies.
  - (c) Financial assistance and guidance for women self-help groups and cooperative societies.
  - (d) Low-interest rate bank loans for women entrepreneurs.
  - (e) Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), a scheme for widows and women with children living without a male partner to get low-cost housing loans.
3. **Career Empowerment**—The schemes emphasize on empowering women in career areas
  - (a) Special reservations for women candidates in Central and State government jobs.
  - (b) Special laws implemented to ensure women participation in specific jobs which are ruled explicitly by men, such as priests in Hindu temples, air force, locomotive, train drivers etc.

4. **Other areas of Empowerment**—Other schemes also prioritize women representations in various sectors

- (a) 33% reserve seats for women seats in local and legislative body elections to ensure adequate women representation.
- (b) Conscious efforts by the government to encourage women participation in sports through which candidates represent India in various prestigious sports meets such as Olympics, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, etc.
- (c) Creating general awareness programs. The 108th Indian Science Congress 2021 organized was on the theme “Science and Technology for Sustainable Development with Women Empowerment, a very relevant area to accept the ideas nationwide.

## 6 Need for Redefining the Parameters

Though there are plethora of benefits offered by the country for the betterment of women’s lives, there are areas which are still unaddressed for the upliftment of the community. The insufficiency persists despite of the government identified various parameters to ensure basic survival. To clarify, how can these parameters be redefined for the new context so that women can respond to the inadequacies in an alternative way. A plenty of reservations, financial support, relaxations, etc., were provided to encourage women and bring them to the mainstream within their limits. As India is a developing country, it has its own limitation in offering more funds for social welfare activities. Policies and schemes were already established, but sometimes it becomes hard to validate its implementation part, or the timely updates of the same might not be happening adequately.

For example, though reservations are made to have a fair representation of women in public administration, only less than 9% of women candidates were present in all elected bodies in India. Similarly, only 9–10% got elected for state assemblies, 15.3% for Lok Sabha, and 12% for Rajya Sabha. The statistics are very disappointing compared to the global average of 25% (Onmanorama, 2022).

Another critical area where redefinition should systematically focus is the cultural and religious-based belief system which resists the public from accepting and implementing the government-level policies effectively. These beliefs may force women to tolerate unsuccessful marriages and prevent divorces despite being in a toxic relationship (Callahan, n.d.). A significant area of concern to consider is the patriarchal attitude resisting women from doing jobs to become financially independent. Due to the lack of parental literacy and poverty, many schemes, scholarships, and assistance are not appropriately availed. In the larger geographical area with a high population density and diversification of cultures and ethnicities, the centralized schemes are not reaching the grassroot level, which is another significant reason for the unexpected consequences of these attempts.

## 7 Self-empowerment and Empowering Others

The contribution of women to societal progress is critical and undeniable. However, a high degree of bias and discrimination against women entrenched in a global culture, which insinuates directly, indirectly, and persistently that women are not good enough (Pokharel, 2008). Such gender stereotyping suggests that a man's world and opportunities for women are limited. Being raised in an atmosphere of conflicted messaging around self and empowerment, gradually forces many young women to give into self-imposed barriers and live their lives with a diminished sense of self-based on social norms and perceptions alone.

According to Rowland (1998) as cited from Purnamawati & Utama (2019), women empowerment has to happen in three spheres of a woman's life; individual empowerment, collective or group empowerment, and empowerment in close relationships.

Though each form of empowerment is different in nature, they are interdependent. Rowland (1998) states individual empowerment is the core of empowerment. Every woman might go through similar experiences and play similar roles. Since the experiences that life give them are unique to them, so the way they perceive and reflect on them will also be different. On the other hand, collective empowerment is the ability of one group to exert power on its own and to use its resources to achieve a common goal. This can enhance the group member's confidence and sense of agency. Empowerment in intimate relationships is the relationship with life partners, parents, and in-laws. This dimension of empowerment is to the hardest to change because when a woman starts to voice out for herself, she might face many questions and restrictions that make her inferior again (Purnamawati & Utama, 2019).

The model by Huis et al. (2017) goes in line with Rowland's approach. Huis et al. proposed that women's empowerment can occur in three dimensions: Micro-level, Meso-level, and Macro-level. Micro-level refers to the empowerment or change that has to happen from within. Whereas, the Meso-level refers to a change that should occur in the close relationship circle, such as among family and close relatives. The Macro-level refers to the changes that have to come from the society.

The above model emphasized that a change must happen from within a woman to push against gender disparity in different aspects of daily life and forge a fulfilling life. Every woman should develop an authentic sense of self to break away from self-imposed barriers and be empowered. Society and cultural restrictions against women are still experienced by women of different ages in different areas of life. In India, we can observe a huge gender difference in terms of education, that is, 82.14% of adult men are educated, but only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate (Meena & Mehra, 2014), and this disparity still exists.

Women have to be aware of the significant role they should play in shaping their destinies. Globally, women experience different forms of discrimination. Issues like second-generation gender bias are pretty common even in the developed world (Pokharel, 2008). Hence, to empower themselves, women must understand that problems in life are never ending. They must change how they perceive and find

meaning out of it, through which they can effectively face challenges, overcome obstacles and-become an empowered woman. When women are self-empowered, they can forcefully demand fundamental human rights, access to property and assume leadership roles, and initiate informed choices. Thus, their security is enhanced, prospects are improved, and they can achieve what they want. Even to the extent of empowering others. By contributing their skills to the workforce, and can raise happier and healthier children. They can also fuel sustainable economies, benefitting societies, and humanity at large.

## **8 A ‘PPP’: Positive Psychological Perspective on Women’s Empowerment**

Basically, men and women differ significantly in their preferences for therapy, coping styles, and help-seeking behaviours (Liddon et al., 2017). Positive psychology and Feminist perspectives share a focus on empowerment, strength-based approach, and a reduced attention to pathology. Englar-Carlson and Smart (2014) in their article on positive psychology and gender cited a study finding of Tzou et al. (2012) who used ‘Positive Feminist Therapy’ (PFT) to work with Chinese women going through divorce. The researchers have integrated empowerment feminist therapy, emphasis on strengths and resilience by positive psychology and systems theory.

The positive psychology field approach of positive psychology ultimately seeks to build a flourishing society. So, from the start, the field has been very much focused on “what activities, behaviour and interventions might enhance the well-being of an individual, then to a positive community, and thus to a flourished society” (Ovejero, 2012).

Positive Psychology is a relatively new branch of Psychology that focuses on positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels, including the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life. The National Positive Psychology Association claims that the core foundational belief shared by Positive psychologists is that humans strive to lead meaningful, happy, and satisfying lives. By considering this notion, it can be said that the objectives of Positive Psychology (PP) intermingle to a certain extent with Indian Psychology (IP) (NPPA, 2022).

Several studies in positive psychology show that there are significant gender differences in various positive psychology variables. Considering women empowerment from a Positive Psychological Perspective, research says that some positive psychological constructs are embedded in entitlement, unfairness, and privilege (Sanders et al., 2021), mainly authenticity, civility in the workplace, courage (speaking up in the face of bias) and nourishing positive experiences. The research by Shahzadi and Khan (2022) among Indian women shows a significant positive relationship between self-esteem, life satisfaction, and spirituality, which helps individuals become self-aware and will improve their life satisfaction. Thus,

women should focus on their spiritual beliefs, enhancing their self-worth and ultimately leading to life satisfaction. Findings also suggest that building resilience should allow one to have better contentment in one's life.

The research by Husain (2021) had focused on the gender difference in character strength. The findings shows that women possess significantly higher levels of a variety of character strengths as compared to men. Specifically in character strengths, such as levels of wisdom, justice, curiosity, love of learning, social intelligence, leadership and appreciation of beauty and excellence. The findings also reported that the overall picture confirmed women to be more virtuous than men.

Ovejero (2012) had pointed out that a cross cultural analysis has found that women score higher than men with the strengths, such as love and kindness, while men scored higher than women with the strengths such as bravery and creativity. These findings indicates that though character strengths are considered universal, culture including gender roles specifically influence the development of some strengths over others (Ovejero, 2012).

When it comes to gender differences in character strength and empowering women, women must first be aware of their strengths and know how to live an empowered, satisfying, and happy life by employing those strengths in both professional and personal life. For a youngster growing up in a family where women are powerful, they become the supporters of women's empowerment—through which the family, community, and finally society can be empowered.

Self-compassion is another positive psychological dimension associated with empowerment. Neff (2010) defined self-compassion as compassion directed inward, relating to ourselves as the object of care and concern when faced with the experience of suffering. It consists of three elements: kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness which mutually interacts to form a self-compassionate frame of mind.

It has been found that approaching painful feelings and life sufferings with self-compassion is helpful for leading a happier life with an optimistic mindset, also shown that having self-compassion is appears to facilitate the ability to grow, explore, and wisely understand oneself and others (Neff et al., 2007).

Another study by Stevenson and Allen (2016) reveals a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and empowerment. The research finding also reveal that empowered women also have a high level of self-compassion. Similarly, according to Dullea (2021), since girls and women experience high levels of shame and self-criticism, practicing self-compassion may address the inner conflict, revolutionizing our relationship to self, others, and the world around them. The researcher also stated that being compassionate with oneself can improve self-acceptance, and as a result, women may change the way they present themselves in the world, gradually becoming able to model self-compassion for future generations, as a model for being strong and gentle at the same time.

There are a wide range of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) has been developed and tested, including both brief self-help interventions of short duration to more in-depth intervention programs, and are of group based and individual based interventions such as, savoring, loving-kindness meditation, and expressive writing

interventions; these can enhance positive emotions, helping to be resilient and finally flourished individual (Nabi & Rizvi, 2017). Likewise, Bolier et al. (2013) and Brown et al. (2010) reported that strength-based approaches and other interventions based in positive psychology resulted in empowering marginalized women and also helpful in improving subjective well-being and psychological well-being, as well as in helping to reduce depressive symptoms (cited from Goradietsky, 2020).

## 9 Conclusion

According to the information and statistics given by Press Information Bureau of India and the NCRB, we can be inferred that even after having 100% literacy and access to education, women are yet to learn to vocalize their rights. The traditional culture of India had taught people to respect women. But with each passing year, we are coming across more occurrences of dowry death and domestic violence in which most of them are left unreported. Given these facts, this is the high time to practice women empowerment in India. To attain this, firstly the mindset of the people has to be changed. Women has to have a clear awareness of their own strength and so that they can voice out and stand up for their rights. However, it is also important that men have to wide open their eyes and support the world which is advancing towards equality and equity. Growing body of evidence indicates that various salient mechanisms, namely, the adoption of a survivor-centered approach, collaborative relationships with staff, meeting women where they are, systems advocacy, fostering independence, and building long-term networks with formal and informal supports (Menon & Allen, 2021) are paving the way to empower women. Similarly, various interventions especially positive psychology-based interventions can be helpful for women to be more psychologically stronger from within and thus they become able to reclaim their power and strength in order to create an empowered family, community and flourished society.

## 10 Need for Future Research

From the conceptual understanding of the present content, the need for women empowerment for suicide prevention is very evident which should be considered seriously for further research. Similarly, a detailed investigation should happen to understand about why young women from different socio-economic background are still suffering, and why those incidents about intimate partner violence are not getting reported. More positive psychology intervention needs to be developed as preventive strategies against domestic violence, which will empower women community to have good mental health and resilience skill to overcome the challenges facing in their lives. The intervention should specifically focus on different age groups starting from childhood. Research can also be conducted to understand the

effectiveness of existing schemes to overcome the impact of domestic violence within the family. Though we have several strategies which government implemented to prevent and overcome domestic violence, the reason why there is an increase in the occurrences of similar incidents should be explored in detail to bring significant changes in the statistics of suicide rate in India.

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# Psychological Empowerment and Intention to Quit: Is There a Difference Between Female and Male Employees?



Hamza Smajić  and Emil Knezović 

**Abstract** The purpose of this study is to investigate whether there is a difference between male and female employees in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding Psychological Empowerment (PE). Furthermore, the gender differences in the relationship between psychological empowerment and intention to quit are considered. A sample of 507 employees was collected by cross-sectional survey method. To test hypotheses, the Welch t-test and multiple regressions were used. The results indicate no difference between female and male employees when it comes to psychological empowerment dimensions. On the contrary, there is support for the difference in the relationship between psychological empowerment and intention to quit for female and male employees. This study extends the literature on women's empowerment by considering the gender differences of employees in the relationship between psychological empowerment and intention to quit within the context of a developing country.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Psychological empowerment · Intention to quit · Female employees · Male employees · Bosnia and Herzegovina

## 1 Introduction

Psychological empowerment (PE) of employees has been in the focus of many researchers and practitioners in the last few decades (Liden et al., 2000; Shah et al., 2019) as it plays a pivotal role in achieving higher efficiency in organisations. From an employee perspective, PE represents a psychological attitude toward the work and organisational role (Spreitzer, 1995). Its role has been more pronounced recently, as a dynamic business environment requires a flatter organisational structure and more responsibility on the individual levels (Tripathi & Bharadwaja, 2019).

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To keep the efficiency in a highly dynamic environment, organisations have to keep their top talents (Srivastava & Agrawal, 2020) since human resources are a potential source of sustained competitive advantage (Knezović & Đilović, 2020). As a proxy predictor of retention, employee turnover intentions (TI) have always been an important concern among business leaders. In particular, research shows that TI play a critical role in both employee and organisational performances (Wong et al., 2015). Therefore, investigating the determinants of TI has been in the focus of many studies (Lin et al., 2017; Srivastava & Agrawal, 2020). Considering TI as a negative or positive organisational behaviour, the researchers emphasise the importance of positive psychology (Shah et al., 2019), where one of the most significant needs of employees is a sense of empowerment. Recent studies demonstrate that PE plays an integral role in a wide array of work-related outcomes, including TI (Islam et al., 2016; Ngqeza & Dhanpat, 2021; Saira et al., 2021). Although the empirical evidence of direct PE—TI link exists, there are recent calls to understand “when and why PE influences employees’ positive attitudes and behaviours at the workplace” (Shah et al., 2019, p. 798). Following such calls, the focus of research is put on two limitations of the current knowledge.

First, one of the factors that might be important for the PE—TI relationship is gender. Although researchers who promote the gender equality, in general, indicate that psychological differences between males and females are minimal and constructed by society, a growing number of researchers, who advocate for an essentialist perspective on the matter, argue that actual gender differences exist and should be embraced supported (Butler, 2019). Moreover, we have recently witnessed the emergence of systematic concern for the relationship between gender and motivation, especially in terms of females’ educational and professional accomplishments (Butler, 2019). Regardless of whether the distinctions in motivation between males and females are viewed as socially constructed or innate, research on gender differences in PE generally shows that males feel more psychologically empowered than females (Durrani et al., 2017; Speer et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2006). However, existing literature fails to explain whether and how these differences in PE translate to its relationship with TI. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to investigate the difference in PE between male and female employees by considering its relationship to the intention to quit (ITQ).

Second, existing research on positive psychology mainly utilises Western samples (Mayer et al., 2022). Similarly, the literature on gender and motivational constructs is mainly concerned with Western countries (Butler, 2019). Hence, apart from the general lack of literature, there is an even larger lack of knowledge in developing countries. Although the distinctions in PE among males and females in Bosnia and Herzegovina are quite unknown, the business context of the country is obviously characterised by the significant differences between males and females. Namely, it is highly dominated by males that are notably more active in the labour market than their counterparts (Khare et al., 2010). Furthermore, females are significantly underrepresented in managerial and ownership positions within businesses (The World Bank, 2019). Lack of education, equal opportunities, and cultural factors (Khare et al., 2010), including traditional gender roles (Somun-Krupalija, 2011), are

only some of the reasons for such situations in the market. Thus, the second objective of this study is to discuss the practical implications of gender, PE, and TI within the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This chapter contributes to the broader theme of the relationship between PE and TI by examining the role of gender. First, the analysis of differences in PE between male and female employees from Bosnia and Herzegovina is performed. Then, the investigation of whether these distinctions persist in the relationship between PE and TI was made. Finally, the discussion on practical implications that could help managers understand and manage employee retention is provided.

After the introduction, the chapter presents a review of the global and regional literature considering the key concepts. The literature review is followed by the methodology and analyses and results. Finally, the discussion and conclusions are presented in the last section of the chapter.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *Psychological Empowerment*

Tripathi and Bharadwaja (2019) pointed out in their work the emergence of PE as a motivational perspective of empowerment that is considered to be among the crucial drivers behind the number of employee outcomes. Hence, its understanding and consideration of its consequences represent an important research inquiry. Nevertheless, to proceed to it, there is a need to define the concept initially.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) described empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (p. 474). Building on this definition, Spreitzer (1995) further refers to PE as an intrinsic motivation to perform tasks consisting of four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning refers to the value of the goal or purpose based on individual ideals or standards (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) or, simply, the value of the work performed (Jha, 2014) and the importance and caring about the work (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Self-determination is regarded as causal responsibility for one’s actions (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), the choice to begin and control actions (Jha, 2014), or the freedom to choose how to perform the job (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Competence is described as the ability to perform an activity with skill (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Choice or impact (according to Spreitzer, 1995) is the ability to create desired effects (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) or affect organisational outcomes (Jha, 2014).

PE as a determinant of different work-related outcomes has been extensively investigated. A number of authors confirmed its benefits to organisational effectiveness and employee attitudes (Tripathi & Bharadwaja, 2019). Authors suggested that it benefits the individual performance (Mahmoud et al., 2022), organisational

citizenship behaviour (Saira et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2016), innovative behaviours, managerial effectiveness (Spreitzer, 1995), creativity (Imam et al., 2020; Nguyen & Doan, 2021), creative process engagement (Nguyen & Doan, 2021), and innovative work behaviour (Spreitzer, 1995). Overall, PE exhibits a multidimensional influence within the organisation.

## 2.2 *Psychological Empowerment and Gender*

Although the general literature on the topic is scarce, findings are diverse. On the one hand, studies indicated that gender is correlated with (Guerrero et al., 2018) and has an impact on PE (Ghosh et al., 2018). However, there is also evidence that does not confirm the effect of gender on PE (Kundu et al., 2019). Considering the specific gender differences in PE, cross-cultural research showed that females in Pakistan are less psychologically empowered considering meaning, self-determination, and impact than their male counterparts. However, results indicated that this was not the case in China (Durrani et al., 2017). Nevertheless, another research from China pointed out the existence of gender differences in PE, where males were found to be more psychologically empowered than females (Meng & Sun, 2019). Further, Obi (2021) indicated that males in both United States and Nigeria perceive themselves as more empowered than is the case with their female counterparts. Further, research from the United States showed that gender is related to the intrapersonal aspect of PE. However, findings only suggest that lower-income males tend to be more emotionally empowered than females from the same group (Speer et al., 2012). Similarly, Peterson et al.'s (2005) results show that males score higher than females on certain aspects of both interactional and intrapersonal components of PE. Furthermore, Hechanova et al. (2006) reported that males have higher scores on competence and meaning dimensions of PE.

Overall, literature on the topic generally suggests that males feel more psychologically empowered than females (Durrani et al., 2017; Meng & Sun, 2019; Obi, 2021; Speer et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2006). However, existing findings have certain limitations. For instance, some authors neglect or avoid focusing on relevant dimensions of PE: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (e.g. Obi, 2021; Meng & Sun, 2019; Kim & Shin, 2017; Speer et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2005). Further, authors who focus on those components find somehow opposing results. Namely, while Durrani et al. (2017) indicate gender differences in meaning, self-determination, and impact components of PE, Hechanova et al. (2006) find differences only in competence and meaning dimensions.

In line with Durrani et al.'s (2017) and Hechanova et al.'s (2006) assertions that males and females differ on the meaning dimension, existing literature points out that there are differences in values between genders (Elizur & Koslowsky, 2001; Hirschi & Fischer, 2013). However, the authors disagree on the dimensions of competence and self-determination. Based on Butler's (2019) discussions on male

and female inclinations toward “prove and protect” and “doubt and try to improve”, respectively, it is possible to assume gender differences in terms of competence and self-determination perceptions. On the one hand, existing social interactions and pressures direct males to “prove and protect”, positively impacting their confidence and perceptions of their abilities. On the other hand, despite motivating them to acquire competence, female inclination to “doubt and improve” could lead to questioning one’s abilities (Butler, 2019) and lower their perceptions of competence and self-determination. Although Durrani et al. (2017) and Hechanova et al. (2006) disagree on the impact dimension, which refers to the ability to create desired effects (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), research shows that there are gender differences in both perceived (Beyer & Bowden, 1997) and actual performance (Ting, 2021). This is in line with Durrani et al.’s (2017) assertions. Considering the situation in the labour market of Bosnia and Herzegovina that has been by some a large degree inherited from the previous system (Knezović et al., 2020), one might expect the difference between female and male employees on different individual and organisational constructs. When describing the previous system, Jerončić (2015) states a strong presence of masculine culture within the region of ex-Yugoslavia. Therefore, considering the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: There is a significant difference between female and male employees regarding their psychological empowerment.

Besides, considering the limitation in the current state of literature, which mainly was not focused on the multidimensionality of PE when it comes to comparative studies between female and male employees, the following is hypothesised:

H1a: There is a significant difference between female and male employees regarding the meaning dimension of PE.

H1b: There is a significant difference between female and male employees regarding the competence dimension of PE.

H1c: There is a significant difference between female and male employees regarding the self-determination dimension of PE.

H1d: There is a significant difference between female and male employees regarding the impact dimension of PE.

### 2.3 *Intentions to Quit*

Although Islam and Alam (2014) argue that TI can be observed as ITQ and intention to stay (ITS), Elangovan (2001) defines turnover intention as “an attitudinal orientation or a cognitive manifestation of the behavioural decision to quit” (p. 159) and, therefore, this study refers to the phenomenon as ITQ. Further, Ghadi (2017) states that ITQ could be described as prospects to look for other options in different organisations. Although some may question the relevance of intentions for actual

behaviour, employee behavioural intentions are perceived as the best predictors of employee turnover (Abugre, 2017).

Since, in general, ITQ is negatively related to employee performance (Wong et al., 2015), it is not surprising that authors dedicate their efforts to investigating factors that explain such intentions. For instance, authors argue that lower commitment (Elangovan, 2001) and resistance to change increase ITQ while organisational citizenship behaviour (Ouakouak et al., 2020) and affective commitment (Haque et al., 2019) negatively relate to it.

#### ***2.4 Psychological Empowerment, Intentions to Quit, and Gender***

A vast amount of literature favours the negative relationship between PE and ITQ (Islam et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2019; Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2015; Suifan et al., 2020; Lyu et al., 2019; Sandhya & Sulphrey, 2021). Additionally, research indicates that there is a positive relationship between PE and positive work attitudes (Bharadwaja & Tripathi, 2021). Furthermore, Ngqeza and Dhanpat (2021), who consider the multidimensionality of the PE construct, only provide evidence of a negative relationship between the meaning PE dimension and ITQ. Authors also assert that females feel less psychologically empowered than males, while there are no gender differences in ITQ (Ngqeza & Dhanpat, 2021). Nevertheless, they do not consider gender differences in particular PE—ITQ relationships.

