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# Negotiating professional and personal selves: The experiences of Black academic women in South African Higher Education institutions: A conceptual reflection

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## Abstract

This article explores the intricate landscape of higher education more specifically, South African higher education. It mainly focuses on the experiences of Black female academics since the end of apartheid in 1994. Despite the number of women, entering