Authors generally agree that the relationship between PE and ITQ is negative. However, existing research is limited in two aspects. First, authors generally overlook the PE dimensions when assessing its relationship with ITQ (e.g., Shah et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2016). Since PE is a complex phenomenon consisting of four mutually distinct dimensions, approaching it as a single variable and reaching implications might be misleading since different PE components might have different relationships with ITQ. Second, previous literature fairly neglects gender differences when analysing this relationship. Understanding the role of gender in this relationship helps identify different aspects of PE that require attention to reduce the ITQ of both males and females. From a conceptual standpoint, there is an argument that empowerment is masculine biased (Boudrias et al., 2004). In particular, it is argued that the concept is more fit for masculine understanding where the emphasis is on competence, mastery, and control rather than on female understanding dominated by connectedness and cooperation. In line with this, Spreitzer (1995) demonstrated the masculine prevalence regarding self-determination and impact. As such differences are expected, their relationship with ITQ could differ. Hence, to emphasise the multidimensionality of the PE and its relationship with ITQ considering the gender differences, the following is hypothesised:

H2: The relationship between PE dimensions and ITQ differs between female and male employees.

Same as in the case of H1, the PE is observed as a multidimensional construct. Therefore, the following is proposed:

- H2a: The relationship between meaning and ITQ differs between female and male employees.
- H2b: The relationship between competence and ITQ differs between female and male employees.
- H2c: The relationship between self-determination and ITQ differs between female and male employees.
- H2d: The relationship between impact and ITQ differs between female and male employees.

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Participants and Procedure

To test the hypotheses empirically, quantitative research was conducted. Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey among employees from companies located in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the country lacks usable state databases, a convenience sampling method was used to reach the final sample. To reduce the potential biases associated with this non-probability sampling method, a large number of employees were included in the study.

Each employee received either a hard copy or a digital questionnaire that required their consent to be used in the study. Upon the collection and checking of the questionnaires, the final sample reached 507 employees. The profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Profile of respondents

	Male		Female	
	Range	%	Range	%
Age	<30	42.5	<30	44.3
	30–49	45.7	30–49	42.1
	49>	11.8	49>	13.6
Education	High school	34.9	High school	21.7
	Bachelor	44.3	Bachelor	47.8
	Master	18.9	Master	29.8
	PhD	1.9	PhD	0.7
Work experience (years)	<10	53.3	<10	60.7
	10–19	26.9	10–19	18.6
	19>	19.8	19>	20.7



### **3.2 Instrument Design and Measurement**

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of questions related to respondents' demographic characteristics and their perceptions about PE and ITQ. Demographic questions were used to collect data about gender, education, work experience, etc. To measure PE, the construct developed by Spreitzer (1995) was adopted, consisting of 12 items measuring meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (three items each). ITQ construct was adapted from Colarelli's (1984) scale and consisted of two items. Both PE and ITQ constructs are measured on a five-point Likert scale. As the constructs were originally in English, they were translated to the Bosnian language using the back translation method.

## **4 Analyses and Results**

### **4.1 Pre-testing**

The analysis was performed in two stages: pre-testing and hypothesis testing. In the pre-testing stage, reliability, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and descriptive statistics were used. The results for both samples are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

For reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was checked by using the common 0.70 threshold (Bekele et al., 2014). As it can be seen, the reliability of all constructs in both samples has been achieved. Since the PE and ITQ constructs were borrowed from Spreitzer (1995) and Colarelli (1984), respectively, CFA was performed to check for convergent and discriminant validity. First, all items had standardised factor loadings above 0.50 ( $t > 1.96$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), except one item in ITQ, which was later on removed. Second, all constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) higher than the common threshold of 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Finally, all constructs had composite reliability (CR) higher than 0.60. Therefore, it can be concluded that convergent validity has been reached. To check for discriminant validity, square roots of AVE were compared to paired correlations between constructs. In all cases, the square root of AVE was higher than paired correlations. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are no concerns with discriminant validity.

As the data was collected at one point in the time applying the same method, there was a concern for possible common method bias. Because of that, Harman's single factor test was performed. In both samples, the factor in extracting was below the common threshold of 50% (41.1% for females and 39.5% for males. Therefore, it can be concluded that was no evidence for common method bias.

**Table 2** Pre-testing indicators for female employees

	M	SD	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	ITQ	MEA	COM	SD	IMPV
ITQ	2.434	1.220	0.894	0.897	0.814	<b>(0.902)</b>				
MEA	4.090	0.798	0.940	0.940	0.840	-0.426 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.916)</b>			
COM	4.276	0.681	0.910	0.914	0.782	-0.124	0.635 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.884)</b>		
SD	3.862	0.883	0.934	0.938	0.835	-0.117	0.391 <sup>**</sup>	0.452 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.914)</b>	
IMPV	3.597	0.968	0.925	0.929	0.814	-0.281 <sup>**</sup>	0.451 <sup>**</sup>	0.349 <sup>**</sup>	0.690 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.902)</b>

Note(s). N = 212. Square roots of AVE values are in parentheses. <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$

**Table 3** Pre-testing indicators for male employees

	M	SD	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	ITQ	MEA	COM	SD	IMPV
ITQ	2.434	1.215	0.871	0.875	0.779	<b>(0.883)</b>				
MEA	3.987	0.835	0.910	0.912	0.776	-0.433 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.881)</b>			
COM	4.228	0.775	0.913	0.914	0.781	-0.140	0.595 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.884)</b>		
SD	3.786	0.907	0.908	0.910	0.771	-0.359 <sup>**</sup>	0.480 <sup>**</sup>	0.434 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.878)</b>	
IMPV	3.604	1.046	0.928	0.931	0.818	-0.350 <sup>**</sup>	0.360 <sup>**</sup>	0.275 <sup>**</sup>	0.682 <sup>**</sup>	<b>(0.905)</b>

Note(s). N = 295. Square roots of AVE values are in parentheses. <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$

### 4.2 Hypothesis Testing

For hypothesis testing, two separate analyses were performed. To test H1, the Welch t-test was used. The results are presented in Table 4.

From Table 3, it can be observed that there is an insignificant difference between female and male employees in all PE dimensions, which provides no sufficient evidence to support hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d. Therefore, H1 is not supported.

For testing H2, structural equation modelling was performed. The values of model fit were acceptable for female ( $\chi^2 = 214.8$ ,  $df = 67$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.205$ , Confirmatory Fit Index = 0.962, Tucker Lewis Index = 0.948, and Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation = 0.087) and male samples ( $\chi^2 = 151.5$ ,  $df = 67$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.261$ , Confirmatory Fit Index = 0.965, Tucker Lewis Index = 0.952, and Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation = 0.077). The results of individual relationships are presented in Table 5.

Regarding female employee, there is a negative relationship between meaning and intention to quit ( $\beta = -0.521$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and impact and intention to quit ( $\beta = -0.218$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). On the contrary, the relationship between competence and

**Table 4** Welch t-test

	N	M	SD	SE	t	df	Sig.	
MEA								<b>H1a</b>
Male	212	3.987	0.835	0.057	-1.406	505	0.160	
Female	295	4.090	0.798	0.046				
COMP								
Male	212	4.228	0.775	0.053	-0.735	505	0.463	<b>H1b</b>
Female	295	4.276	0.681	0.040				
SD								
Male	212	3.786	0.907	0.062	-0.945	505	0.345	<b>H1c</b>
Female	295	3.862	0.883	0.051				
IMPV								
Male	212	3.604	1.046	0.072	0.079	505	0.937	<b>H1d</b>
Female	295	3.597	0.968	0.056				

**Table 5** Individual relationships for both samples

Individual pathways	Females				Males				
	Std. est.	SE	t	p	Std. est.	SE	t	p	
MEA → ITQ	-0.521	0.122	-6.324	0.000	-0.446	0.127	-4.435	0.000	<b>H2a</b>
COM → ITQ	0.221	0.139	2.736	0.006	0.227	0.118	2.508	0.012	<b>H2b</b>
SD → ITQ	0.137	0.136	1.599	0.110	-0.134	0.136	-1.256	0.209	<b>H2c</b>
IMPV → ITQ	-0.218	0.126	-2.525	0.012	-0.161	0.105	-1.659	0.097	<b>H2d</b>

Note. Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) = 0.240 for females and 0.265 for males

intention to quit is positive ( $\beta = 0.221, p < 0.01$ ), while the relationship between self-determination and intention to quit is insignificant ( $\beta = 0.137, p > 0.05$ ). When it comes to male employees, the relationship between meaning and intention to quit is negative ( $\beta = -0.446, p < 0.01$ ), while the relationship between competence and intention to quit is positive ( $\beta = 0.227, p < 0.05$ ). The other two dimensions of PE have insignificant relationship with intention to quit (self-determination— $\beta = -0.134, p > 0.05$ ); impact— $\beta = -0.161, p > 0.05$ ).

On a comparative basis, it is clear that more PE dimensions have a statistically significant relationship with ITQ regarding female employees. First, both meaning and competence are significant in both cases. However, a higher effect of meaning is present in the case of female employees, while a higher effect of competence is present in the case of male employees. This provides evidence to support H2a and H2b. Second, self-determination is the only PE dimension that has an insignificant relationship with ITQ in both samples. As such, there is no sufficient evidence to support H2c. Finally, when it comes to impact, it is only significantly related to ITQ in the case of female employees. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is sufficient evidence to support H2d. Overall, H2 is supported partially.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

Considering that keeping skilled and talented employees is among the key issues for the survival of any organisation (Srivastava & Agrawal, 2020), the examination of ITQ and its determinants represents a highly relevant research concern. Although PE is one of the factors that reduces ITQ (Islam et al., 2016; Ngqeza & Dhanpat, 2021), existing literature failed to observe the relevance of gender in this relationship. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the differences in PE among male and female employees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, considering its relationship with ITQ.

The first theoretical contribution of this study is that it further clarifies the gender differences considering PE and its multidimensionality. Namely, reached findings indicate no differences between males and females in PE and its dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Such results oppose Peterson et al. (2005) and Hechanova et al. (2006), who argue that certain gender differences in PE exist. Although Durrani et al. (2017) show differences in PE between genders in Pakistan, their findings from China are in accordance with those reached in this study. Similarly, the results of this study are partially in accordance with those from Speer et al. (2012), who argue that there are no gender differences in PE except for the lower-income group.

The second theoretical contribution of this study is that it indicates the existence of gender differences in the relationship between PE and ITQ that was significantly neglected in the previous literature (e.g. Shah et al., 2019; Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2015; Suifan et al., 2020; Lyu et al., 2019; Ngqeza & Dhanpat, 2021). The findings reached in this study demonstrate two novel contributions. First, the multidimensionality of PE should be considered, where the notion of a universal

negative relationship with ITQ should be rejected. In particular, competence is positively related to ITQ. Second, when it comes to gender differences, the findings show that meaning, competence, and impact are related to ITQ in the female sample. In contrast, only meaning and competence relate to ITQ in the male sample. Further, the relationship between meaning and ITQ is stronger for females, while competence and ITQ is more intense for males.

### ***5.1 Practical Implications***

From a practical side, this research informs HRM officers and other managers that there are differences between males and females in the PE—ITQ relationship. First, to approach ITQ for females, there is a need to consider the meaning, competence, and impact dimensions of PE. To tackle the same issue for male employees, managers should focus only on meaning and competence. However, since the competence dimension is positively related to ITQ for both samples, managers should be aware that employees who score high on this dimension are generally more likely to leave their organisations if the opportunity arises. Furthermore, the relationship between competence and ITQ is stronger for male employees, meaning highly competent males are more likely to leave the organisation than their female counterparts. Nevertheless, the positive relationship between competence and ITQ for male employees can be offset by increasing their sense of meaning. However, the relationship between meaning and ITQ is less intense in this sample. The meaning aspect of the PE can be increased by providing them with explanations about the goals and purpose of the tasks that they perform. For female employees, managers should aim to develop and increase their sense of value and purpose of the work (meaning) and their sense of impacting organisational outcomes since those two PE dimensions are negatively related to female employees' ITQ. The sense of impact can be intensified by providing female employees with clear explanations on how their work is related to the relevant organisational outcomes (e.g., increased sales, profitability, efficiency, etc.). Considering that the negative relationship between meaning and ITQ is a stronger and positive relationship between competence and ITQ is weaker for female employees, it can be concluded that managers will generally have fewer difficulties in retaining female human capital.

### ***5.2 Limitations and Future Research***

Although this study offers valuable insights into gender differences in PE—ITQ relationships, it is not without limitations. First, this research is based on cross-sectional data, preventing changes in PE and TI over time. Hence, future studies could investigate the role of gender in the PE—ITQ relationship using longitudinal data. Also, the convenience sampling method in this research did not provide all

members of the population with an equal chance of participation. Therefore, future studies could employ probability sampling techniques. Further, although this research provides valuable insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina, future studies should be conducted across different cultural settings to compare findings and increase knowledge on the relationship between PE—ITQ. Finally, future works should consider factors other than gender that could play an important role in this relationship.

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# How Language Use Can Empower Women: The Discourse on Gender-Equitable Language in Germany



Gundula Gwenn Hiller

**Abstract** This chapter shows that language is a powerful tool for gender equality and thus for the sustainable empowerment of women. It argues that social realities are reflected in language and that changes in the societal mindset are interconnected with language use. Research findings support the claim proposed by feminist linguistics that gender-equitable language use makes women more visible and can open up new career opportunities for them by encouraging increased mental representation of prestigious professions. Using the example of the public discourse on gender language in Germany, this chapter will show on the one hand how language reflects and perpetuates sexist power structures, and on the other hand how these structures can be softened by persistent counteraction by female academics and activists, resulting in a more gender-equitable language.

**Keywords** Gender equality · Fair language · Gender-equitable language · Gender-sensitive language · Language impact

## 1 Introduction

According to feminist linguistics, language is a ‘mirror’ of social conditions as well as an instrument to bring about social change (Schoenthal, 1989, 300). This is what this chapter wants to show, using the example of the transformation of the German language towards a gender-equitable use of language that empowers women. Gender equality is the foundation for the sustainable empowerment of women, so the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (WEP, 2021). This can be supported by appropriate language use. As it will be shown, feminist linguistic research reveals that using gender-equitable language can change mental representations in terms of equality and participation.

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The influence of language on cognition was shown in the last century by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf (Hoijer, 1955). But not only does language shape our perception of the world and thus our thinking: it also serves as a “guide to social reality” (Sapir, 1929, 209). At the same time, it has the power to constitute this reality (Kotthoff & Nübling, 2018; Kusterle, 2011). Current research confirms the interdependence of language and thought. For instance, cognitive scientists Boroditsky (2009), Boroditsky et al. (2003) and Levinson (e.g., in 2009) show how language shapes the way people think and perceive reality. Research in positive psychology examining the impact of language on our mindset also demonstrates that language and thinking are interrelated (Baolin et al., 2010; Knuppenburg & Fredericks, 2021). In feminist linguistic psychology as well, research has shown that mental representation is associated to language use (Nothbaum & Steins, 2010). Thus, women’s empowerment through language can happen when language is used to create a more equitable society.

What is nowadays known as gender-equitable or gender-sensitive language, or ‘gendering’, refers to “a linguistic procedure to achieve equality, i.e. the equal and fair treatment of women and men in language use” (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2017, 5). As early as the 1980s, Luise Pusch, a pioneer of feminist linguistics, pointed out that the German language ‘hides women better than a burka’ (Bohr et al., 2021, 9). With this metaphor she intended to express the fact that the existing social inequality between the sexes is reflected both in the grammatical structure of the German language and in its everyday use. Since the end of the 1970s, Pusch and her fellow campaigners have criticized the fact that the use of language in Germany discriminated against women by presupposing ‘male as norm’ (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020, 29). In 1980, Senta Trömel-Plötz showed the extent to which power is exercised in conversational situations and social structures are perpetuated linguistically, for example by the fact that women’s names for prestigious professions in medicine and science do not occur linguistically (Trömel-Plötz et al., 1980, 3). This refers to a generic masculine which, according to the common reading, includes the female forms. Thus, the linguists of this generation declared the German language to be sexist and androcentric because of its structural asymmetry (Schoenthal, 1989, 301), arguing that language can empower or repress, depending on how it is used.

Nowadays, Germany, despite being a modern society, is still not doing very well in terms of equality (Boeckler-Stiftung, 2022). Nevertheless, a slow but steady change towards more sustainable, gender-equitable social structures is happening. This is reflected in language use and activists remain convinced that language use plays an important role in this regard (Diewald, 2020). Meanwhile, research has also shown that language is a powerful instrument and that a change in language use can empower women and contribute to a fairer society (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020). It is only in recent years that gender-equitable language use has experienced a breakthrough in Germany (Diewald, 2020). Even if gender-equitable language is not yet accepted by the majority of the population (Janson, 2021), it is increasingly gaining acceptance in the media, in the public administration, at universities and in business (Diewald, 2020). Current surveys show that its acceptance is growing, especially among the younger generations (Welt am Sonntag, 2021).

The following pages will use the example of German to trace the lengthy path of establishing gender-sensitive language use, looking at the discourse that started in the era of the 1970s feminist movements in society and science. After a short sketch of the methodology, the context of this chapter will be presented by briefly discussing the status quo of gender equality in Germany. In order to better understand the discourse on gender-equitable language, the problem of gender designations or the generic masculine will be discussed. Starting from the criticism of feminist linguistics, the discourse will be traced that has massively moved from the academic world to the media and political public sphere in the last 2 years in particular, giving rise to new standards. The results of empirical studies that cannot be dismissed will accompany the debate and allow the conclusion that gender-equitable language has a considerable and lasting influence on women's visibility and on their career prospects, and that it can therefore empower them.

## 2 Methodology: Discourse Analysis

Based on discourse analysis, this chapter will mention important milestones in the public discourse on language involving gender as used in German science, politics and the media, and describe the current situation. Discourse analysis can be used to show how knowledge is produced and what consequences this has for the social actors. Keller et al. (2018, 255) assume that discourse describes and reproduces orders of knowledge that are regarded as corresponding to the truth in a certain historical-social situation. These orders respectively systems of knowledge refer to typified experiences of the world that relate to a reality assumed to be 'shared' (ibd.). However, the construction of reality takes place not only through discourses, but also through dispositives and practices (cf. Keller, 2008, 290). For this reason, in addition to a short overview of the discourses in academia, politics and media, this analysis will also briefly look at legislation and language use in society.

## 3 Gender Inequality in Germany

Although it is required by the Basic Law (GG Art 3, § 2, n.d.), gender equality in Germany is not in a particularly good position (Boeckler-Stiftung, 2022). In Europe's most populous country, family policies that discriminate against women have led to a particularly high number of women working only part-time (IWD, 2021). Within the European Union, Germany ranks a mere 13th in terms of the compatibility of work and family, to a large extent because of the unfavourable childcare situation in the country (ibd.). Germany also has to catch up in terms of the gender pay gap: a 2022 survey shows that women still earn about one fifth (18%) less than men (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). At the same time, German women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. According to another 2019 study, only

29.4% of all leaders in the German political and corporate sphere are female. Germany thus ranks an inglorious 20th in this respect, in the bottom third of all EU member states (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019; Statista, 2022). Women are also still strongly underrepresented in the area of co-determination in politics and business, despite the introduction of women's quotas (Hobler et al., 2020). Given these facts, Germany is still far from being a gender-equal society.

According to feminist linguists, in addition to legislation, language can be an effective instrument to achieve social justice. Thus, they have been arguing for decades that changes in individual and societal mindsets must start with language use (Kusterle, 2011; Pusch, 1984; Trömel-Plötz et al., 1980). In order to make the problem accessible to readers who have no knowledge of the German language, the next section will outline the basic features of German and its use of gender designations.

## 4 Gender Designations in German

In contrast to English, German is a 'grammatical gender language', where nouns are assigned gender categories. Research has shown that countries with 'grammatical gender languages' have lower levels of gender equality than countries with other language systems (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). An important feature of German is the 'generic masculine', a characteristic long viewed by feminists as being discriminatory (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020). Thus, in German it is still common for masculine forms to be used to refer to either male or female persons, especially when referring to groups, even though some members of this group may be females. For example, the masculine form 'Psychologe' to refer to a psychologist is meant to include female psychologists as well; when referring to 'ein Experte' (masculine), female experts are also meant.

In fact, there are linguistic possibilities to designate women without much effort, for example with the suffix *-in*, e.g., *Psychologin*, *Expertin*, *Professorin*. But the masculine form is used not only for men but also for generalisations of persons of all genders. In contrast, the feminine form is used exclusively for women. Often, when describing a mixed-gender group of people, only the masculine form is used. As an example, Pusch (1984) uses this sentence:

*"In diesem Chor sind 100 Sänger."* (= "There are 100 singers in this choir.")

Yet the choir could consist of 99 female singers (*Sängerinnen*) and one single man, but it is still referred to as a male group because of this single man. Moreover, the generic masculine is often used for groups consisting only of women. Linguist historians proved that women are not automatically included in this forms, but very often excluded (ibd.). They point to the fact that in the late nineteenth century, with women taking on social roles which until then had been reserved for men, it had become the norm to deliberately refer to women with female forms in order to clearly distinguish them from men (Müller-Spitzer, 2021). But in the post-war period, it

became common German usage for the masculine form to be primarily used as a generic term (Doleschal, 2002). The main criticism is that in this way women are no longer linguistically recognisable. The choice of the generic masculine to describe a profession is thus interpreted as the linguistic retention of a male-dominated norm. Irmen & Köhnke (1996, 153) point out that the generic masculine is not a problem inherent to language itself, but an attempt to manifest the real dominance of one gender over the other in language.

## 5 The Beginning: Feminist Linguistics and the First Changes

Feminist linguistics deals with the discrimination of women through language. From the beginning, it had a political intention and assumed that people's social situation was reflected in language and specifically in language systems, and that social change could be supported by appropriate language use (Kusterle, 2011). As one of the first feminist linguistics in Germany, Senta Trömel-Plötz expressed her criticism as early as 1978, stating that the German language was very male-dominated, even sexist, and that women were recognisable only to a limited extent (Trömel-Plötz, 1978). She also qualified the generic use of the masculine form as constituting a linguistic imbalance. Thus, she and her colleagues claimed a gender-equitable language use, and according to Schoenthal (1989), the publications with the greatest media impact in this regard include *Richtlinien zur Vermeidung sexistischen Sprachgebrauchs* ("Guidelines for Avoiding Sexist Language Use") (Trömel-Plötz et al., 1980) and "*Das Deutsche als Männersprache*" ("German as a Man's Language") (Pusch, 1984). The considerations and proposals put forward by feminist linguists initially met with fierce opposition among German linguists, as they were judged to be unscientific; critics also argued that language was not supposed to be a part of the social debate within their discipline (Kalverkämper, 1979).

But criticism of discriminatory forms of language use had already been voiced by non-academic women as well. As early as the 1950s, there was protest regarding the word '*Fräulein*', which referred to unmarried women by using what is in fact a diminutive ('little woman') and a neuter pronoun. A debate on this subject in the *Bundestag* in 1954 was met with laughter (Bohr et al., 2021). It was not until the mid-1970s that this form disappeared from official forms, but it was still present in everyday language use for at least another decade.

According to Schoenthal, the fastest language changes were in the administrative language: the transformation of the administrative and regulatory language in Germany had been discussed since the 1980s. Since the early days of feminist linguistic criticism, occupational titles have had a special significance in the debate on gender-equitable language, as they are directly related to the professional emancipation of women (Schoenthal, 1989). A regulation on gender-equitable job advertisements in

the public service was implemented as early as 1980. At the same time, legislation was passed in the Federal Republic of Germany stipulating that the official list of occupations requiring apprenticeships and all the pertinent training regulations published in the Federal Law Gazette (*Bundesgesetzblatt*) include the female form of occupational titles in addition to the male form (Schoenthal, 1989). In the GDR, on the other hand, attempts were made to achieve equality in language with the opposite strategy, namely, by abolishing female job titles (Hergenhan, 2015). Linguists have noted a clear difference in language use between West and East Germans in this regard (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the federal cabinet agreed to important linguistic changes: “*Frau Minister*”, for instance, became “*Frau Ministerin*”. Over the years, individual federal states also adopted principles for the equal treatment of women and men in the legal language of state authorities (Schoenthal, 1999). In the 1990s and around the turn of the millennium, several influential guidelines on gender-equitable language appeared (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020). At the same time, the first important research papers on gender-equitable language were published (e.g. Stahlberg et al., 2001, cf. section ‘empirical studies’). In the noughties, the topic of language and gender found its way into German-speaking universities, but was still far from mainstream (Hensler, 2021).

## 6 The Development During the Twenty-Tens

All in all, the last decade has seen huge progress in society and in science with regard to gender-equitable language and linguistic gender equity. The mere fact that the Society for the German Language, in 2020, dedicated an extensive issue to the topic is, according to Gabriele Diewald, a clear indication that this field is now also receiving the attention it deserves in linguistics (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020, 1). She claims that the debate has now turned around: whereas until recently advocacy in favour of gender-equitable language always had to be linked to justifications, the pressure for legitimacy has now shifted and in many contexts the need to justify is now to explain why the generic masculine should be retained at all (ibd.). In her review, she points out the pioneering changes in public, political and official language. For decades, governmental and public institutions have been striving for gender-equitable communication and publishing guidelines for this purpose (ibd., 8). For example, the city authorities of Berlin, Hannover, Lübeck, Freiburg and Dortmund as well as many universities and both the Catholic and the Protestant Church encourage the use of gender-sensitive language. Several large German companies have now also positioned themselves in favour of gender-equitable language, such as Audi (2021) and the traditional mail order and online shop company Otto (Bohr et al., 2021).

According to Diewald (2020, 9f.), important impulses for different ways of gender-equitable communication come from new political movements, e.g., Fridays for Future. She shows that the protest movement, which is predominantly supported



by young people, uses a variety of gender-equitable language forms. Use of gendered language has also increased in many public media and is no longer restricted to alternative or left-wing media (ibd.).

Diewald distinguishes two epochs as far as the discourse on gender-equitable language is concerned (ibd.). While in the first era the discussion was about making women linguistically visible, it is now very often about depicting the current model of fluid sexuality. The change was triggered by the 2018 law allowing the third gender entry “diverse” in the civil status register. This put into question the traditional binary gender concept and designations associated with it, and in linguistics and society new gender-neutral solutions were discussed. Since then, two discourses have been running in parallel: on the one hand, efforts are being made to make women linguistically visible, while on the other hand, people are now concerned with the question of adequately designating the third gender.

With the new law, new headlines, discussions and criticism came up, and as the topic was very present in the media, there have also been numerous appeals against the change of language use. For example, the German Language Association (VDS) spoke out in March 2019 and initiated an “Appeal against gender nonsense” (VDS, 2021). According to Diewald, the arguments they use are without substance and show a conservative attitude that does not do justice to the current research situation (ibd., 13f.).

## 7 Linguistic Solutions

Despite the linguistic complexity of the issue, more and more people are taking up the challenge (Diewald, 2020; Müller-Spitzer, 2021). Everywhere in public “the practice of gender-equitable language has taken on an unprecedented momentum” (Müller-Spitzer, 2021, 10). It should be noted that there are many forms of gender-sensitive language established in different periods:

– Double noun	( <i>Studentinnen &amp; Studenten</i> )
– Use of gerunds	( <i>Studierende</i> )
– Gendering with an asterisk	( <i>Student*innen</i> )
– Gendering with a colon	( <i>Student:innen</i> )
– Gendering with a capital I	( <i>StudentInnen</i> )
– Gendering with an underscore	( <i>Student_innen</i> )
– Gendering with a slash	( <i>Student/innen</i> )

The double noun (use of both male and female forms) seems to be the simplest way of achieving gender equity. Here, both the female and the male form are written out and pronounced. This variant is used especially when addressing people in letters or in front of an audience. When using gerunds, the associated verb becomes a gender-neutral noun, whereby, for example, *Student:innen* becomes the word *Studierende* (‘studying persons’). On the one hand, this solution does not fulfil the original concern of feminist linguists to make women more visible in language. But

on the other hand, it allows a gender-neutral language use and takes into account the law from 2018, that requires a new necessity to be able to name and describe all persons concerned by appropriately ‘gender neutral’ language.

In the case of forms with an asterisk, colon, capital I, underscore or slash, the typographical sign separates the root of the word from the feminine ending. The selected sign thus symbolises all—even non-binary—gender identities (Müller-Spitzer, 2021). The asterisk has become the preferred form among these (Bohr et al., 2021). All the typographical forms can be marked orally as follows: a pause, a so-called glottal stop, is spoken in each case, briefly interrupting the word to auditorily represent all genders. The variety of forms shows that there is still no uniform rule on gender-sensitive language. Despite the dissenting recommendation of the Orthography Council (see below—section ‘recent developments’), all the forms described above are now in circulation. This is why more and more institutions and companies now publish guidelines to give orientation.

## 8 Language Change and New Standards

The development of the standard dictionary of the German language, the Duden, mirrors the language change in society. In 1984 the grammar Duden, referring to the generalising use of the masculine form, stated that feminine forms should be used only when women alone are meant (Irmen & Steiger, 2005). By 1998, the same Duden proposed avoidance of the generic masculine in favour of a double naming of both forms (Kotthoff, 2020).

In 2016, the grammar Duden abolished the term “generic masculine” and instead introduced a distinction between the terms “*sexusspezifisch*” (gender-specific) and “*sexusindifferent*” (gender-unspecific) (Kotthoff, 2020). The latter refers to the possibility in German, for example, of forming gender-unspecific forms by using gerunds (see last section). This form has been gaining acceptance in academic contexts for some time, with people now mostly speaking of “*Studierende*” (=studying persons).

In 2020, the spelling Duden for the first time included a chapter on “*Geschlechtergerechter Sprachgebrauch*” (gender-sensitive language use) showing different options of gender-sensitive formulations and offering appropriate explanations (Kunkel-Razum, 2020).

A significant step towards more gender-equitable language use was the revision of occupational titles in the 2021 online edition of the Duden, when it changed the entries for over 12,000 personal and occupational titles (Müller-Spitzer, 2021). Instead of describing personal and occupational titles for women merely as the female forms of the entry in question, words such as “*Sängerin*” (a woman singer) now received an entry of their own with a specific description such as “female person who sings (professionally)” instead of “female form of singer” (Duden-Online, 2022).

## 9 Recent Developments

With the Duden decision to include the female forms of all common professions in its online edition, the issue of making women visible, hence gender-equitable language use, once again moved into the foreground, displacing the focus on gender-neutral language which had dominated the debate since 2018. Sections of the public reacted with massive protest: the Duden editorial committee reported letters of rage, insults and hatred as a reaction (Knuth, 2021). The topic of gender-sensitive language even became a polarising political issue. Several politicians spoke out about it during the election campaign, parties positioned themselves, all major German media picked up on the issue and even made it into cover stories, most of them treating the topic very critically (e.g. Bender & Eppelsheim, 2021; Bohr et al., 2021). The talk was about “gender madness, gender gaga or language dictatorship” (Müller-Spitzer, 2021, 6.). This widespread exposure brought the debate into the very midst of society (Bohr et al., 2021).

But in fact, even though many see the Duden as being normative, it is not. The members of its editorial committee see their work as ‘mirroring language use’ (Knuth, 2021). It is the Council for German Orthography (RdR, *Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung*), established in 2005 by the German-speaking countries of Europe, which is responsible for official German spelling rules. Its’ set of rules is considered binding for the administration of justice and for public authorities, schools and other institutions. The publication “Gender-equitable spelling: recommendations of the Council” from March 2021 reaffirms that all persons should be spoken about with gender-equitable language and addressed sensitively. However, it specifies that “this is a societal and socio-political task that cannot be solved with orthographic rules and spelling changes alone” (RdR, 2021). According to the Council, gender-equitable texts, like all other texts, should be understandable and easily readable; they should guarantee legal certainty and unambiguity, ensure that readers and listeners can concentrate on the essential facts and core information, and they should not make written German more difficult to learn (ibd.). This news also caused an uproar because the Council opposed the inclusion of gender-neutral spelling options (e.g. adding asterisks, underscores etc., in the middle of words) in the Official Rules of German Orthography. Asterisks and similar forms had become quite established in social circles that intend to write in a gender-neutral way. This development was put in question by the RdR statement.

## 10 Empirical Studies

A lot of research has been carried out since the beginning of the demand for gender-equitable language. This has given the societal debate on language and on the potential changes a scientific basis (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2017, 119). Many comparative studies have investigated the problem of how women and men are

represented in language. Numerous experiments using different measurement methods have examined the effects of different language use on mental representation. These studies have provided scientific proof that the generic masculine exerts a detrimental influence on the representation of women, and furthermore, that alternative gender-equitable forms of language are advantageous (*ibid.*, 120f.). The studies differ mainly in whether they examine oral or written language, and which form of gender-sensitive language they consider. Due to limited space, only some of them will be mentioned here.

- In 2001, Stahlberg & Sczesny showed that the use of gender-sensitive language can have an effect on the mental inclusion of women in Germany. When asked about their favourite heroes, both men and women mentioned significantly more female heroes in response to the double-naming or neutral question than to the same question asked in the generic masculine.
- In another experiment, Stahlberg et al. (2001) examined the effects of a certain gender-equitable spelling, also on the basis of mentioning famous personalities. Faced with the generic masculine, test persons named fewer female persons than in the questions in which the double noun or the capital I were used.
- The effect of linguistic double nouns in relation to the generic masculine in job titles was explored by Blake & Klimmt, 2010. The result showed that double nouns made test respondents assume higher female participation.
- Kusterle (2011) showed in her study that use of the generic masculine predominantly leads to a conceptualisation of the category “man”, and that this can be prevented with the use of alternative forms.
- Gygax et al. (2008) and Misersky et al. (2019) examined the mental inclusion of women in relation to the generic masculine in written language. Both studies found that respondents often interpreted masculine role labels as masculine rather than neutral.
- Vervecken et al. (2013) showed in two classroom experiments that the presentation of occupational titles in pair forms (e.g., *Ingenieurinnen & Ingenieure*, female & male engineers) “boosted children’s self-efficacy with regard to traditionally male occupations” (*ibid.*, 5).
- Horvath et al. (2015) found that the use of gender-equitable language significantly increased the inclusion of women in the respondents’ mind’s eye.

These studies and many others prove that use of the generic masculine leads to a lower mental inclusion of women than alternative language forms, and thus that language shapes cognitive processes and perception of reality. The 2020 Handbook of Gender Equitable Language published by Duden summarises the results of the most relevant studies as follows (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020, 93):

- Readability and text comprehensibility are not impeded by gender-equitable wording.
- Subjective text evaluations show that overall, gender-equitable forms do not have a negative impact on text quality/text aesthetics. Small deviations arise insofar as men tend to prefer masculine forms.

- The use of the ‘generic masculine’ creates a mental representation among text recipients that women are involved only to a very small extent or not even considered as actors, and at the same time, it overestimates the role of men in the event being described.
- Gender-equitable forms improve the mental inclusion of women to varying degrees.

All in all, these studies in the German-speaking world show that language use influences cognitive imagination. Numerous studies based on English and other languages also support these findings (e.g. Aikhenvald, 2016; Cacciari & Padovani, 2007; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009), but in this article the focus was on German. Results of empirical studies are part of the discourse and have influenced linguistic change in the public, media and university sectors.

## 11 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to highlight the role of language in the context of female empowerment. It was shown that demands for gender-equitable language introduced by a feminist initiative nearly 50 years ago have slowly but surely become reality in policy, institutions and academia (Diewald, 2020; Müller-Spitzer, 2021). Studies have revealed how fair and empowering language can make women more visible, and how this can even extend the scope of their career possibilities (e.g. Blake & Klimmt, 2010; Vervecken et al., 2013).

The question of how to increase the acceptance of gender-equitable language among the population remains open, however. According to recent surveys, 82% do not find the topic of gendering important (Presseportal, 2021), and while 26% are in favour of gendering, 36% completely reject it and 28% rather reject it (Welt am Sonntag, 2021). It may no longer be possible to persuade the ageing baby boomer generation to adopt an appropriate language. But the public sector, many media and the academic world already use gender-equitable language, and the younger generation is calling for more and more gender-sensitive language (Diewald, 2020). The process has been rather slow and met many hindrances: parts of the scientific community still trying to portray the topic as being ridiculous, a general population that until today has been largely opposed to the change, and politicians and media still agitating against a so-called “language dictatorship” as late as 2021 (Bohr et al., 2021; Diewald, 2020; Müller-Spitzer, 2021).

In the meantime, many linguistic solutions have been found for gender-equitable speech, and the criticism that the language would be spoiled by this (e.g., Eisenberg, 2020) can no longer be accepted. For example, initiatives such as “Genderleicht” of the German Association of Women Journalists offer an online database with suitable strategies.

All in all, Germany might serve as an example. The slow, but steady change can be interpreted as a soft revolution against the patriarchal structures perpetuated in our

modern society. Feminist linguist Gabriele Diewald stated in 2020 that “one of the last steps on the way to the abolition of centuries-old discrimination is that social change is now beginning to be reflected in language and language use” (Diewald, 2020, 5).

## 12 Needs for Future Research and Practice

The fact that language has the power to construct realities (Kusterle, 2011) makes it an important tool to foster the equality of women, to make them visible and thereby empower them. This chapter has revealed that change towards a fairer use of language does not usually happen quickly and without resistance, but that many things change when academics and politicians pull together, even if only later generations may really benefit from it. As it was shown here, research findings from more than two decades support the pioneers of feminist linguistics by proving that gender-equitable language use empowers women in a sustainable way, e.g., by extending mental representations of their participation. If the study results were better known, more people would probably recognise the relevance of gender-equitable language.

From a socio-political perspective, future research should ask how to create greater awareness among the population about the effects of language use. It should be examined, which political but also didactic instruments are effective in implementing gender-equitable language. What have the Germans learned from the process? Which stakeholders should be involved in order to increase social acceptance? For instance, school teachers and career counsellors can play an important role in this by setting an example to their students. How can they be won over?

Furthermore, the field of the effect of language on thinking has been researched for a long time already, but many questions remain open. Of particular interest in terms of positive psychology are the effects on mindset of the way society talks about women, but also the effect of how women talk about themselves. Many more empirical studies on the impact of language are needed. Finally, there are still so many ways of speaking and using language in different cultures whose effect on women’s empowerment has not yet been researched.

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Her heartfelt concern is the claim that our societies need more equality, new skills and new ways of thinking.

**Part VII**  
**Women's Empowerment: Examples**  
**of Outstanding Women**

# Remote Counselling from a Positive Psychology Perspective During Covid-19



Claude-Hélène Mayer 

**Abstract** According to researchers, Positive Psychology (PP) interventions have mainly been used in contexts that are white, educated, industrialised, democratic and rich (WEIRD). However, PP interventions are also used in non-WEIRD samples throughout Western and African countries.

This article presents the implementation of selected PP interventions during online counselling sessions with a young African woman during Covid-19. The aim of the sessions was to strengthen and empower the client while also working on topics of experienced meaninglessness, demotivation to study, and personal family-related struggles.

The study presents ways in which two selected PP interventions can be used to empower women of non-WEIRD samples in counselling sessions.

Methodologically, the article is a single qualitative case study in the hermeneutic research paradigm, aiming at an in-depth understanding of the use of PP interventions in counselling sessions. The intervention included PP approaches which aimed at *meaning making* through a positive identity narration and symbol work. Conclusions and recommendations for counselling with women of non-WEIRD samples are given.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Positive psychology interventions · Women · Meaning-making · Externalisation · Symbol work · Counselling · South Africa · Case study · Non-WEIRD sample

There is no coming  
to consciousness  
without pain.  
Carl Gustav Jung

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## 1 Introduction

In the past years, discourse on broadening the research necessity in non-Western, non-educated, non-industrialised, non-rich and non-democratic contexts has evolved. The claim is that most of the research conducted uses WEIRD samples and contexts, namely people who are Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Accordingly, the authors ask for an increase in research—which Cultural Anthropology and Indigenous Psychology researchers have already followed during the past century—to focus their studies on non-WEIRD samples and contexts (e.g., Mayer, 2005). However, following the call of mainstream psychology to expand its focus to non-WEIRD research studies, Masuda et al. (2020) point out that even a decade after this call, most of global research is still focused on the geographic regions of the G7 and G20 countries, not supporting the expansion of cross-cultural psychology research beyond these cultural regions.

Research conducted in WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts points out that language that is used to conduct the research usually differs across the contexts. Furthermore, the sample sizes are smaller and there are less publications from non-WEIRD contexts and samples than from WEIRD ones (Beyebach et al., 2021). It has also been pointed out that mentioning the non-WEIRD countries in articles leads to biases in evaluation whereby the country names are twice as much mentioned in non-WEIRD than in WEIRD country studies (Kahalon et al., 2021). Recent research in psychology and behavioural sciences focuses increasingly on non-WEIRD countries and samples (Alper & Yilmaz, 2019; Duckitt & Sibley, 2016; Vitriol et al., 2020).

Positive Psychology (PP) interventions have been used mainly in WEIRD contexts (Hendriks et al., 2020; Duan et al., 2022), although researchers have pointed out during the past years that there has been a significant increase in PP interventions in general (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013; Rusk & Waters, 2013; Wong et al., 2021), and in non-Western contexts (Hendriks et al., 2018; Lambert et al., 2019; Ng & Lim, 2019; Rao et al., 2015). A systematic literature review from 2018 shows that PP interventions report a larger effect size than from Western countries (Hendriks et al., 2018) which, according to the authors, might result from the overall low study quality or the better cultural fit of PP approaches to non-Western countries.

PP interventions are characterised by the positive aim of the intervention, but also by promoting meaning and purpose, positive relationships, acts in kindness, gratitude and savouring (expanding pleasurable experiences) (Schueller & Parks, 2014). Hendriks et al. (2018) add to previous discussions, emphasising that these interventions also increase positive cognitions, feelings and behaviours in individuals while aiming at an increased well-being at the same time. By fostering these positive outcomes through PP interventions, women can be empowered (Ralte, 2020). Recent research has pointed out that PP perspectives need to be implemented in research and practices to empower women (Ralte, 2020). But others have also highlighted that PP should not only focus on one identity marker, such as gender,

but also needs to take other identity aspects, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social status, etc. into consideration when talking about the empowerment of women (Englar-Carlson & Smart, 2014; Trotman Reid, 2002). Shooshtari et al. (2018) have shown that empowerment is extraordinarily important for women and their impact in society. Further on, authors have discussed the importance of empowerment and the different areas in which women need to be empowered or need to empower themselves (Gholpour & Rahimian, 2011; Kayanighalesard & Arsalanbod, 2014). It has also been pointed out that empowerment is often connected to and limited by the cultural contexts, values and norms (Shooshtari et al., 2018) which might need to be taken into consideration.

Several systematic literature reviews have been conducted during the past years with regard to non-WEIRD contexts and samples, particularly focusing on quantitative studies and their empirical outcomes regarding happiness, well-being, quality of life, resilience, depression, anxiety and stress (Basurrah et al., 2021; Hendriks et al., 2018).

In the African context, PP has, for example, also been applied in the context of therapeutic interventions with non-WEIRD samples in South Africa (Crous & de Chailain, 2016; Mayer & Viviers, 2016; Van Zyl & Stander, 2013). This article contributes to the body of literature about working with non-WEIRD samples and presents a qualitative case study in the therapeutic field with the implementation of selected PP interventions, working with a non-WEIRD female client during Covid-19. The aim of the sessions was to strengthen and empower the female client, who is from a non-WEIRD background working in a higher education context within the South African society. The article thereby not only contributes to non-WEIRD studies, but also to the study of a female non-WEIRD sample in particular.

## 2 Beyond WEIRD Contexts in South Africa

South African society is strongly impacted by its imperialist history, its socio-cultural diversity and the decades of apartheid (Bornman, 2011; Mayer, 2005). In post-apartheid South Africa, all of these different socio-cultural influences are often encountered as conflictual and fractured, gendered and racialised (Mayer & Mayer, 2021). International organisations, such as UNESCO (2009), have called for the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, with attempts to desegregate practices and establish social cohesion across different socio-cultural groups (Dlamini et al., 2021); however, disparities across the socio-cultural groups remain (Bornman, 2011; Mayer & Mayer, 2021; van Schalkwyk et al., 2021).

During apartheid, the National Party government introduced the 1950 Population Registration Act which registered the entire South African population under three categories: “white,” “black” and “coloured,” referred to as “races” (O’Malley, 2004). The creation of these “race groups” was based on physical appearance and social acceptability, which include linguistic skills (O’Malley, 2004). Additionally, the

racial categories have remained a part of South Africa's contemporary, democratic society and individuals are still often categorised into members of population groups, such as "White," "Coloured," "African," "Indian" and "Asian" (Mayer et al., 2021), although non-racialisation and unity is being encouraged (Mittelmeier et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019). Based on its history, South African society consists, in part, of WEIRD members of socio-cultural groups, as well as non-WEIRD members. Often, members of previously disadvantaged groups carry the stigmas of apartheid, leaving them with less education and wealth than previously advantaged groups. Further, South Africa as a constitutional democracy has faced distinct erosion and decline during recent years with a major discourse about democratic rights, gender and minority rights and reforms (Southall, 2017). There are contradictions in the South African democracy of the post-apartheid state and different strains of democratic streams exist in the political arena of this multicultural context (Smith, 2019).

Recent research has shown that the South African government still aims at establishing a "rainbow nation" in which democratic and economic inclusion of citizens of all cultural and racial backgrounds is endorsed (Jackson et al., 2021). However, it appears that South Africans in their private spheres still do not wish, to a certain degree, to increase present and future contact with other groups (Hofmeyr, 2006). Society is faced with nationwide splits in regard to socio-cultural interaction and different strings of WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts in the society.

### 3 Selected Positive Psychology Interventions in Counseling

During the past years, PP perspectives and interventions have been integrated into psychology and psychiatry (Compton & Hoffman, 2019; Diener & Chan, 2011; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2020). New communications evolved to give PP new directions (Wong, 2020; Yakushko, 2019) by exploring the ambivalent nature of constructing a good life (Fowers, 2017). Thereby, shadow and light sides are explored, integrated and transformed (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Wong, 2019). Recent research has pointed out that PP needs to focus more closely on multicultural, interdisciplinary and multi-methodological scenarios (Lomas et al., 2020). However, often PP approaches have not yet been described when used in non-WEIRD contexts.

In the following, selected PP approaches are described and will afterwards be presented as approaches which have been used in a non-WEIRD South African counselling context during Covid-19. The selected approaches presented are focusing on meaning-making through identity narration and symbol work.

### ***3.1 Meaning-Making in Counselling from a Positive Psychology Perspective***

Previous studies have emphasised that PP interventions can build a framework in counselling sessions and interventions (Mayer et al., 2019; Wong, 2020). Meaning-making is an important aspect of developing a client–counsellor relationship (Wong, 1998). A positive relationship between the counsellor and the client can support the transformation of suffering and pain, in addition to any negative emotions that the client usually experiences and which create vulnerability (Wong, 2019).

Client-based intervention often aims at transforming the meaning that clients ascribe to pain, suffering, symptoms and experiences through their self-perception, by offering the reflection on new narratives of meaning (Frank, 1986; Wampold & Imel, 2015). As psychotherapists and counsellors listen to their clients, the clients feel cared for and supported in regaining their mastery and control over their mental challenges (Brody, 2000). This means that the client feels empowered through the experience of control and freedom at the same time (Shooshtari et al., 2018).

Meaning-based therapies and counselling approaches are often based on narrations and their transformation towards positive empowerment. These are approaches which emphasise the client’s stories and narrations by challenging the existing meaning systems of the client and supporting them in creating narratives which are healthier, more positive, functional and meaningful (Kropf & Tandy, 1998). The counsellor thereby needs to present the interventions and explain them to the client in a positive way, since the way that information about interventions is given may have an impact on the client (Justman, 2011).

Furthermore, the construction of meaning is socio-culturally dependent, and the way in which the client’s narratives are told or changed with respect to meaning-making depend on the socio-cultural context. Change in mindset and the experience of healing through new meaning creation contributes to new forms of understanding oneself and others (Levitt et al., 2015). Wong (2010) points out that the idea of how an individual fits into the world, finding one’s place in the world and contributing to a larger life plan which might even go beyond oneself, can contribute positively to a person’s experience of meaningfulness in the world. Meaning-making then plays a crucial part in identity development and in understanding, forming and participating in the world around them (Mayer & Ooustuizen, 2019; Wong, 2011). Psychotherapeutic and counselling settings are providing contexts that enable clients to develop and transform meaning of their ideas, thoughts, feelings and experiences, as well as their symptoms (Locher et al., 2019) and develop new identity narrations. They offer spaces of reflection and openness for new narrations (Frank, 1986; Wampold & Imel, 2015).



### 3.2 *Symbol Work Through Active Imagination*

Active imagination as a technique invented by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, has been used in therapy, counselling and consultancy across cultures (Chodorow, 1997, 2006; Jackson, 1990; Mayer, 2019; Mayer & Ooustuizen, 2019). It has been described previously as a positive psychology intervention (Mayer & Ooustuizen, 2019). Imagination can support individuals to explore both the negative and the positive sides of a situation (Seabright & Schminke, 2002) and it has been pointed out that it can support health and well-being in individuals and organisations positively, if implemented suitably (Rozuel, 2012). According to Jung (2009), symbol work, when used in active imagination, connects the individual with their soul to self-reconcile, heal and empower. Accordingly, it deeply affects emotions and can help an individual to transform negative emotions concerning their experiences into more neutral or even positive emotions (Mayer & Ooustuizen, 2019).

During the process of active imagination, the client is guided to explore their unconscious while in consideration of a certain question or topic in which they would like to get new insight or new perspectives on, thereby exploring the symbols which the unconscious sends out (Wright & Dziak, 2016).

The process of active imagination has been described by Jung (1928, 1953, 1970), as a creative method to explore the mind for self-development and self-healing. It is defined as a process in which the conscious is connected to the unconscious and in which the unconscious mind is used to find solutions in form of symbols (Von Franz, 2017). During the process, the mind is brought into a relaxed state in which the unconscious is trusted to bring the solutions for a situation to the conscious mind in the form of an image or symbol. The individual plays the role of the observer and observes the unconscious mind bringing relevant information in such a form into the consciousness of the individual. The individual can observe the symbol, but can also enter into an interaction with it, to explore the inner meaning it holds for the individual (Jung, 1928). The symbol as a socio-historical and cultural transmitted idea (Wong & Tsai, 2007), is then decoded and evaluated in connection with a core question or a problem, by the individual, or, if used in counselling, together with the counsellor. Through the understanding of the meaning of the symbol, the defined problem or question can then be understood and transformed according to the symbol's message for the individual.

Symbol work can be used to deal with challenging situations in life, lack of meaning in life, or to deal with emotions that must be transformed (Mayer, 2019). It can help to reflect upon inner emotions and attitudes, and to visually describe them (Booth & O'Brien, 2008). Symbol work is not only part of Western psychotherapeutic traditions, but can also be found in traditional healing approaches of indigenous groups or societies (Hoogasian & Lijmaer, 2010). It can be incorporated into storytelling and narrative therapies, and used with metaphors and proverbs in counselling to work with the inner growth of clients (Honoré France et al., 2021; McRobie & Agee, 2017).

## **4 Research Methodology**

### ***4.1 Research Design, Paradigm and Approach***

Methodologically, this article presents a qualitative case study, providing in-depth information (Gaya & Smith, 2016) on a single individual's experience within a counselling setting. This methodology enables the conduct of an in-depth exploration of the PP interventions applied to a complex therapeutical context (Baxter & Jack, 2019; Yin, 2014) and has been used for exploring research in clinical and counselling psychology (Edwards, 2019). Although research of single case studies has often been treated as second-class methodology, it is extremely important in psychology to present meaningful knowledge regarding specific phenomena in the world.

The study uses a post-modernist and hermeneutical-phenomenological research worldview (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) which aims at understanding the subjective experiences and encounters through the eyes of the researcher (Clarke & Hogget, 2009; Hassan & Ghauri, 2014). The researcher aims for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the text, recreating the meaning from the text, revealing new or dissimilar themes and topics (Yin, 2014).

### ***4.2 Sampling and Sample***

The sampling was conducted using the purposeful sampling technique (Benoot et al., 2016). This is a case study of a female African adult who will be introduced in more depth in the case study section.

### ***4.3 Data Collection, Analysis and Reporting***

Data were gathered during counselling sessions, in the form of notes, observations and questions the client was asked during these sessions. The counselling sessions were conducted online in remote counselling during Covid-19 and the zoom platform was used during the sessions.

The client was asked and consented to be part of this research study, and permitted data collected during the counselling sessions to be used in this study. The researcher ensured that her roles as both counsellor and researcher were not confused.

Data were analysed according to the five steps as outlined by Clarke and Hogget (2009): (1) the information was subjected to an introductory, preparatory and all-encompassing evaluation, (2) topics were produced, (3) information was coded, (4) the body of the content was broken down into important sections that were

named and (5) close consideration was given to the nuances and subtleties of the meaning inalienable within the information by the researcher (Clarke & Hogget, 2009). Information was not recorded during the counselling sessions; the counsellor made handwritten notes during and after the sessions. The client was informed of this and gave consent that the notes can be used for research.

The findings are reported in a qualitative reporting style to provide the readers with an in-depth insight into the data and the situation.

#### ***4.4 Quality Criteria and Research Ethics***

The quality criteria of this study are anchored in establishing rigour in the qualitative approach and inquiry (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and to present scientific and evidence-based findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Additionally, quality criteria referring to trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability were taken into consideration by using persistent observation (establishing credibility), systematic observation, and identifying the objectives of the study and bringing them together with the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Through determining reliability of findings, dependability was established during the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Further, transferability was achieved by using thick descriptions of the research process to repeat the study and find the same or similar results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The findings were verified through discussing the findings with other researchers and psychologists to reach conformity (Forero et al., 2018), and by describing the research process and documenting it in detail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

This study follows ethical considerations with regard to informing the participant of the aims of the study (Connelly, 2014; Resnik, 2011), providing her with the ability to withdraw from the study at any point (Smythe & Murray, 2000), and to exercise the right of informed consent. Additionally, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed (Wiles et al., 2008). Consent was given by the individual to use the counselling session insights for research and to publish the findings.

## **5 Presenting the Case Study Findings and Discussion**

The client, Kelili,<sup>1</sup> is a 27-years old African woman. She is from a lower-class South African (Xhosa) and Zimbabwean (Shona) family background. She was born in a rural area in the Western Cape province. Kelili is well spoken, self-reflective and highly self-critical. She grew up with her mother only; her first language is Xhosa;

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<sup>1</sup>The name was chosen to keep anonymity and confidentiality.

her mother's first language is Xhosa. The father, who was originally from Zimbabwe, left the family before Kelili was born. When Kelili was 5 years old, her mother moved with her to a large city in the Eastern Cape. Her mother, who had lost her own parents early in life, sent Kelili to a primary boarding school. She stayed in different boarding schools until she completed her schooling, only visiting her mother during the holidays. Shortly after her 18th birthday, she returned to her mother's home. She then worked in different stores to earn an income. Later, she worked at a local doctor and helped as a nurse since she was always interested in the health care sector. She received a nursing degree whilst working at the doctor.

During the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020), Kelili is depressed about staying with her mother during lockdown, still working at the local doctor. She hears that four free counselling sessions are offered for health staff during Covid-19 and she uses the opportunity and seeks advice provided by a volunteering group of psychologists. The counselling takes place remotely between March and July 2020. In the first session, she and the counsellor identify three main topics. These are (1) how to deal with her fear of Covid-19, (2) her depression and meaninglessness experienced in life, and (3) her personal struggles in never having known her father and being a single African woman.

During the four counselling sessions, the Kelili focuses mainly on understanding his extreme experience of depression and meaninglessness and developing ideas on how to work with these experiences in a positive and more constructive way than before.

In the following, two PP interventions are described which aim to support the client in the counselling sessions.

### ***5.1 Positive Perspectives in Meaning-Making***

During the second session, the counsellor and the client focus on the shift from the experience of depression and meaninglessness in the client's life toward the experience of meaning during his lifetime and at present. The counsellor uses different techniques to create positive narrations around the topic of meaningfulness rather than staying with analysis of the challenges.

*Counsellor:* Last session you pointed out that you experience these feelings of meaninglessness. Can you tell me more about this?

*Kelili:* Yes. I am depressed. I feel down and frustrated. Helpless, not knowing what to do. It is as if my life does not have any meaning. Yes, I have been through school, I do have a job, I do well—but I cannot enjoy any of this. It is like . . . I don't know why I am doing it. . . . But I feel so down. . . and staying with my mother is not easy. She lives on her own since I was born and I do not want to be like this. But I struggle to get into a relationship and to find the right person to be with. And now it is even worse to find someone during Covid and the new situation. I feel very lonely, but I cannot tell my mother, she would be offended, although she always tells me that I am growing too old and should find somehow to marry and have children with.

The client continues for a few more minutes to highlight the feelings of frustration, depression, meaninglessness and the fear to become like her mother. The counsellor listens and mirrors these feelings and experiences. Then, the counselling takes a turn with a shift in questions toward the positive, taking the client's focus away from the trance of negativity.

*Counsellor:* I see; when did you feel happy in your life? Can you think of any situation where you felt that your life made sense, was meaningful and maybe even joyful? A time where you felt that your thoughts and actions brought meaning to yourself or even others?

*Kelili:* Oh . . . let me think. I am not sure . . . not that I can think of . . .

*Counsellor:* Just give it a bit of time. Think about situation which really made you happy. . .

*Kelili:* Hmm . . . [takes some time] . . . maybe the time before I went to boarding school.

*Counsellor:* Okay. Tell me more about this situation.

*Kelili:* I stayed with my mum and we had nice neighbors and other kids and friends.

*Counsellor:* I see . . .

*Kelili:* I felt happy and safe and not alone. I did not have any responsibilities; we could just play and be free.

*Counsellor:* What exactly made you happy at that point in time?

*Kelili:* I think being together with all these people who cared and were nice to me. Just being. . .

The session moves forward and the client is asked to remember more situations where she experienced happiness and meaningfulness. Later in the session, the counsellor draws the client's attention to the present situation in her life.

*Counsellor:* And when you are looking at your life now, living in this city, being with your mother, working as a nurse with the local doctor—where do you experience happiness and meaningfulness?

*Kelili:* I am not sure. I think this is exactly the problem . . . I do not experience these moments of easiness, happiness and meaningfulness anymore.

*Counsellor:* What would need to happen to experience these moments and to allow yourself to feel happy, the life to be meaningful, to experience meaning in your relationships and to enjoy these moments?

*Kelili:* Maybe . . . I think I would need to feel needed and wanted and have a good time with friends and just enjoy life and go out and meet people and see that . . . also that my studies will lead me to make a difference one day. To lead a good life. Do something that is really meaningful, like maybe, a situation where you really change the life of others for the better . . . and life is not a struggle anymore.

*Counsellor:* I see, so that life becomes really light and enjoyable. What exactly could this look like?

*Kelili:* I don't know, but something like . . . people would tell me, "Oh, that's great that you are here and that you are doing that." I think that would make me happy and give my life some meaning.

*Counsellor:* So, this means that, really, when you contribute to the life of others in a positive way and they give you feedback, that you have a positive impact on their life, that would make your life meaningful?

*Kelili:* Yes, I guess so . . .

*Counsellor:* Maybe we can take a look at what exactly would need to happen, how such a situation could look in detail. Since we are in lockdown and you are at home with your mum all the time, how could you create a situation that brings happiness and meaning to you in this kind of a challenging situation?

From the narration of overall meaninglessness in life, the client took the opportunity in this session to explore situations throughout her lifetime where she experienced happiness, joy and meaningfulness. The shift from the narration of depression, frustration and meaninglessness in her life towards happy life experiences was outstanding. The counselling sessions took a turn when Kelili was asked for positive and meaningful narrations and her experiences in past and present. After these narrations were told, and mirrored and reframed by the counsellor with a view on the positive experiences, the client could later on at least play with the idea that there might be meaningful experiences in the present or future. The client showed that she could change the narration from a negative stance towards a more positive view. Her focus thereby shifted from the meaninglessness experienced in the situation toward the focus on positive experiences and joy.

The counsellor used active listening, reframing, and mirroring techniques, while shifting the focus onto recalling positive experiences of the past, thereby requesting a solution-focused view from the client. The questions the counsellor asked were questions that led the client to see the joyful moments she experienced (within the context of her mother and family) in the past and move forward into the future (how will a happy future look like for you?). From a positively constructed future, Kelili could then look back at her present situation and create a new narration of meaningfulness and joyful moments in the present.

## **5.2 Working with Symbols**

During the third counselling session, the client expressed strong feelings of depression, frustration and irritation. She felt alone and was sad about being without a partner.

The counsellor decided to work with symbols by applying the active imagination technique. She explained the technique to the client and she was willing to work with it. Together, they defined a question to work with and ask the subconsciousness to help to find an answer. The question was: How can the situation be resolved towards a more joyful, pleasant and meaningful experience?

During the active imagination, one very striking symbol appeared in front of the inner eye of the client. She saw was a woman on a black motorbike, wearing a black motorbike gear and a black helmet with yellow stripes riding down a road with potholes, trying not to hit them while accelerating the speed. The client did not share her image during the active imagination process, but only afterwards.

She explained that she was very surprised about the image that she saw when she shared it, because from her African perspective as a woman who has grown up in an African traditional context, the image was very uncommon and surprising. In her opinion, there are not many black men riding fast motorbikes, and even less women riding motorbikes in the African culture. She said she was surprised that she saw this picture, because women riding fast high-speed motorbikes were not really accepted in the culture she came from. She was surprised by the speed the woman was riding

the bike, particularly looking at the shape of the streets in terms of the many potholes. She said that she was always fascinated by motorbikes, but had never been in the position to consider riding one.

After the first explanations, the counsellor asked evaluative questions with regard to the transformative aspects of the image, such as: What do you associate with the woman riding the motorbike?

The client associated speed, Western culture, independence, sexiness, attraction, danger, freedom and other values which represented an independent life of a woman.

The counsellor and the client worked their views through the different symbols. The client responded to questions, such as: What do you associate with the motorbike, with the blackness of the woman rider's clothes, with the helmet and the yellow stripes, with the speed, with the streets with potholes? Which are the values that are represented? What do you think: where is the rider coming from and where is she heading to?

Additionally, more general questions were asked regarding the connection between the situation and the life of the client: How does she feel riding the bike? If the client would put herself into the position of the rider, how would she feel where would she be coming from and/or going to? Which attitudes does the client share with the rider which would she like to share with her? Where are the similarities between the rider and the client and where are the differences?

Finally, the counsellor asked the client to interpret the situation within her own's life context: How do you interpret the symbol with regard to the entry question that we asked? What are the positive aspects from the image that can be taken into consideration for the client's own life and her question how her situation can be resolved?

The client emphasised, interpreting the image with regard to her question, that she needed to focus on the street, pick up speed and wear the right gear and helmet to be protected in case of a fall. She would need to focus on the street, detouring the potholes, taking a risk a times, riding fast on a bumpy road. For her, the street represented her living environment with lots of potholes—a kind of broken street. However, the female rider represented a speedy woman who could steer her bike through all the holes and stay tuned on her way forward. She was not impressed by the potholes, but made her way through them.

Whilst interpreting the image, the client appeared to be quite fascinated by this positive image that her unconsciousness had created for her.

During the fourth and final session, the client and the counsellor focused primarily on solution-finding to enable the client to build a happier, forward-bound and more meaningful life. She said that the symbol had been an eye-opener in the way that she should not focus on the potholes, but on the healthy and fixed parts of the road. She also emphasised that her life should not be determined by traditional values and ideas in African cultural mindsets what women should do or should not do, but rather by her own individual ideas how her life should be led. She said that she had realised that “. . .sometimes, as a woman, you need to take a vehicle that you usually would not take. . .because you are a woman. . .but sometimes, we do have to make the decision that it can be helpful to use a vehicle that is traditionally rather

used by White men than by Black women. . . .and when we are courageous enough to use these vehicles, we need to steer well with confidence. . . .and we need to carry ourselves through the potholes of this world, with conscious awareness and also with confidence. . . .we should not let others distract ourselves, so that we can make our way forward.”

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the study was to explore the question of how to work with a client from a non-WEIRD background in counselling sessions by using selected PP interventions to empower her. The presented client, an African woman, showed high levels of experienced unhappiness, meaninglessness, stress and anxiety which occurred particularly after the beginning of the pandemic.

It can be concluded that she felt uplifted and empowered after the sessions of counselling: During the first two sessions of counselling, the PP interventions used were meaning-making through narration, and change in narration, from the negative into a more positive approach to his life and attitudes. During the second two sessions, the counsellor and client worked with a symbol that the subconscious of the client produced during an active imagination exercise. Both of the PP interventions worked well for this client from a non-WEIRD background. Since both of the interventions use basic human functions, namely narrations and symbol work, these interventions worked well in this non-WEIRD context and client for her own feelings of meaningfulness and empowerment.

Additionally, the guidance which is needed for dealing with and integrating the PP perspective in the narration and the symbol might be influenced by cultural aspects, descriptions, emotional concepts, and interpretations. The guidance through mind-setting narrations and the exploration of unconscious symbols—from a negative mindset towards a positive one—worked very well with this client. The focus on the positive evoked increasingly positive feelings in the client and made her feel more powerful and self-confident.

It is noteworthy that the client with an African non-WEIRD cultural background, was shown an image during her active imagination session which she related mainly to white men. This might be interpreted as a symbol that came up to make her aware of the importance to realise one’s own boundaries and the importance of sometimes consciously crossing the cultural or gender-related boundaries, taking the “nice parts of the roads and the potholes into consideration”.

This leads to the conclusion that PP interventions may use narrations and symbols which connect individuals across cultures or might be used beyond the classification of WEIRD or non-WEIRD backgrounds and contexts. Symbols in particular can help to overcome cultural and gendered boundaries and provide access to new insights and perspectives through new cultural contextualisations. This is in particular important since previous literature has repeatedly emphasised that cultural values and norms often present strong boundaries for women’s empowerment in



many cultural contexts. This is especially the case when women come from WEIRD backgrounds.

Further, it is worth posing the question whether differentiating between WEIRD and non-WEIRD contexts makes any sense when exploring PP interventions, since it can be seen in this example that being categorised as WEIRD or non-WEIRD might be transcended by the thought styles, cognitive schemes and concepts of an individual client. The ways in which PP interventions can be used with non-WEIRD clients and contexts was demonstrated in this case study. But it is still to be explored further whether the categorisation of WEIRD or non-WEIRD samples is meaningful or helpful in counselling and therapy contexts.

It is recommended that future research focuses on exploring culture- and gender-specific PP interventions and their implications for individuals of different backgrounds. However, it also needs to be researched whether the differentiation of individuals of non-WEIRD and WEIRD categories is valuable when exploring interventions on the micro-level, taking individual's subjective perspectives and views into consideration.

From a practical perspective, it is recommended that a larger discussion takes place concerning the classification of clients in counselling situations as WEIRD and non-WEIRD individuals. It needs to be explored how this classification influences the perception of the counsellor with regard to the client. Additionally, it should be established whether using macro-level classifications of Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic aspects as categories makes sense when classifying the background of individuals or their contexts. It should be further investigated how these macro classifications affect the individual and their identity, cognition, affects and behaviours. Since this case example has shown how integrated WEIRD and non-WEIRD identities, backgrounds, styles, ideas, concepts and cognitions can be within an individual, it is necessary to evaluate the practicability of PP in counselling interventions.

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# Role of Social Capital in Career Development: Empowering a Japanese Woman to Become an Executive at an International Company



Kiyoko Sueda 

**Abstract** Women are under-represented among business executives in Japan, but one pioneering Japanese woman has broken this barrier, beginning her career 45 years ago as a secretary and then moving up to eventually fill executive positions in international companies and organisations in various industries in Japan.

The concept of social capital is broad in scope, with a common denominator of interpersonal relationships, networks, institutional support and other social assets that can be accessed by members to their advantage. It has its origin in sociology and has been widely applied in research in other fields, including business and management. However, there has been little empirical research studying how women utilise social capital for their career development.

Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how social capital and the willingness to maximise social capital lead a pioneering Japanese woman to be a manager and then an executive in international companies in Japan.

A series of interviews were conducted with a former woman executive. Applying the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM), a life map was drawn from the collected data. Following this, additional interviews were conducted with the participant to determine what types of social capital assisted her to become a manager at each stage of her life and how she maximised her relevant social capital at each stage of her life.

**Keywords** Women's empowerment · Social capital · A Japanese woman executive · Career path

## 1 Introduction

In 1985, Japan's Diet enacted the Equal Opportunity Law and in the following year, it came into effect (E-GOV, 2020). Under this law, it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of gender for the recruitment, employment, assignment, promotion, demotion,

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training opportunities, fringe benefits, change in job type or employment status of workers, encouragement of retirement, mandatory retirement age, dismissal and renewal of labour contracts (Ministry of Health, Labour and Industry, 2019). While some impact of the law on gender parity was expected, in particular, an increase in the number of women managers and executives, as of 1998, 82.1% of small (with below 100 employees) and mid-sized (with below 1000 employees) companies in Japan did not have any women executives and 92% of those had no women managers or above, as found by a survey administered by the Ministry of Labour (Takeishi, 2001).

The Global Gender Gap Report 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2022) ranks Japan in 116th place due to a decrease in the number of women in the workforce and in legislative and managerial positions. A survey conducted by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2021) indicated that 13.1% of companies have women above the managerial level. Likewise, 20.8% have women above the assistant managers position and 22.6% have women above the section chief position. Only 13.1% of all managers are women, far short of the 30%, set by the Japanese government to be achieved by 2020.

On the other hand, diversity is increasingly needed in the Japanese labour market. Certain conventional characteristics of the Japanese employment system, such as permanent employment and internal promotion systems, have become unsteady in current years and an external labour market is growing (Okabe, 2012). Moreover, Japan will experience a shortfall of 6.44 million workers by 2030 (Kamei, 2018). Thus, organisations in Japan need to diversify their employees at all levels.

In this chapter, the researcher highlighted a pioneering Japanese woman who began her career 45 years ago as a secretary and moved up to become an executive in international companies in Japan and organisations in various industries. It is worth observing how she empowered herself in spite of not having a college degree to develop her career by investigating how she has made use of the social capital around her and what prompted her to make the maximum possible use of this social capital.

## 2 Literature Review

The concept of social capital has a broad meaning. From a micro perspective, it is defined by Burt (1992, p. 9) as being made up of the 'friends, colleagues and more general contacts through whom you receive opportunities to use your financial and human capital'. On the other hand, Putnam (1995) views it from a macro perspective, defining it as the 'features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (p. 67). In another work, Putnam (2000) divides social capital into two types: bridging and bonding. While bridging refers to open networks that connect us to circles of people extending outward, bonding is an inward network that reinforces our exclusive identities. Du Plooy et al. (2020) pay close attention to another dichotomy with



respect to social capital: cognitive and structural social capital. The former relates to the perceived quality of the relationships built and maintained by people, such as trust and harmony. The latter, for its part, concerns the quantity of social relationships and access to the resources embedded within those social networks.

Adler and Kwon (2002) conducted an extensive literature review and devised a broad definition by synthesising a concept along the following lines. 'Social capital refers to the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence and solidarity made available to the actor' (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 23).

As indicated above, the concept of social capital has its origin in sociology and has seen applications in various research fields, such as business, management, political science and organisational behaviour. Kim presented her concept of Integrative Communication Theory into the field of intercultural communication in the late 1980s and has kept refining it (Kim, 1998, 2015). This theory exhibits a shared gist of the concept of social capital.

According to Kim (2015), when sojourners or immigrants enter a new and unfamiliar environment, they seek to exploit the resources available to them, which include the interpersonal network in their home country or culture as well as those more immediately present in the host country or culture, as well as the social communication provided by the mass communication both at home and in the host country or culture. By utilising the resources, sojourners and immigrants develop the cognitive competence to master the language, history, institutions, values, norms and rules of the host country or culture. At the same time, the use of those resources enables them to acquire sufficient affective competence to embrace the stress of being in a new environment, manage themselves psychologically and challenge a new and unfamiliar environment (du Plooy et al., 2020).

Working in an international organisation<sup>1</sup> requires us to exhibit similar qualities and skills to those of immigrants and sojourners who must deal with a new environment and with people from various cultural backgrounds. In particular, in being promoted and acquiring a new position, we must adjust ourselves to this new role and seek to meet expectations for the amount and quality of work associated with our new status. The higher that people are promoted, the greater the variety of tasks they are responsible for and the more diverse the demands they have to meet.

In the literature on global leadership (e.g. Bird, 2008; Jokinen, 2005; Kozai Group, 2017) three core elements of competence are highlighted, namely, perception management; self-management; and relationship management. Relationship management concentrates on questions of developing and maintaining relationships in general. Of 900 multinational organisations surveyed by Salicru et al. (2016), more than half of them were planning to expand their operations as soon as possible, but

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'international' refers to 'those that operate beyond national boundaries' (Gundersen, 2015, p. 556). On the other hand, global means 'a mindset, a worldview with few limitations, one that is holistic in nature' (ibid., p. 556); therefore, 'international' is the term used here.

few reported having globally ready leaders. Salicru et al. (2016) published a case study of a global leadership development programme, part of which focuses on building a network and promoting collaboration between two or more individuals within the organisation. That is, the importance of building social capital (bonding capital) is highlighted.

Although the role of social capital in the above-mentioned areas cannot be stressed too much, there has been little research focusing on the processes through which someone in a peripheral position in the organisation moves to a major position in a given organisation that enables more engagement and entails more complexity. Lave and Wenger (1991) indicate the ways in which people who participate in a community gradually extend their participation to reach full participation through situated learning. In this study, analysing how a pioneering Japanese woman executive came to participate fully in business is important because her success came and she was hired as an executive by an international company before legal protections were enacted. Women in general were considered peripheral in the 1970s. Thus her success must have required maximal use of the resources surrounding in her steps, reaching the positions of assistant manager, manager and eventually executive.

In this chapter, the two following research questions are explored.

RQ1. What kinds of social capital enabled a Japanese woman to become a manager and then an executive in international companies in Japan?

RQ2. How did she maximise her social capital at each stage of her life?

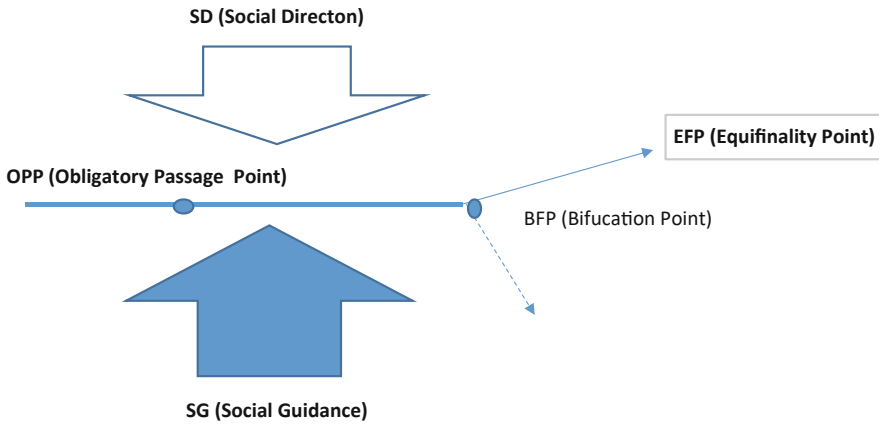
### **3 Research**

#### ***3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach***

Because the purpose of this study is understanding the research participants' subjective understanding of their experiences, the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) is used. In the constructivist paradigm, researchers focus on the interactions between the research participants and their environment. Instead of pursuing the truth as if it can be detached from a particular context, researchers analyse the subjective meaning of their lives by examining the cultural and historical context where they live, taking a qualitative research approach.

#### ***3.2 Research Methodology***

In the present research, the trajectory equifinality model (TEM), a major subcomponent of a new qualitative methodology called the trajectory equifinality approach (Sato et al., 2014) is used to capture the process in which one interacts with one's environment. In TEM, researchers deepen their understanding of the ways in



**Fig. 1** Concepts of Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM)

which research participants choose a single option from among possible choices, studying what has encouraged them to and discouraged them from making certain choices in their lives (de Mattos & Chaves, 2013; Sato et al., 2009). Irreversible time is not existential, as it cannot be measured by any particular unit. In the life maps produced using the TEM, the length of the line does not correspond to an actual length of time (Yasuda et al., 2015a, 2015b).

As noted, TEM enables researchers to identify what has encouraged research participants to choose one and discouraged them from choosing another out of the many options in life. It also elucidates the social and societal factors, viewed in the micro, meso and macro perspectives that influenced the research participants as they made certain choices. The major concepts of TEM are presented in Fig. 1<sup>2</sup>.

An equifinality point (EFP) is a given end state (Zhang et al., 2019) that can be reached equally well by a certain group of participants. In this study, a pioneering businesswoman’s career development is analysed. The point where she became a customer service representative within her original company is taken as a provisional end state, as this role is drastically different from that of her earlier position; it is here that she gains considerable autonomy and even acquires her own secretary. The bifurcation point (BFP) marks where alternative options diverge. Participants inevitably move through an obligatory passage point from the initial condition to an EFP. In this study, the aforementioned pioneering Japanese businesswoman was hired as a secretary by an international chemical company in Japan. Without this step, she would not have been able to become a customer service representative. Social guidance (SG) denotes the power that helps the participant move toward an EFP

<sup>2</sup>This depiction of the major concepts of TEM is adapted from Zhang et al. (2019, p. 107, Fig. 2) but the drawing is original.

and social direction (SD) is the power of inhibition that holds the participant back from that motion.

According to Yasuda et al. (2015a, 2015b), one, four and nine are suitable numbers of participants for the TEM. One is suitable for developing a deep understanding of the paths that the participant took. A study with four participants (plus or minus one) is appropriate for understanding the diversity of the paths that the research participants have taken. A study with nine participants (plus or minus one) can develop a deep understanding of patterns of the paths that are to be taken among a targeted group of people.

### ***3.3 Participants of the Study***

A purposeful-sampling<sup>3</sup> approach was adopted for this study and the previously mentioned Japanese woman was selected as the sole participant. She is referred to as her alias, Yumi hereafter.

Yumi's story was analysed in the micro, meso and macro perspectives. Yumi is in her 70s. Despite her success, she does not have a college degree. Six sessions of in-depth interviews were conducted, from May 2014 to February 2017. A life map of her career was created from the data obtained and four sessions of in-depth interviews were conducted based on this map. The interview sessions ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. Conducting ten interviews with the same participant made it possible to identify the factors that encouraged her to seek and discouraged her from seeking the highest management position, how she dealt with different kinds of diversity and when and how she acquired a global mindset.

### ***3.4 Procedures***

A pilot study was conducted in May 2014 and four sessions of face-to-face unstructured interview were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017 to develop the TEM. Once this was complete, four sessions of follow-up interviews were conducted using the TEM, which were complete in September 2017.

After the first round of interviews, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed. Then, the data were segmented and a draft TEM was created. In finalising the TEM, the researcher checked with Yumi and refined what was drawn by identifying each point, the SGs and SDs.

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<sup>3</sup>In TEA, the purposeful sampling is called HSI (Historically Structured Inviting).

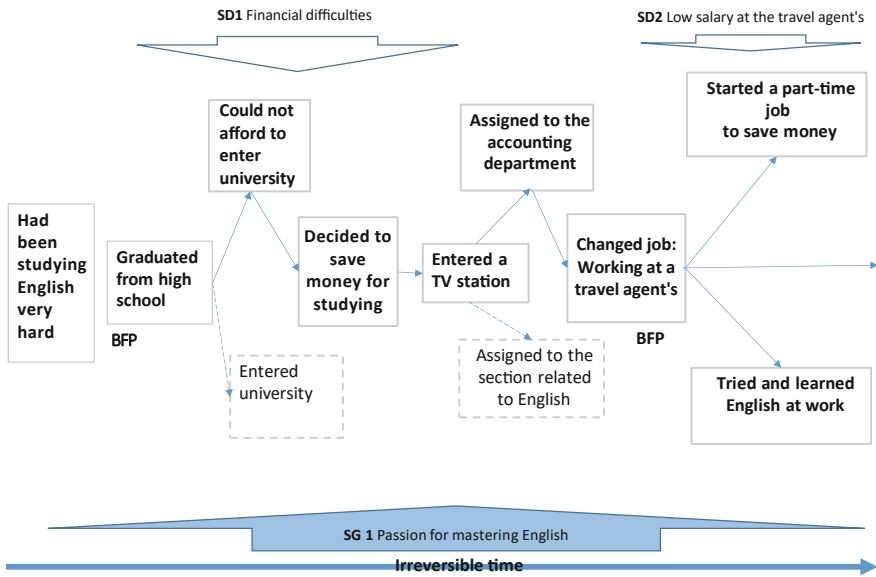


Fig. 2 Yumi’s career path: Part 1

### 3.5 Ethical Approach

The purpose of the study and the informed consent form were explained to Yumi and she signed the form at the time of the initial interview session. The informed consent form covered four issues: (a) granting permission to use the IC-recorder, (b) ensuring voluntary participation in the interview, (c) asserting the participant’s right to withdraw from the interview at any time and (d) promising that the findings of the interview would be used only for study purposes.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Summary and TEM of Yumi’s Career Path

A trans-view was created from the TEM (Yasuda et al., 2015a, 2015b). This involves a series of interviews based on the developed TEM (Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 5) and it helped both Yumi and the researcher create a deeper understanding of her career path. A summary of Yumi’s career path after having graduated from high school is given below.

After high school, Yumi went to work at a TV station due to her family’s need for an income. She set the goal for herself to continue studying English to allow her to

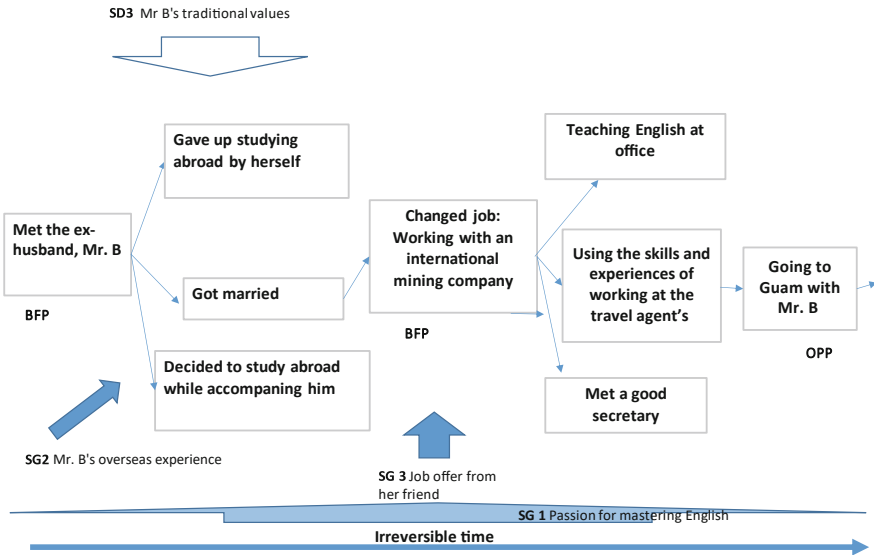


Fig. 3 Yumi's career path: Part 2

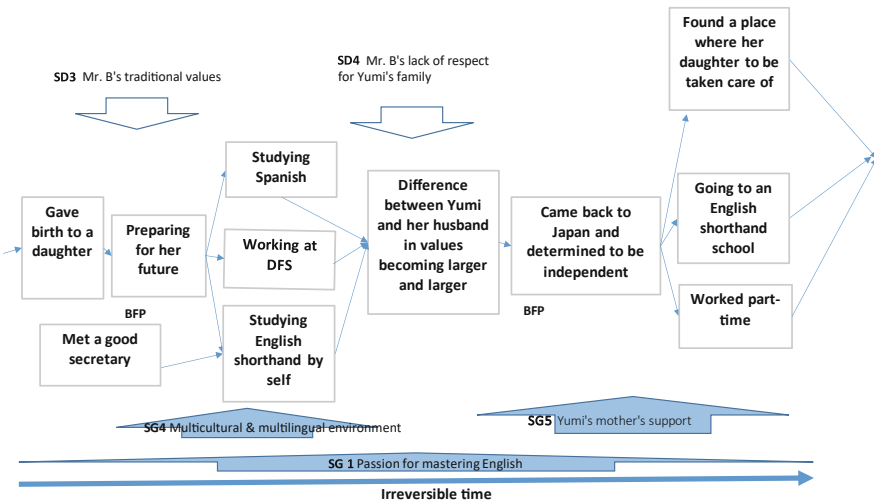


Fig. 4 Yumi's career path: Part 3

study abroad. She was assigned to the accounting department, where English skills are unnecessary.

Then, she began working at a travel agent's and worked to learn English through her job, but because her salary was lower here than before, she took part-time work in the evening. While working at this job, Yumi met Mr. B, who had studied abroad.

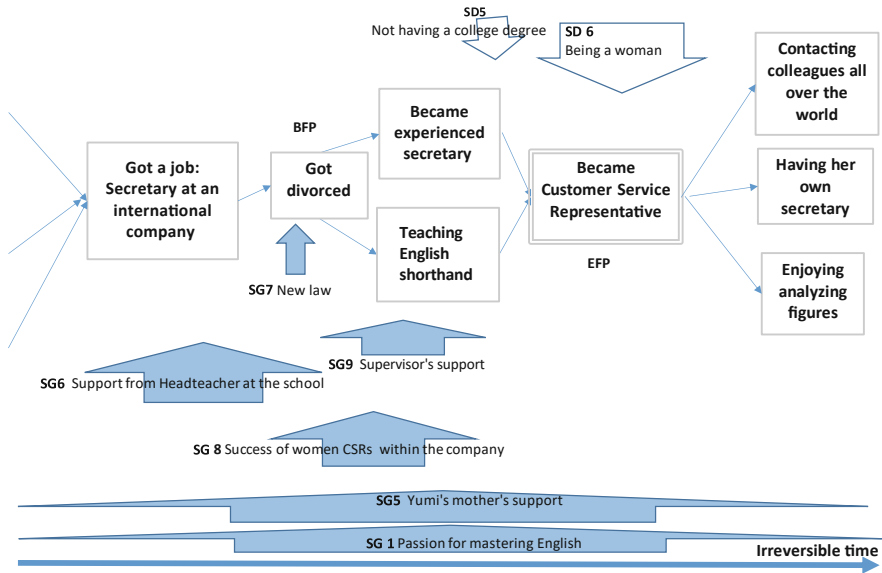


Fig. 5 Yumi's career path: Part 4

The two of them became close and ultimately married. Mr. B convinced Yumi not to go study abroad by herself but promise to go together.

After this, Yumi began to work with an international mining company. She used the skills and experiences she had gained working at the travel agent's and she met a very capable executive secretary, who told Yumi what her position entailed. Yumi's husband was transferred to Guam and she accompanied him. She gave birth to a daughter and she began to prepare for her future career. She was very comfortable in the multicultural and multilingual environment of the duty-free shop where she was working. She began studying English shorthand and learned Spanish as well. However, the differences in values between Yumi and her husband became larger and larger. Yumi wanted to pursue her own professional life, but he was opposed to women working outside the home. He also failed to show respect for Yumi's parents and family. She decided to ensure she would be financially independent.

On her return to Japan, she began studying at an English shorthand school and to work part-time. The headteacher at the school recommended that Yumi work with an international chemical company. Yumi was hired as a secretary to the regional director, in the textile fibre division of this company.

When that director resigned, he suggested that she become a regional customer service representative within the same company. With this move, she became the first woman customer service supervisor in Asia. She took the position of manager of information systems after that and finally a director of the same department, the first woman in the Asia Pacific Region with an equivalent post. When corporate HQ decided to install a new computer system across the company, Yumi found herself in a battle between HQ and the Japanese branch and her staff engineers, who were computer experts. Yumi left the company and went to the United States to study.

After this, she returned to Japan and served in many international companies in Japan as a director and executive in various industries.

## 4.2 TEM

Due to space limitations, in this study, the first end point (EFP) is highlighted and it is shown in Fig. 5. The second EFP marks the point where she truly understood the meaning of globalisation, as has been analysed in another study (Sueda et al., 2020).

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 SG (Social Guidance) and SD (Social Direction)

This study explores the kinds of social capital that were available to Yumi and how she used it for career development. Here, SG and SD should be analysed in the TEM. Table 1 indicates that the number of SGs is greater than that of SDs and that despite many difficulties, Yumi made a maximum use of the social capital including her network, the support provided by her network and the environment. The numbers are assigned in chronological order.

### 5.2 Passion for Mastering English

Yumi's passion for mastering English (SG1) clearly emerges as social capital in her career path. At first, she simply enjoyed studying English and it was her favourite

**Table 1** SG (Social Guidance) and SD (Social Direction)

	SG (Social Guidance)	SD (Social Direction)
1	Passion for mastering English	Financial difficulties
2	Mr. B's overseas experience	Low salary at the travel agent's
3	Job offer from her friend	Mr. B's traditional values
4	Multicultural & multilingual environment	Mr. B's lack of respect for her family
5	Yumi's mother's support	Not having a college degree
6	Support from the headteacher at the school (English shorthand)	Being a woman
7	New law	
8	Success of the women CSRs within the company	
9	Supervisor's support	



subject. The people around her, including her teachers and friends at school, encouraged her to pursue English.

While a high school senior, she decided not to go to university due to her family's financial difficulties (SD1). This was in the 1960s and at that time, plastic products were making inroads into Japan. This impaired Yumi's father's business, as he made wooden propellers, which were being replaced by plastic ones.

It was very hard for her not to go to university. Her high school teachers and acquaintances offered to pay her tuition. Although she was touched by their offer, she decided to find work and took a job with a television station. She set a new goal, to save money to go study abroad (particularly in the USA) to become a news anchor. After finding work at a travel agent's, she began to work part-time elsewhere to make up for the low salary (SD2), but she was still happy that she was learning English in this work.

She mastered English shorthand, which enabled her to enter another career: secretary. Knowing English shorthand helped her become independent economically, which allowed her to divorce her husband. Her passion for mastering English (SG1) was present throughout her career path and constituted other sources of social capital.

At that time, US corporations began to develop branches in many countries all over the world for business and volunteer activities (Paige & Martin, 1983). The political and economic influence of the US was still very strong in Japan, and the relatively high status of English as a language continued (Bourhis et al., 2012).

### ***5.3 Yumi's Husband's Overseas Experience***

While Yumi was working at the travel agent's, she met her future husband and got married. Mr. B's overseas experience (SG2) brought them together. He had studied in San Francisco and had a good feel for business. Yumi wanted to learn from him.

Although Mr. B was good with business, Yumi identified a huge gap in values between the two of them. His traditional values (SD3) indicated that women should stay home and should not be independent and this prevented Yumi from studying abroad by herself, making her give up on studying abroad. His traditional values (SD3) made her hesitant to try to study Spanish or English shorthand while they were living in Guam, even though the multicultural and multilingual environment (SG4) in Guam stimulated her to learn new things and made her aware of the diversity within Asia.

Mr. B's lack of respect for Yumi's family (SD4) also prompted her to seek a divorce.

A new law (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2021) held that divorced women could keep the husband's family name after divorce (SG7) and this encouraged Yumi to be more independent.

#### ***5.4 Job Offer and Connection from Her Network***

After her marriage, she felt uncomfortable staying in the same industry as her husband. One of his colleagues invited her to apply for a job at an international mining company (SG 3). Making use of her English skills and other knowledge, Yumi found herself in charge of handling travel arrangements and events for executives from abroad. She became friends with the secretary of the company's president; this person passed along information to Yumi regarding how to manage a secretary's work and she encouraged Yumi to pursue her professional goals through a secretarial position.

After she returned to Japan from Guam, Yumi attended classes in English shorthand school and mastered this skill. The head teacher at the school recommended that she take a test to enter an international chemical company (SG6). According to Tokunaga (2012), in the West, two major skills, namely, typing and shorthand, were necessary for the profession of a secretary. She took a fulltime position as a secretary during the day, and worked fulltime as a secretary. In addition, two nights per week she taught English shorthand.

It is worth noting how far the social capital within the company and the exterior social capital interacted with one another. Reflecting on that time, she said:

It was very good for me because I could share with my students in the evening what kind of mistakes I made at the office during the day. It lasted for 10 years.

#### ***5.5 Supervisor's Support and Her Own Mother's Support***

After having supported two American supervisors, she made a major career shift within the same company. Before her supervisor left the company, he arranged with top management for Yumi to be promoted to the role of a regional customer service representative (SG9). Then she became the first woman regional customer service representative in the Asian division.

In Japan, a college degree was not necessarily a prerequisite for women to get a good job in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, even in lower managerial positions, people without a college degree (SD5) and/or women (SD6) were least likely to become managers. From a meso-level analysis, Yumi was inspired to become a customer service representative by successful women CSRs within the same company (SG8) in Europe and America. She described the difference between her work as a secretary and that of a customer service representative as follows.

In the beginning, I was overwhelmed by my responsibilities, but it was fun to make my decisions. Secretaries are up to the decisions of their supervisors. I used to be under someone's umbrella, but not anymore.

When her daughter was in the fourth grade of elementary school, Yumi asked her mother, who lived nearby, to help out by providing dinner (SG5). This was very

helpful, as Yumi had to work far longer hours than before, as well as taking work home and working after her daughter was in bed.

## 6 Conclusion

This study explores the kinds of social capital that a pioneering Japanese woman used to become a manager in an international company and how she used the capital available to her. The following three points should be noted.

First, Yumi's passion for mastering English throughout her life was the most useful element of social capital that pushed her into professional life. At first, English was a school subject, but it turned into a tool for her to become independent, develop a professional life and ultimately become a manager with many contacts with colleagues worldwide. From a micro perspective, Yumi utilised her intercultural and language skills well for her career development, following a pattern suggested by Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2014). From a meso perspective, because she worked at an international organisation whose headquarters was in the US, women were encouraged to find their way into positions that used to be exclusively occupied by men. From a macro perspective, the influence of English also relates to the relatively strong political and economic status of the USA in the 1960s and 1970s.

Second, her interpersonal relationships, and the trust she had with the people around her helped her develop her career across the different stages of her life. At the macro level, her career development was inhibited by Japan's strong orientation toward education and its tendency toward male dominance. However, she was able to build trust with her employees across gender and national divides, which allowed her to climb a professional career ladder.

This is most striking in her move to take a position as manager of information systems and a director of the same department (Sueda et al., 2020) within the same international company. Moreover, an interaction between her interior and external social capital can be observed as mentioned in Sect. 5.4.

Finally, Yumi is a boundary spanner, both in herself and within her company. A boundary spanner can mediate between two groups and initiate communication with outgroup members, leading and the inter-group relationship is highlighted (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Richter et al., 2006). This study identifies that Yumi cherished her internal network or bonding social capital, which brought her to an external network or bridging form of social capital. She spanned the network boundaries as well. This echoes the work of Górska et al. (2022), who find that in developing their career to its full potential, women expand their internal networks to exterior networks.

In analysing Yumi's story, even if greater social capital had been available, it would not have been sufficient to develop her career. She herself improved her English skills, developed cultural literacy and became a boundary spanner. This ability to apply social capital is a prerequisite for making full use of available social capital. This point must be further investigated.

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She contributed a chapter “Shame as a health resource for the repatriation training of Japanese returnees (*kikokushijo*) in Japan” in *The bright side of shame* edited by Mayer and Vanderheiden (Springer) in 2019. In 2021, she published another book in Japanese titled “*Komyunikeishon sutadīizu: Aidentiti to feisu kara mita keshiki* (Communication studies: From the perspective of identities and face)”.

# Appreciating Women in Leadership



Sumeshni Govender , Sithabile Ntombela, and Sipehele S. Makhubu

**Abstract** Through sustainable development goal 5 (SDG #5) (SADC, 2016), the United Nations obligates nations to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, a human rights problem. Globally, gender inequality persists as women continue to be marginalized, prevented from advancing, and frequently discriminated against. South Africa has made some progress in this area, as it is listed in the top 20 African nations with the largest number of women in parliamentary posts; however, women continue to be underrepresented in other sectors. Unequal access to power resulting from patriarchal structures spawned by apartheid has resulted in gender inequality.

Qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyse data from the participants. Five women between the ages of 38 and 55 years were selected through purposive sampling based on the following characteristics: their background in their career, their contribution to community engagement and ability to inspire and uplift young female leaders. Interviews were, conducted by means of video recording and telephonically, to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcript and data was openly coded, themes were generated from this exercise and supported by insight from the literature. The findings indicate that women in leadership positions, particularly women from disadvantaged backgrounds believe in empowering others in order to address gender disparities. Through participants interviews it is evident that there is a need to uplift women as there are still challenges when it comes to women empowerment, particularly in male dominated environments.

**Keywords** Sustainable development · Women empowerment · Gender inequality · Appreciative inquiry

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## 1 Introduction

The United Nation, through sustainable development goal 5 (SADC, 2016) commits governments to promote gender equality and empower women, a human rights issue. Gender inequality remains a reality globally as women continue to be marginalised, are prevented from advancing and are often discriminated against. They occupy less than a fifth of senior leadership positions in public and private sectors, with approximately 68% of leadership positions controlled by men. Unequal power access created by the patriarchal systems emanating from our history of apartheid, has created this gender disparity.

Women empowerment has been at the core in achieving sustainable development worldwide (Huis et al., 2017). This has been evident in programmes that have been implemented worldwide to narrow gender gaps in education, health and political representation. For instance, the UN has proposed 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to ensure gender equality and empowerment due to the important role women play in societies (United Nations, 2016). There has been progress in the last decade as more women are educated, hold higher positions in parliament and are holding managerial positions in private sector (Deshpande et al., 2021). However, despite the progress made to empower women across the globe, their status remains unequal to that of men in most countries as access to power and resources remain highly skewed towards men (Abbas et al., 2021), particularly in South Africa where women empowerment has remained a challenging issue as a result of our country's legacy of apartheid. However, in the last decade we have seen transformation in power relations between men and women that also addresses patriarchy, sexism, and structural oppression (Williams, 2019).

South Africa has made some strides in this regard, as it is ranked amongst the top 20 African countries with the highest number of women in parliamentary positions although women remain under-represented in other sectors. There are clear goals on how to substantially develop and promote equality by providing the same opportunities to women and men, including in decision-making in all kinds of activities. A sustainable path of development can be achieved to ensure that women's and men's interests are both considered in the allocation of resources (USAID, 2012). Abbas et al. (2021) argue that women empowerment is key to sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. This means that women in high positions can make a huge impact in the development of our economy as well as social and environmental development. Therefore, ensuring that women are involved in decision making and that their voices are heard could change the dynamics around women empowerment.

Such empowerment can take place in three social dimensions, namely (1) the micro-level, referring to an individual's personal beliefs as well as actions, where personal empowerment can be observed (2) the meso-level, referring to beliefs as well as actions in relation to relevant others, where relational empowerment can be observed and (3) the macro-level, referring to outcomes in the broader, societal context where societal empowerment can be observed (Huis et al., 2017). These



dimensions can assist in improving our understanding of what women empowerment entails and shift the dynamics that affect the effective implementation of women empowerment while promoting gender equality.

Researchers have studied different components of women empowerment such as autonomy, self-determination, capacity for action and self-determination (Hansen et al., 2021). One thing that remains common in most studies is that empowerment is a multifaceted process involving individual as well as collective awareness, beliefs, and behaviour embedded in the social structure of specific cultural contexts (Huis et al., 2017). Hence, the Tran-structural positive psychology perspective seeks to provide how differences in culture and personal beliefs impact on the understanding and meaning of the concept of leadership and its application (Alves et al., 2006). This can assist women in leadership positions in terms of how they can overcome challenges imposed by different dynamics and, in the process, have a positive view about themselves, pursue their goals, professional dreams and thrive.

Developing specific personality traits and character strengths required for success in the workplace (e.g., resilience, motivation, endurance, mindfulness, optimism, life satisfaction, etc.) can assist in shaping great female leaders who also demonstrate the prerequisite knowledge, skills and abilities required for the twenty-first century. Such leaders will be able to sustain the economy and create harmony in the workplace. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development (SADC, 2008) discusses the use of projects, research, policies and legislation to empower women, eradicate discrimination and achieve gender equality/equity.

International literature suggests that although women tend to outperform men in earning university degrees in western countries, they remain underrepresented in top leadership positions (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021; Hideg & Shen, 2019). Nonetheless, there seems to be a significant increase in the influx of women in the workforce attributed to increases in women accessing education and the impact of globalization. Due to education and globalization, women across the globe are now aspiring to leadership opportunities and positions, both in private and public sectors.

Leadership, as defined by Mashele and Alagidede (2021) is a process of influencing others towards the achievement of a common goal. This suggests that both men and women can provide leadership. However, skepticism about the readiness and capability of women to lead still exist (Kiamba, 2009). As such, many a times, gender and not competence for and/or experience in leadership roles serves as determinant factor in the selection of people for leadership roles (Keohane, 2020). Despite the foregoing, Keohane (2020) observes that there has been a significant increase in the number of women occupying leadership positions than before.

Female leaders who have reached the pinnacle in their careers have the capacity to empower younger female leaders looking for role models. Empowerment strengthens one's belief in their sense of efficacy and encourages them to be the best version of themselves which enables an organisation to thrive (Moore et al., 2013). The chapter aims to understand the dynamics around women empowerment and women who may serve as the impetus to motivate and encourage young South Africa women in positions of power will be interviewed. Strong,

South African female role-models are desperately needed, and the characteristics of their success need to be chronicled. The research aims are to: determine the impact that the South African female role-models' individual character traits, close personal relationships, interaction with their community and inter-collaboration with society have on their style of leadership.

## **2 Women in Leadership Within the South African Context**

### ***2.1 The Role of Women in Leadership Positions***

A study by Horowitz et al. (2018) shows that Americans regard men and women as possessing similar key leadership traits. There is a paucity of research on the role played by women in leadership positions. However, a few studies such as Phakeng (2015); Pranathi and Lathabhavan (2021) indicate that although women are under-represented in leadership positions, the fact remains that they are capable of leading and that they are more experienced and skilled in conflict management. Phakeng (2015) further notes that women have requisite experience to tackle issues and contribute to finding innovative solutions to emerging challenges.

In South Africa despite the significant role played by women in the struggle for democracy and the strides made in women empowerment we still have a long way to go before gender equity has been achieved according to the SDG#5. The number of females in positions of power has grown substantially and women in power are committed to gender equity, so ideally this should encourage female leaders to make an impact on decision-making in gender equity, however female leaders have not found this so easy to do. Despite representation, it can take a long time for someone to learn the rules and to use them effectively. As a result, women are still under-represented in most sectors of both the private and public sector. Strong, South African female role-models are desperately needed and the characteristics for their success need to be chronicled. As such, four sectors of each participant's life: individual, close relationships, community and society will be scrutinized to determine the impact these have had on their style of leadership and the nature and extent to which these helped empower them.

### ***2.2 The Influence of Women in Leadership Positions in Society***

Phakeng (2015) notes that women's ability as homemakers and caretakers coupled with their ability to multitask, places them as assets in organizations. Similarly, Pranathi and Lathabhavan (2021) allude that women leadership fosters employee retention, workplace harmony, impressive innovation, and excellent

decision-making processes. This is corroborated by Elias (2018) who argues by virtue of being empathic listeners, women build relationships, encourage teamwork and collaboration. Women because of their multitude of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes can provide a unique approach to leadership positions, especially in public positions, providing a more transformative, nurturing approach to governance.

### ***2.3 Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership Positions***

It is disappointing that despite the observed progress in the number of women advancing to leadership positions, the reality is that it is more difficult for them to access these positions (Abdallah & Jibai, 2020), which makes their representation in the private and public sector low (Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). Alqahtani (2020, p. 294) notes that there are several barriers preventing women from advancing to leadership positions and the most common being the “insistent gender stereotyping which positions men as the only ones possessing leadership traits”. She argues that women’s career advancement continues to be disadvantaged by customs, principles, and structures of their organizations, and that often women lack support within their organizations when potential career conflicts arise (Alqahtani, 2020). This sentiment is shared by Abdallah and Jibai (2020) who observe that gender stereotypes make it easier for men to be promoted to higher positions than for women.

On the other hand, several studies by have advanced that the patriarchal system in Sub-Sahara Africa remains one of the major constraints preventing women from achieving leadership positions and/or limiting their engagement in decision making processes (April & Sikatali, 2019; Coetzee & Moosa, 2020). It is lamentable that culture, norms and traditional beliefs which limit women’s potential for achieving leadership roles are still prevalent in our society. As indicated by April and Sikatali (2019), despite the educational attainment of women, the patriarchal system in African society has ostracized women and made their debut into the job market difficult due to the notion that they are ‘homemakers’. Other challenges as highlighted by Abdallah and Jibai (2020) include work culture that is male centred, few female role models in leadership, gender stereotypes, and apathy in implementing gender equity policies in companies. As a result, many women lack the potential platform to launch or aspire for leadership roles in several organizations.

In South African institutions of higher learning, Shepered (2017) posits that the glass ceiling, marginalisation, under-representation remains a major obstacle to career aspiration of women and their potential to attaining and maintaining leadership positions.

## 2.4 *Support Provided to Advance Women in Leadership Roles*

Hideg and Shen (2019) regard social support in the form of workplace and family career support as critical in advancing women into leadership. They view workplace career support as instrumental, involving mentoring and information sharing and family career support as emotional, involving friendships and encouragement (Hideg & Shen, 2019). Some progress is being observed in the proportion of Women in Leadership (WIL) positions in South Africa. This improvement is due to concerted effort by the South African Government particularly in the post-apartheid regime.

All female leaders interviewed provided detailed feedback of the nature and extent of support received in the past that allowed them to progress to the levels of leadership acquired and the support they now provide to young and emerging female leaders.

## 3 Case Studies

### 3.1 *Case Study 1: Devi Sankaree Govender, Television Investigative Journalist*



Devi Sankaree began her career in journalism at the age of 21 years whilst studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban. From humble beginnings in Umzinto on the South Coast of KZN Devi quickly worked her way to becoming a national celebrity. She started with the radio talk show *Lotus FM*. Her show became popular due to the straightforward, penetrating manner in which she handled controversial topics and interviewed world renowned personalities. This multi-tasker completed an Honours degree in Drama and Performance Studies and a Higher Diploma in Education, then taught for a year at a high school. Devi joined television journalism in 1996 as a freelance continuity presenter for SABC 1's *Eastern Mosaic*, whilst simultaneously managing her radio and television shows and a weekly column for

the Sunday Times Newspaper. In January 2002, Devi joined Carte Blanche. Completion of a Post Graduate Diploma in Business Management and an MBA have assisted Devi to cross over into the media training environment where she coaches senior managers on media strategy, crisis communication and interview techniques. After 26 years in various forms of media journalism Devi moved to public broadcasting, where she now produces and anchors her own investigative journalism show aptly named “DEVI”. Devi is also a sought-after MC and guest speaker and manages her own publicity company. This dynamic woman who has been in the public eye for decades has been awarded the prestigious British Council scholarship for creative writing, but she believes her greatest achievement is her family, husband and two teenagers. This powerhouse is a truly empowered woman of the twenty-second century.

### ***3.2 Case Study 2: Bridgitte Ellen Hartley, South African Olympic Medalist***



Bridgitte is a South African sprint canoeist who has competed since the late 2000s and raced for South Africa for the first time in 2005 at the African Championships in Senegal. She won bronze medals in the K-1 1000 m event at the 2009 ICF Canoe

Sprint World Championships (Dartmouth), at the 2012 Olympic Games (London) in the K-1 (Kayak Singles—Women) 500 m event and in August 2014 at the ICF Canoe Sprint World Championships (Moscow). Hartley became the first person from South Africa and the African continent to get a medal at the ICF Canoe Sprint World Championships. Since her retirement from Olympic competition Bridgitte has had incredible success as a marathon paddler (flatwater and domestic river). She has raced and won or was placed at the World Marathon Championships, the Fish Marathon K1, the national women's K1 river marathon, and the Dusi marathon. On the administrative front in 2021 Bridgitte was elected deputy chairperson of the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Athletes Committee (SASCOC) and in February 2022 chair of the International Canoe Federation's (ICF) Athlete Committee, automatically becoming a member of the organisation's Executive Committee. Apart from her National and International committee responsibilities Bridgitte mentors young up-and-coming female sprint canoeists, is coach to elite professionals in the field, some of whom are preparing for the Olympic Games, coaches at a local school and still manages to find time to run a small business in the hospitality industry. A true symbol of women empowerment Bridgitte strives hard to leave a legacy in her field.

### **3.3 Case Study 3: Nomalanga Anastacia Ngwenya, Manager Monitoring and Evaluation uThukela District Municipality**



Nomalanga Ngwenya is a Manager in Monitoring and Evaluation at uThukela District Municipality. She is also the branch secretary for ANC women league in Kwazulu Natal Province. Nomalanga began her career as an educator. She later moved on to UThukela District Department of Education where she worked as Deputy Education Specialist in Early Childhood Development. She was involved in developing school curriculum and its implementation. She joined uThukela District Municipality in 2017. She supports local women projects that are aimed at uplifting women. She is founder of Women with Difference which is a non-profit organisation an organisation that supports vulnerable women who seek to be self-reliant and assertive by giving them skills that will encourage independence. As a woman she understands the socio-economic disparities and its influence on gender-based violence which is why she founded her organisation.



### **3.4 Case Study 4: Duduzile Patience Mazibuko, CEO uThukela Development Agency**



Duduzile Patience Mazibuko holds an honours degree in public administration. She is Chief Executive Officer at UThukela Economic Agency, a company she founded in 2018. The agency was founded as an initiative by the Department of Economic Development in Kwazulu-Natal to promote socio-economic development with local communities. It is uThukela District Municipality's responsible for economic growth and development by promoting and supporting local entrepreneurs, particularly projects spearheaded by women. Duduzile started her 14-years career as an educator and was promoted to principal. She was a member of South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and was elected as branch secretary between 2001 and 2005 and that is where her passion for politics began. In 2005 she ran for the Mayoral Position at Alfred Duma District Municipality and was elected. She held this position for 16 years. In 2008 the Department of Economic Development launched a project for women in leadership positions to engage with communities to promote the economic growth of UThukela District Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, the first Municipality to promote the initiative. In late 2018 she founded UThukela Economic Development Agency with support from the UThukela District Municipality and implemented a bursary scheme for high school graduates to further their tertiary studies. She also supports local female-farming projects, by assisting them distribute their products nationally and international, and the tourism industry to develop the economic growth of the province. She has helped several local farming projects, runs workshops on skills development and business management



to assist small and medium business enterprises, and her agency employs new graduates.

**3.5 Case Study 5: Nothile Ernel Tshabalala, Deputy Mayor oKhahlamba District Municipality**



Nothile Tshabalala is a Deputy Mayor at oKhahlamba Local Municipality. She has a bachelor’s degree in public management. She is also Deputy Regional Chair for ANC Women’s League at Joseph Gumede Region. Her political career began in 2004 and she was elected as the first female Secretary, branch chair and treasurer at Peni Ndlovu Branch. In 2016 she was the coordinator of local elections at oKhahlamba Sub-region. As part of her political career, she is also involved in community development and outreach programmes aimed at creating awareness around Gender-Based Violence and HIV/AIDS. She also participates in voluntary work at Bergville Child Survival Project which is a project supported by the KZN Department of Health. Prior to joining politics Nothile was employed by the KZN Department of Health as an HIV and AIDS Counsellor and that is where she

developed the passion to work with vulnerable groups in creating awareness against the spread of HIV/AIDS. As part of a community outreach project, Nothile was elected as a board member of Amangwane Traditional Council, which is a council that deals with land reform.

## 4 Methodology

Qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyse data from the participants. Five women between the ages of 38 and 55 years were selected through purposive sampling. The participants were selected based on the following characteristics: their background in their field of career, their contribution on community engagement and their ability to inspire and uplift young female leaders. Participants from a diverse range of careers were included in the study.

An appreciative inquiry leadership lens was used to engage female leaders to discuss themselves and their rise to leadership positions. According to Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Radar (2010, p. 5) appreciative leadership is described as “. . . a set of practices that turn human potential into positive performance. It is a positive, strength-based approach to human performance, collaboration, and change management. It represents a shift from individualistic and deficit-based leadership processes to relational and dialogical leadership processes. It puts forth a fully affirmative way of working and leading based on the ideas that positive processes get positive results. In essence, appreciative leadership draws on positive power to discover, learn from, and build on the best in people and situations and to make a positive difference in the world.”

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2013) discuss in detail five strategies of appreciative leadership which contribute to important aspects of continued developmental practice. Each strategy is meant to encourage positivity and release individual ability which ultimately works towards the benefit of the entire organisation: (1) The wisdom of inquiry, (2) The art of illumination, (3) The genius of inclusion, (4) The courage of inspiration and (5) The path of integrity. The individual may display signs of appreciation but the organisation benefits from the positive output.

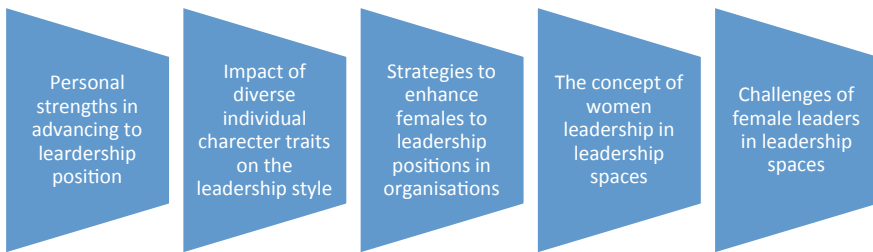
Interviews were conducted with participants to collect data via means of video recording and telephonically as per the requests or needs of the participants. The questions focused on the personal strengths of the participants in advancing to leadership positions, the impact of diverse individual character traits on their leadership style, strategies to enhance females to leadership positions in organisations and challenges faced by women leaders in leadership spaces.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a method for studying qualitative data that involves searching across data collection to locate, interpret, and report repeating patterns (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The advantage of using thematic analysis is that the approach is not limited to a single paradigm orientation; rather, it can be integrated into post-positivist, constructivist, and critical realist research methods (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Utilizing thematic analysis in

distinct research paradigms necessitates adapting this technique to distinct aims and outcomes (Joffe, 2011).

Interpretivism paradigm was adopted to gain insight into the participant perception and meaning of women empowerment within different sociocultural contexts. In interpretivism thematic analysis highlights the social, cultural, and structural contexts that influence individual experiences, allowing for the development of knowledge that is constructed through interactions between the researcher and the research participants, thereby revealing socially constructed meanings (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The transcripts were read line-by-line, the significant sentences and phrases were underlined, and the key concepts were derived and labelled. Assimilation of overlapping themes and main data categorization were coded. Themes were generated from this exercise, supported by insight from the literature. The following themes emerged from data analysis:

### 4.1 Themes Generated from the Interviews



#### 4.1.1 Theme 1: Existence of Personal Strengths Advancing Leadership Position

Certain leadership abilities are essential for leaders to be productive and relevant to their organisations and communities. While is possible to learn and strengthen the skills necessary to effectively lead for some people these skills are innate. The narratives from the participants show that women in leadership position share common strengths that has helped them advance in their positions. Determination, perseverance, strong willed working hard and career driven are some of the common strengths that these women possess. For instance, Devi, Bridgette and Duduzile narrated that they would not be where they are if they were not strong-willed and determined. Extracts from their interviews explain this:

Devi mentioned:

so for me, it was that never give up approach . . . Because the only way that you can get to leadership in this space is if you are exactly like that, and I’m exceptionally thick skinned.

I suppose that I don’t ever give up, and I suppose that’s a strength that I use to guide and help other people. . . Because if you give up on something too quickly, then you don’t achieve in any way.

Dudzile also pointed out that her strengths involve perseverance, hardwork and determination:

When I started uThukela Development Agency, the district municipality was not ready financially. I had to start with no budget, with no staff to assist me. I sometimes had to use my car as an office. With persistence and determination, I pulled through. The thing is I never give up and I believe in pioneering things.

These findings are similar to the findings obtained by Railey (2020) who conducted a phenomenological study of black women with depression holding senior leadership positions. Perseverance and determination acted as catalyst for their career accessions. This shows how women are determined to thrive in male dominated positions. Failure does not seem to be an option and this could be driven by society's perception that they are not equipped to assume such positions.

#### 4.1.2 Theme 2: Impact of Diverse Character Traits on Leadership Styles

The participants' interpersonal strengths included the subthemes of relationship building and management, persuasion, community involvement, and empowering others. Building relationships was described as demonstrating warmth, friendliness, and appreciation for others, being able to communicate with people at their level by utilizing empathy, establishing strategic relationships with key stakeholders, and maintaining strategic alliances:

*Dudzile* explained that:

I am an extrovert and I like forming new relationships. That has made it easy for me to engage with people from different walks of life. I am also empathic and relate with most of the challenges faced by women thriving in their careers. My career background and challenges have taught me to practice Ubuntu.

*Devi* said that:

if people are happy in what they do, and if they feel that they're growing, then they'll stay and continue to contribute and make an impact . . . But if you're not empathetic, and they feel that you don't care about who they are, then you'll find that people want to move around a lot. So those are the two things that I realised about myself. Extremely direct, but also extremely empathetic to a fault sometimes but I believe in the good of everybody. I believe if you make a mistake, you learn from it, and you become better as a result of that.

*Nomalanga* also espoused this philosophy by mentioning:

I have used people skills, which helped me to recognize and develop other people skill. I have an ability to listen and relate to other people on a personal and professional level. With that assisted me to solve problems and work towards common goal with mutual understanding. As a disciplined person I am true to myself. I have self-controlled person who behave in a particular way without needing someone to enforce discipline or work ethics to me. I don't allow my feelings to rule over, so I remain focused. Having to communicate difficult decisions needs a leadership skill.

Empowerment is the quality of equipping others with knowledge, skills, and resources, and recognizing them as capable of self-improvement. The desire to raise the status of others was rooted in Nomalanga's personal struggles.

*Nothile said:*

By having multiple mentors who keep on encouraging me, that i must hold on, no matter how hard it might be, but I have all potential to bring better change in demand for all genders.

Bridgette felt that it was important to:

try and help someone believe in themselves. . . . that I've learned from my coach. And then I've also met a lot of people who I could say were mentors along the way, who believed in me and helped me to get into the leadership positions.

Community collaboration is viewing people and events between them as interconnected, recognizing that the purpose of human beings is to benefit collectively, collaborating with others as part of a greater whole, fostering a sense of togetherness, and having individual actions have an impact on the whole, improving conditions for others, and enabling the development of the greater community.

Dudzile mentioned that:

They have impacted it greatly, I believe that when you want change go to people in their communities and see the challenges that they face every day in order to facilitate change. I am currently working with local farmers, helping them to distribute their produce nationally and internationally to promote economic growth.

The findings suggest that women are good with communication and listening skills. This is similar to the findings obtained by Abdallah and Jibai (2020) in their study on women in leadership gender personality traits and skills. There was strong evidence of gender differences in leadership style which lies in the tendency of women to adopt a more democratic and participatory style which adopts transformational leadership and that of men to adopt a more autocratic and more directive style. Consistent with the findings obtained by Mashele and Alagidede (2021) in their study on appropriate leadership styles in times of crisis: a study of women in senior leadership positions in corporate South Africa. Participants expressed overwhelming support for appreciative leadership style due to its characteristics. Women tend to apply a more cooperative, participative and democratic style of leadership while men typically exhibit a "command and control" style.

#### **4.1.3 Theme 3: Strategies to Enhance Females to Leadership Positions in Organisations**

The participants mentioned that having mentors and people to look up to can really advance one's career. However, in addition to that, education, determination and drive is what will advance an individual and prepare them for a higher position.

Nothile mentioned that she had to . . .

Have advanced leadership skills while I was in High school, expanded even more while worked in Health Department. I have then find myself willing partake in community works

and later on I joined the world of politics. Therefore, my leadership advance up to this far is by having multiple mentors who keep on encouraging me, that i must hold on.

Devi

Yeah. I think there's been so much of a drive over the last 20–25 years for female empowerment and take a girl child to work and, and all of that, but they, on the one hand, it may have just created the impression that you are entitled to it's just automatically because you are a woman . . . The second thing is, if you want to really empower yourself, then you must put your back to it. Go and do the work. Go do the internship. Go and study for it. Go and seek out people you think are going to take you somewhere if you really want to empower yourself, you've got to do the work? There is no shortcut to this, either.

Consistent with previous findings, mentoring often comes with benefits such as knowledge transfer and skill enhancement (Konstantin Korotov, 2016; Passmore & Oades, 2015), increased self-awareness and enhanced self-esteem, self-efficacy, and/or leader role efficacy (Ely et al., 2010; Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014; Passmore & Oades, 2015), enhanced leadership motivation and improved work attitudes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment; (Ely et al., 2010; Passmore et al., 2022) enhancement of well-being such as stress reduction (Passmore & Oades, 2015), cognitive flexibility to perform successfully in complicated and changing situations (Ely et al., 2010) and confidence in subordinates (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014).

However, it was noted that while mentoring focuses more on an individual's broad, long-term growth and development, it is often with challenges.

Devi mentioned:

I see a lot of entitlement walking around. I've seen a lot of young female possible leaders who have it in their heads that this is due to me. This is my right. You know, and, and I've seen so much of it, that I'm even raising this as a point.

Therefore, the improvement in relationship between mentor and mentee is crucial to avoid such misconceptions.

#### **4.1.4 Theme 4: Challenges Experienced by Female Leaders in Leadership Spaces**

The way women perform as leaders is intrinsically linked to the understanding that they are women, with all the stereotypical baggage that comes with gender roles (Hentschel et al., 2019). The multiple roles that women play, and the gender role stereotypes imposed on them seem to affect their leadership.

Devi mentioned:

I may be criticised for saying this, but I do believe that women lead differently. And I think it's because we are responsible for a whole load in our lives, you know. As we get older we are responsible for our parents, children, husbands or, you know, we are the captain of this entire ship.

Although gender equality has made great strides in the economic, educational, and employment sectors. Numerous rules and regulations have been enacted to promote equal opportunities for men and women throughout and to eliminate all forms of

prejudice. However, there are still some concerns with how societies view women in leadership positions (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Men and women often internalize gender stereotypes; consequently, the focus then becomes on both how men and women are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves in relation to stereotyped characteristics (Hentschel et al., 2019).

Dudzile explained:

It is still difficult as a woman to come up with new ideas that are supported without being scrutinized based on how the society perceive gender role stereotypes. Serving as a Mayor I initiated a bursary scheme that was aimed at supporting learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The bursary had four qualification criterions one of which was a bursary given to maidens. Because it was a woman who initiated it, it came with lots of controversy. I was persecuted on the grounds that I was discriminating against male applicants. However, the practice of Umhlanga and virginity testing on maidens had long been a practice and nobody ever complained that we were invading young girl's privacy.

This suggests that how women leaders are perceived is greatly influenced by the role given by society to women and men. Society still imposes on men and women how they should lead.

#### **4.1.5 Theme 5: The Concept of Women Leadership in Leadership Spaces**

Women in leadership positions still struggle with gender stereotypes that some positions are not suitable for them, and they end up staying in one position for too long. Devi for instance mentioned that her move from one company to join another:

was a total no brainer, . . . And I would never have had the opportunity if I stayed where I was, maybe it would have happened, I don't know, but I was there for a long time. I was there for 18 years with the same qualifications, so for me it was time to just go somewhere else and manage your production together with like being responsible and being you know, answering to exco and things like that.

This is supported by previous findings in research where women still have to overcome gender imbalances in leadership, and that having women in positions of power or leadership should not induce complacency about the elimination of gender bias (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

The case studies reveal that strong personalities played a significant role in their lives and this was supported by relevant research (Galambos & Hughes, 2000) which, for example, recommends that leadership skills may be fostered within the family unit, organised female sports groups, community service organisations and special interest groups. Mentoring is another factor that creates a sense of empowerment, safety, and helps create a healthy self-concept. Mentors vary and include teachers, neighbours, coaches, and grandparents who inspire, support and motivate young women to actualise their potential by exploring new opportunities available.

Using sport to illustration the case in point, Bridgitte Hartley, a South African female leader in the sports arena has recently been appointed to national and international sporting committees and mentioned the honour and privilege attached

to the selection. Hanlon and Taylor (2022) also highlight that although there are increasing numbers of females in leadership positions in sport organisations, females are still under-represented and, gender inequality is a reality. Citing Elling et al. (2018), Hanlon and Taylor (2022) cite areas of progress that have been made for example, in board representation, as with Bridgitte Hartley. However, male privilege, power and dominance generally, continue in the field of sport leadership.

## 5 Conclusion

Women's empowerment has been essential to achieving global sustainable development. This has been demonstrated by global programs aimed at closing gender gaps in education, health, and political representation. Due to the significant role women play in communities, the UN has established 17 sustainable development goals to ensure gender equality and empowerment (United Nations, 2016; Huis et al., 2017). There has been development over the past decade as more women are educated, have greater positions in public, sports and private sector (Deshpande et al., 2021). However, despite the progress made to empower women across the globe women still face challenges imposed by gender role stereotypes and this has affected their leadership style and influence on young aspiring female leaders.

There are clear objectives of how to greatly advance and promote equality by giving women and men with the same opportunities, including in decision-making for all types of activities. To ensure that women's and men's interests are viewed equally to make it is possible to reach a path of sustainable development (USAID, 2012). Abbas et al. (2021) claim that empowering women is essential for sustaining economic growth, social development, and the environment. This means that women in leadership positions can have a significant impact on economic, social, and environmental growth. Consequently, ensuring that women participate in decision-making and that their perspectives are heard could alter the dynamics of women's empowerment.

Such empowerment can occur in three social dimensions: (1) the micro-level, referring to an individual's personal views and strengths, where personal empowerment can be witnessed; (2) the meso-level, referring to a group's collective beliefs and activities; and (3) the macro-level, relating to (2) the meso-level, which refers to beliefs and acts in relation to relevant persons, where relational empowerment may be observed, and (3) the macro-level, which refers to consequences in the larger, societal context, where societal empowerment can be observed (Huis et al., 2017). These characteristics can aid in enhancing our understanding of what women's empowerment comprises and altering the factors that hinder the successful implementation of women's empowerment while advancing gender equality. The use of appreciative inquiry as a research technique regarding women empowerment was motivated by social constructionist perspectives. Appreciative inquiry leadership lens is used to engage female leaders to discuss themselves and their rise to leadership positions and in turn use their knowledge and understanding based on



their experiences to bring about transformation that will pave a path for young and aspiring female leaders.

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# Activism, Advocacy, and Rebellion: Arab Women Through the Work of Nawal El Saadawi



Shereen H. Shaw 

**Abstract** The Egyptian society is regarded as being masculinist and patriarchal. Research of this region, like many Arab societies, mainly focuses on women's sexuality, suppression, and—to a great degree—a lack of freedom. Arab women have been gazed upon as objects or chattel among Arab societies and Arab men, leading to heavy critique being delivered by the Western World against the lack of emancipation and sexual freedom Arab women are seemingly able to have agency over. Arab women are to be no longer a subject of the male gaze, but rather to be free agents in creating their own narratives. This chapter presents a critical review of Nawal El Saadawi's work and key ideas which have emerged in her writings about women's liberation in modern Arab societies. Having spent her life resisting and rebelling, and lobbying for the rights of others, El Saadawi was a psychiatrist, who emerged from poverty to international acclaim, ran for President, but was largely subject to social ostracization and even imprisonment throughout her life. El Saadawi grew frustrated with the lack of future thinking by successive governments. In doing so, she has urged Arab Women to seek opportunities to be heard, to pursue education, to be acknowledged as an active agent contributing to the fabrics of the Egyptian society and to be instrumental in the state's new beginnings. Whilst her work was widely accepted across the Western World, it remained controversial in the Arab World, we argue El Saadawi and her work has played a huge role in empowering Arab women. Moreover, the effects of her work have been more broadly applied across transcultural and transdisciplinary contexts to change the face of modern feminism.

**Keywords** Women empowerment · Arab women · Arab culture · Women offenders · Sexual liberation · Education · Social justice · Egyptian feminism

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical review of Nawal El Saadawi's work and key ideas which have emerged in her writings about women's liberation in modern Arab societies. Having spent her life lobbying for the rights of others, El Saadawi was a psychiatrist who emerged from poverty to international acclaim, ran for President, but was largely subject to social ostracization and even imprisonment throughout her life. El Saadawi grew frustrated with the lack of future thinking by successive governments, and in doing so urged Arab Women through her writings and activism to seek opportunities to be heard, to be acknowledged as an active agent contributing to the fabrics of the Egyptian society and to be instrumental in the state's new beginnings. Whilst her work was widely accepted across the Western World and her name became known, she remained controversial in the Arab World.

The aim of this chapter is to argue El Saadawi's case as a pioneer and a prolific female writer whose work has played a huge role in empowering Arab women in Egypt and as part of a global women movement through her work such as *Women and Sex* (1972), *God dies by the Nile* (1974), *Woman at point Zero* (1983), *The Hidden face of Eve* (1977), *Memoirs from a Women's Prison* (1994), *A Daughter of Isis* (1999) and many more. The chapter presents qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources sought for the purpose of this research. The result of the study illustrates El Saadawi's feminist approach to key social and cultural issues captured in her writing and its impact on women empowerment nationally and internationally.

The introduction presents a brief synopsis of El Saadawi's early life and the factors that have shaped her character as a child and as an Egyptian woman who gradually became engaged in various forms of activism. Growing up in a rural part of Egypt where poverty and illiteracy are the norm due to the lack of resources and cultural stigma regarding educating women meant that El Saadawi had to work twice as hard at a very early age to overcome many barriers. The second section of this chapter shows how El Saadawi began to write extensively to empower many women of her time who had a similar upbringing or who grew up in worse conditions, little did she know that she would be met with such a hostility from the clerics, the press, from people in power, and from colleagues so much so that she felt shunned by society as a whole and had to leave Egypt in fear for her life. The third and final section of this chapter showcases examples from El Sadaawi's narratives used to depict the lives of many women who fought for their rights and their freedom. Thus, the key research questions that I aim to answer, inspired by El Saadawi's words herself, are twofold: (1) To what extent can writing become a weapon with which to fight the system which draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family? And (2) How did El Saadawi's writing empower the Arab female subject to be authentic, liberated and most importantly, self-determining?

Nawal El Saadawi is one of the loudest feminists, and perhaps too one of the loudest *females*, voices in the Arab World. Mourned at the age of 90 by many

Egyptians and Arabs on March 2021, the Egyptian feminist's name appeared in many debates on social media. Some users described her as "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world" whilst others were angered by the statement as they regarded it as "euro-centric" and a "total lack of respect" to such a significant author and activist (Albawaba, 2021). El Saadawi was born in 1931, into what she recalls as a "more than usually complicated" family. She suffered the religious practice of female circumcision at just age six where her clitoris was removed. El Saadawi was born into a world she already was destined not to like. In her first autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis*, she expressed how she was outraged when she began to realise daughters were *not* considered equal to sons. When her grandmother told her, "a boy is worth 15 girls at least . . . Girls are a blight," she stamped her foot in fury (El Saadawi, 1999). Her father was a well-educated and high-ranking official in the Egyptian Government's Ministry of Education—but one who clashed with the British Occupiers in Egypt, and as a result his career suffered for a decade. One thing which he instilled in all his children was that they were to be educated proving there was a glimmer of progressiveness amidst the traditionalist roots of El Saadawi's family.

Shaking off the desire to become a dancer, the then 'rural girl' El Saadawi, left Kafr Tahla (her village in Northern Egypt), to study Psychiatry at the University of Cairo. Upon graduating, aged 24, she went on to work in rural areas supporting under-privileged groups from women and children. Taking up a position at Egypt's Ministry of Health, El Saadawi quickly became Director General of Public Health, but soon after she lost both of her parents. As the second eldest of the nine siblings, she found herself in a position where she had to take responsibility for her whole family before she had even turned 30 (Melhem, 1999, p. 2). During this period, El Saadawi had also married and divorced twice. The first time was due to her husband's addictions and violence; the second because of her husband's disapproval and resentment of her 'feminist outspokenness', but after moving to New York to complete a Master's in Public Health, she married Sherif Hatata, a Marxist Doctor who encouraged El Saadawi's feminist endeavours. Her third marriage lasted 46 years before El Saadawi filed for a divorce following an alleged affair that Hatata had; she told *Daily News Egypt*:

I've already divorced two husbands before and when the third violated my rights, I divorced him as well and refused to live with him. There are women who accept that, but what would force me to stay with someone who violates my rights (Samaan, 2010, p. 1).

Settling back in Cairo, El Saadawi focussed on her work as a psychiatrist using her position within the Egyptian Ministry of Health to assist her in the development of the 'Arab Association of Human Rights' which she co-founded in 1968. In the same year, she became the Editor of the 'Medical Association Magazine'. El Saadawi spent her time and energy outside of the day-job writing on issues which women faced and suffered from in Arab cultures such as El Saadawi's diehard fight against the taboo subject of female genital mutilation in Egypt (FGM). Her writings, especially her most controversial book, "Women and Sex", appearing in 1972, caused widespread public outrage amongst Egypt's religious authorities, eventually

culminating in her dismissal from her position within the Ministry of Health and the shutting down of her magazine *Al-Nūn*. Regardless, El Saadawi concentrated on psychiatry, working in Ain Shams University, Cairo, researching neuroses in women and taking a particular interest in the psychiatric health and psychological wellbeing of women prisoners. It was during this time, her writing on the state and oppression of women and women offenders (evidenced in the publication: “The Hidden face of Eve” in 1977), coupled with her profound knowledge of psychiatry enabled her to establish herself as an advisor to the United Nations Women’s Program in Africa and the Middle East.

It was, however, her ongoing controversial publications since that of “Women and Sex” in 1972, coupled with her role in publishing the feminist magazine: ‘Confrontation’ which landed El Saadawi in prison under the orders of then incumbent President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, in September of 1981. She, with many of her fellow and female academic colleagues were told they were to be sent to their deaths, but El Saadawi believed Sadat’s reign was soon to be over and they would be released. One month after Sadat’s assassination later in the same year in which she was imprisoned, El Saadawi’s premonition came true. She was released under the order of the new President, Mubarak (Amireh, 2000, p. 216). El Saadawi published her “Memoirs from a Women’s Prison” in 1994 which she had written in prison ‘on a roll of toilet paper’ with an ‘eyebrow pencil’ which an incarcerated prostitute had smuggled to her. Describing the experience, she says:

It was a good experience. . . . When I went to prison, I was already 50 years old- quite mature- so I was strong enough to survive. It’s a battle, but you go on. You are conquered and they you conquer. You are *not* broken. In prison, you face *real* life. Prison is like death, like exile, you face something horrible that you were so afraid of all your life- I was so afraid of prison and of death and of exile and of loneliness, of everything but when I was in it, I lost my fear. You have to face these things to lose your fear (Raphael, 2018, p. 3).

More determined than ever to write about the religious and social oppression of women and cruelty to children, El Saadawi resumed writing instead of buckling under societal and the Government’s pressure to keep her voice down. On the contrary, her imprisonment inspired her writing to further evolve to speak of women from diverse cultural contexts, to address minority women, especially offenders and to rebel on a system that restricts the poor and prevents success and empowerment. She, thus, founded many organisations aiming to protect and promote women, including: the ‘Arab Women’s Solidarity Association’ in 1981, ‘*Al-Nūn Magazine*’ in 1982 and the ‘African Association for Women on Research Development’ in 1983 (Amireh, 2000, p. 220). El Saadawi’s feminist—and now famous—voice made it difficult for El Saadawi however to obtain a job in Egypt. Could it be that her writing and opinions had frightened those in power and caused controversy? In fact, her ideas of equality for women and her outspoken political critiques were such a huge threat to the new regime that, her life was in danger from the religious fundamentalists who named her on a ‘kill list’ and from the bodyguards who, at the time, President Mubarak had supposedly sent to protect her.



El Saadawi evokes deep affection in her audience, many of whom are young women. For them, as indeed for women of other generations, she is something of a lodestar for dissidence and activism, a celebrated writer and thinker, a woman who has written dozens of books and has even been imprisoned for her writings (Al-Yafai, 2012, p. 2).

Could it be that the new Egyptian Government has scorned El Saadawi's work just as much as the last Government? She found herself, her husband, and their children, living in exile between Europe and The United States of America. There, El Saadawi did not give up. "I feel I am betrayed by my country. I should be awarded the highest prize in Egypt for what I have done regarding injustices against women and children, and for my creative work" (Khaleeli, 2010, p. 3). El Saadawi lectured and wrote across some of the World's most famous institutions, including The Sorbonne, Harvard, and Yale, amongst others before returning to Cairo in 1999. She said:

Home to me is the world because my books have been translated into more than 30 languages. People feel they know me and the minute they talk about my life or books I feel at home. Home is where you are appreciated, safe and protected, creative, and where you are loved – not where you are put in prison (Johnson & El-Saadawi, 1992).

On her return, and almost entering her seventh decade, she did not slow-down. Evidence of her activism, strong beliefs and rebellion on the system, she persevered running for President in 2004; winning a legal battle against the foremost centre for Islamic thought: al-Azhar University (within which she had been accused of heresy); divorcing her "once feminist, but now liar of a husband" in 2010; and participating in 'The Arab Spring' of 2011, finally seeing the man who wanted to silence her 30 years beforehand, topple after the revolution of Tahrir Square. Not only was she empowered as an activist relentlessly advocating women rights, but also, she was believed in by many young women who marched with her side by side calling for a better future. It was perhaps at that point that El Saadawi realised that her writing has become a weapon with which she, and many other Egyptian women, can fight the system and the power exercised by men. El Saadawi's notoriety has, on occasion, seen her labelled as: "the Godmother of Egyptian Feminism"; and by others as "the best loved, most hated, and best-known feminist in the Arab World" (Shaw & Silverio, 2019). Thus, it seems fitting to round-off this introduction by allowing Nawal El Saadawi to describe herself in her own words, she is, above all else, she says; "very extraordinary".

## 2 Egyptian Feminism

Egyptian feminism is dynamic and is evolving. El Saadawi wrote:

What do we mean by choice? It is pressure, but it is hidden pressure – she is not aware of it. I was exposed to different pressures from my sisters. We are all the products of our economic, social, and political life and our education. Young people today are living in the era of the fundamentalist groups (Khaleeli, 2010, p. 3).



The awakening of the Arab Spring represented a new frontier for women empowerment. The world watched as history marked the march of Egyptians, middle and upper-class, men, children, and women; citizens who were assuming agency and showcasing their capacity to exercise their will and to determine the shape of their own lives. Women of all ages and from diverse cultural contexts were partaking in the shaping of their culture and society. Could it be an awakening of a voice that was silenced by rigid regimes? It stirred cultural and social upheaval as a rising “feminist consciousness” was unmasked through the arts and more evident in narratives, essays, poems, and stories. Egyptian Feminism refers to “women’s coming into an awareness that being born female meant that they would lead their lives very differently from those of similar classes and circumstances who were born male” (Badran, 1995, p. 3). Feminist activists, feminist associations, and the Egyptian Feminist Union, (EFU- *Al Etihad al- Nisa’I al- Misri*), like El Saadawi, their mere existence have empowered women to re-think and reconstruct themselves, their families, and during this period, their nation.

The Egyptian women participated on the 25th of January Revolution and in demonstrations and sit-ins in various squares along with men. Yet, later steps and decisions by military council and the government prevent women from participating in these decisions systemically and in intended way. Women participated in some committees none seriously and in marginalised way. Thus, the Alliance for Arab Women (AAW) consider the necessity of holding a wide national conference for the civil society to assure women participation in the transaction period to achieve the revolution goals. This conference was held on the 4th of June in 2011 in conference hall in Nasr City and was attended by about 2500 of civil society representatives from all governorates. The conference was concluded with a Charter and many suggestions and recommendations the first of which was to revive the Egyptian Feminist Union that was established by Hoda Sharawy in 1923 and was dissolved in 1950s (EFU).

As an activist, El Saadawi was witness to a long history of lobbying, debating, and campaigning for women’s rights, for education, health and well-being, equal pay, and against Female Genital Mutilation FGM, harassment, discrimination, violence, and abuse. But this often came at a great cost to El Saadawi as a woman first and foremost, and as a writer. She wrote:

It was 6 September 1981. I was in my old apartment in Giza, alone. The children were with the father in the village. I was writing a novel when I heard a knock on the door, and then the words: ‘Open up! Didn’t you hear the president’s speech last night? We are the police.’” Sadat, it seemed, had announced that 1,000 dissidents would be arrested, that they would be “smashed” . . . “I was frightened, my heart was beating wildly, but I’m very obstinate. I asked them if they had a warrant, and when they told me they did not, I replied that I could not open the door. They disappeared for half an hour. I put on my shoes, and I got my key and bag, and I was ready. When they came back, they broke down the door: 30 of them, very savage. They pushed me out into the street, where there were 10 police cars. I could see my neighbours peeping out of their windows, all very frightened (Cooke, 2015, p. 4).

El Saadawi was hopeful when a review of the projects led by EFU publicised on their webpage reflected the twentieth-century Egyptian feminism shift in culture and ideology whereby Islamic modernisation and secular nationalism have directly affected gender discourses and cultural awareness of gender issues. The review

stated, “EFU seeks to coordinate the interested efforts in women’s issues to create an aware society that believes in empowerment of women, equality, citizenship, social justice, human dignity and respect of women’s rights.” (EFU, 2015) This is in response to a culturally ingrained belief that a woman possess powerful sexual drives, is sinful and, thus, needs to be controlled or kept chastised. It is important to note here that often verses from the holy Quran are often misinterpreted and used to imply that it was a woman’s original sin; namely Eve’s act to lure Adam to eat the forbidden fruit—which drove them both out of heaven. The shift in transnational and transcultural perspectives and ideologies show that a woman became no longer seen as “exclusively, a sexual being—unlike the man who was only partly understood in terms of his sexuality” (Badran, 1995, p. 5).

Due to public criticism and hostility in the press and media, El Saadawi found herself obliged to clarify her stance from religion. She was raised to believe in basic principles of Islam, and, for her, Islam meant to have faith in God and the spirit of justice, freedom, and love. Reflecting on this she reiterated, “it became clear to me that religion is nowadays used as a tool in the hands of economic and political forces to perpetuate the patriarchal family which adheres by traditions” (Johnson & El-Saadawi, 1992). El Saadawi’s words were misused in the press and misunderstood by journalists and clerics as a quest for breaking away from Islam and religious beliefs altogether. In fact, El Saadawi was urging women to restore Islamic values through ‘critical inquiry and independent thinking’ with the aim of transcending ‘literalism’ that does *not* allow for ‘dialogue’. For example, she wrote, “all progressive forces have a common ground. Religion is a personal matter. A progressive Muslim is a Muslim who respects all religions. He doesn’t politicise his god. God is not a book. God is justice and freedom and love and honesty. That is what my father taught me—to be honest” (*The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1977, p. 8). Another example of how El Saadawi’s words were met with hostility was after the publication of her novel *God Dies by the Nile* (1974). The title alone contributed to the negative reception of this novel and caused a stir amongst many. The novel does not oppose Islam and does not claim, as many believe it to be, that Islam oppresses women, but rather it presents how religion is misused and the melange of traditions and superstitions that abuse and oppress women. The novel is set on the river Nile in the small village of Kafr El Teen which El Saadawi used to depict the corruption of political institutions, patriarchy and power structures that falsely and maliciously distort religion in many ways. The narrative, like many of El Saadawi’s works, relies on symbolism to show the abuse manifested in all aspects of the villagers’ lives; political, economic, social, and sexual.

El Saadawi holds that it is integral to encourage dialogue around the role of religion in perpetuating female oppression in the Arab world. It is important to broaden our understanding of religion away from dogma. In doing so, she argues that women can have a new frontier in a contemporary society that nurtures their freedom, creativity, development and growth as women, mothers, and active educated citizens. She uses “the veil” as a metaphor and states, “there is a veil that hinders Arab women from transcending the oppositions. This act of hiding behind a cloak of cloth symbolises that women are only seen as bodies subject to exploitation

and inequality; not seen and not visible to others' gaze" (Johnson & El-Saadawi, 1992). Equally, wearing the hijab, in Islam, as an act of obedience, does *not* mean achieving perfection or virtue as many believe, but it is a response—or perhaps a necessity—because of the sexual obsession with the female subject which is manifested in acts of harassment, violence and violation of the female body and abuse. El Saadawi states, "everybody is very much interested in the physical veil- the religious Islamic veil. But what we don't see is *the veil of the mind*. We are all exposed to the veil of the mind by education, by religion, by the moral code. As women, we are always pushed to be hidden, to be veiled, even if we are *not* aware of that" (*The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1977, p. 9). To clarify, in an interview, El Saadawi refers to women in the past when women—prior to the 1970s—did not wear the veil and actively contributed to labour and the domestic life and, thus, from her perspective, were seen as equal by husbands. El Saadawi believes that things have changed over time since then for many reasons such as increasing poverty, assertion of patriarchy in many societies, misuse of religion, fear and violence, and a lack of opportunities for women, depriving young women of education and many more. From her perspective, the modern Arab woman ought to acknowledge her strengths, efforts, and contributions to society, and to utilise her intelligence and education to have the courage to resist, rebel, and be heard. This, for El Saadawi, is the meaning of women empowerment. She writes:

Women are pushed to be just bodies – either to be veiled under religion, or to be veiled by makeup. They are taught that they shouldn't face the world with their real face – they must hide their face somehow. Both are very significant of the oppression of women, that women are *not* really encouraged to be real, to be themselves, they are encouraged to hide, to be what society wants, what religion wants, what men want (*The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1977, p. 11).

She adds: "Women who do fight, never succumb to outward expectations and acts intended to silence them. These women are always finding a way to imagine other possibilities and to be heard" (ibid).

### 3 Empowerment, Education & Social Justice

Empowerment, for El Saadawi, as an activist and advocate for women's rights, is a key word which signifies the liberation of all women and the reclaiming of agency. This is evident in many of her narratives whereby education is posited as a tool that allows for such liberation and empowerment. Speaking of her mother, El Saadawi notes that the best gift that she had given her was teaching her to read and write at such an early age and thus, she is forever in debt. Education allows women to overcome barriers, to believe in themselves and to seek social justice in a corrupt system. For example, in a critical review of El Saadawi's novel *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Salah (2017) argues that El Saadawi empowers herself through a narrative which incorporates elements of memoir and critical analysis of Arab culture and Islam. El Saadawi spoke of her awareness of the early

persecution of women in the name of religion in *My memoirs in Women's prison*, a novel that reveals the ways in which women overcome difficulties and join hands for a common cause. Like her, women of her novels are traumatised by the act of 'being cut'; the removal of parts of their female organs, by the confinement of women's sex lives in childbearing, and male sexual violence to which women are subjected. Salah (2017) claims that "these nuggets of personal experiences are inserted into an overview of the complaints of stifled sexuality and associated sequelae with which her psychiatric patients struggled" (p. 3). One may claim that through reflection on personal experiences with a critical lense, El Saadawi was able to recount some of the harrowing experiences she has lived, especially memories from her childhood. She writes:

I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and I did not try to find out. I just wept and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found *her* standing by my side. Yes, it was *her*. I could *not* be mistaken (*The Hidden Faces of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, 1977, p. 14).

Salah (2017) explains that "in many societies where female genital mutilation is the norm, mothers are looking to protect their daughters from the shame of being an 'uncut woman' and ensure their daughters' futures as eligible brides when they engage in this human rights violation" (p. 4). The emphasis on virginity, the notion of honour and the avoidance of shame are pressures placed on many Arab women (Shaw & Silverio, 2021). Could it be that in El Saadawi's investigation of the historical designation of women as 'inferiors' in all faiths and *not* just in Islam, she had directly criticised societal judgement of women and revealed the construction of femininity which in her view did *not* evolve independently from society, religion, traditions, and customs? Indeed, she notes in her writings that these beliefs are ingrained in the conception of patriarchy. For example:

*Woman at Point Zero* (1975) is a novel portraying society's hypocrisy towards women's sexuality, which came out in the mid-1970s and brought El Saadawi unprecedented criticism. In an interview with the *Weekly* in the 1990s, she said this was because of society's wish to carry on "hiding behind alleged morals" that are designed to secure the continued oppression of women (Ezzat, 2021).

In her novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi details the real-life story of a lower-class woman, a sex worker in prison waiting to be hanged for killing one of the many men who abused her. The protagonist is Firdaus. El Saadawi met Firdaus and heard her story whilst working as a psychiatrist in one of the prisons. Firdaus' case reflected key failures in a patriarchal society. For example, "the daily struggles can often be manifested in as conflicting behaviour and/or actions between what one wants and what one should or should *not* do. The struggles that young girls endure growing up in a restraining patriarchal environment, which some succumb to over the course of adolescence, shape the critical transition from girls to women who suffer from low self-esteem, isolation, depression, and often entrapment in unhappy relationships and marriages" (Shaw, 2017). Firdaus is a real-life heroine who was interviewed by El Saadawi during her work with inmates at Al-Qanatir female Prison. El Saadawi was conducting research into some of the issues that faced

women in prison and only by chance she interviewed the protagonist who had received a death sentence after ‘refusing’ to plea guilty for killing a man in cold blood. “Inside her small cell, sat Firdaus waiting for her date with death. Though she looked broken, it was as if her fate was her final act of rebellion. Her life would return to point zero. Firdaus would be free, unburdened by the body, submitting her spirit to a superior power above all.” (*Woman at point Zero*, p. 10) Firdaus tells El Saadawi:

I didn’t belong to the upper classes without ensuring that I have a certain hairstyle and I wear makeup and expensive shoes. I didn’t belong to the middle classes without relying on my ambition to learn and having a secondary schooling qualification and showing a desire to be somebody important. I belonged to the poor classes as the daughter of an illiterate farmer on a limited income. He [father] sold me as a virgin bride before the coming of age, he stole neighbours’ crops, he is a wife-beater and yet every Friday morning he wears his clean fresh white robe to go to pray in the mosque in God’s name (*Woman at point Zero*, p. 10).

Firdaus’ case was one of the many examples that El Saadawi heard during her time working in the prison. The issues that all female inmates highlighted strengthened the premise that religion was misused as an act of patriarchal ideology that legitimates the oppression of women and maintains the inequality in society where men dominate. Religion as a patriarchal institution is a view reflected by how male characters in almost all of El Saadawi’s writings appear to go to places of worship, use sacred texts and phrases, claim to follow religious laws and customs to maintain a dominance of their sexuality. Firdaus tells El Saadawi:

He took a locking me in the flat before going out. I now slept on the floor in the other room. He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, likes a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe. Then one night his body seemed heavier than before, and his breath smelt different, so I opened my eyes. The face above me was not Bayoumi (*Woman at Point Zero*, p. 50).

Firdaus’ story reveals that “women’s bodies are frequently subject to societal contestation of what is said to be the female idea and thus can be described as walking a tightrope when it comes to their bodies and body image, whilst the ‘ideal’ is altered, re-issued, and dictated unto them” (Silverio, 2017). El Saadawi argues that poverty and the lack of education are the main key factors that contribute to female-oppression and violence by society against women. Only by overcoming both, can women really feel empowered.

The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice...Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of a girls’ external genital organs, sexual desire is minimised (*The Hidden Faces of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, 1977, p. 50).

Firdaus, from a poor countryside, was a commodity in the eyes of her extremely poor family. As an innocent child playing in the fields with other children, Firdaus was not prepared for what was yet to come. As a young girl, she was subject to female genital mutilation (FGM), also referred to as clitoridectomy, a procedure that reduces, if not

cease altogether, female-sexual pleasure. Firdaus, in her family's eyes, became no longer a child and is now a woman who can potentially bring 'shame' upon the family if not wedded. It is an inevitable transition that subjects young girls to such a cruel procedure which is one of many traumatic violations against the female-body. Firdaus recalls a conversation:

Sharifa said to me one day, 'Neither Bayoumi, nor any of his cronies realised your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a women's value, Firdaus. She *is* the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realise what you are really worth and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal (*Woman at Point Zero*, p. 55).

An interesting twist in Firdaus' story is the protagonist's own reflections on men and power. After her parents' death and obtaining a good level of education, Firdaus ran away from a husband who beat her. Hopeful that the male strangers whom she encountered offer to help only to reveal their true intentions, Firdaus reverted to work as a prostitute. At that point, she realised that her whole life quest was always to prove that she is more than a subject in her own story; told to do what she does not want and others determining her fate for her. El Saadawi writes that Firdaus' decision to accept the death sentence, and not appeal it, was her act of empowerment against society. Death, in this way, is seen as an opportunity for liberation and a rebellion having lived a life that she was never in control of. In the novel, Firdaus describes her male customers as "terrified of being *less* powerful than they think they are", full of hypocrisy and deceit as they deceive and abuse their power. El Saadawi was intrigued by Firdaus' reflection on men's vulnerability. As a prostitute, Firdaus expressed how she felt powerful as she refused to sleep with some of the men.

They panic and offer her ever increasing sums of money simply because it terrifies them to think that their power might not have the reach, they think it does (*Woman at point Zero*, p. 59).

Even in her 'false' sense of independence and self-determination, Firdaus felt liberated by the act of choosing her partners and rebelling to find for herself new avenues in life. "My work [sexual acts] is not worthy of your respect. Why then do you join in it with me?" Firdaus asked one of her clients one day in sarcasm" (ibid, p. 60). The exchange, from her point of view, is a typical hypocrisy of men who have illicit sex and yet she is the one considered to be 'shameful'. The truth that Firdaus' story unveiled is that her true crime was *not* killing a pimp, but rather exposing the hypocrisy of patriarchy, the misuse of power, female-powerlessness, and social deceit. El Saadawi knew that although men and women live side by side, they live in separate worlds governed by separate rules, and from further stories from inmates, offenders, she became more and more convinced and fully aware that there can be no reconciling them without finding new grounds to do so. For El Saadawi, women's empowerment and overcoming of social barriers are intertwined and come at a great cost.

## 4 Conclusion

All creative works help to open the minds and illuminate oppressed women and men, as well as assist in raising their consciousness, and therefore they organise and struggle together to liberate themselves from all types of prisons. Most of my heroines are fighters in different ways (Abdallah & Shaker, 2018, p. 3).

Through a transcultural and transdisciplinary approach to women's empowerment, El Saadawi's female heroines in her literary works portray themselves mostly as victims of societies at such an innocent young age. Some female heroines succeed to assert themselves and stand at the face of adversaries whilst others fall victims to a rigid system. Having said that, from El Saadawi's perspective, these women have all chosen a path of their own seeking freedom amid a corrupt system that requires their upmost rebellion. Some are poor, uneducated or deprived of schooling beyond a certain age, and some women, as evidenced in El Saadawi's work, are subjected to acts of violence which continue to haunt them in their adult lives. Her writing tells their stories, and they inspire others through the narrative. Stories told in such a way are an act of pure catharsis for El Saadawi who stresses that the sole aim of FGM was to hide women from the hungry-male-gaze. The process not only fails to do so, but also the fact that it is often performed by the primary carers, i.e., mothers, is a traumatic experience viewed as, El Saadawi bluntly puts it in her writings, as an act of *betrayal* and a breaking of a child's *trust*.

FGM is closely linked to education. . . and, while education levels among girls are increasing, progress would need to be 15 times faster to end FGM by 2030 (Holleis, 2022, p. 3).

Oppression of women in diverse cultural contexts, minority groups, and women offenders and violence against the female body are all problematic issues that are critically investigated in El Saadawi's narratives. These issues began from birth by subjecting the female to acts of violence and stripping away any sense of agency, autonomy, identity, and freedom in the name of religion, culture, traditions, and customs. As an activist and advocate who spoke openly and fearlessly about how to improve women's lives, El Saadawi explains that for Arab women to find their freedom, liberation, authentic self and be truly self-determining, they must speak up and reject any forms of oppression. For this goal, as an Egyptian female writer, she has lived her life lobbying and campaigning against oppression and violence nationally and internationally. And yet sadly, to this day according to a new study by the Cairo-based Tadwein Centre for Gender Studies, "86% of underprivileged women aged 18–35 in Egypt, a country of more than 102 million people, have been subject to female genital mutilation (FGM)-also called female genital cutting (FGC). That is only down one percentage point from the FGM figures in Egypt's last National Health Survey, in 2014" (Holleis, 2022, p. 1). The fear of female genital mutilation (FGM) is a fundamental theme that runs through most of El Saadawi's writings (Hiddleston, 2010). Acts of violence and abuse shackle the poor and uneducated heroines so much so that it seems to the reader of El Saadawi's work that in her writing she wishes to set these women free. Thus, the act of writing become a weapon in which to fight an authoritative system whose member of power exercise



violence, abuse and oppression towards the female subjects in the name of traditions, societal customs, and worse of all, in the name of religion. With El Saadawi's death in March 2021, one cannot help but wonder if her writing has indeed empowered Arab female subjects nationally and internationally. The mutilation and violation which is a symbol of male-dominance, parental and societal expectations as presented by El Saadawi's narratives, sadly continue to haunt more female heroines who merely seek to reclaim the female-body in the face of adversities and empower themselves through simple acts of rebellion. However, one is hopeful that these practices in time die out and Arab women, through education and overcoming poverty everywhere, can assert themselves as equal, liberated, and most of all self-determining.

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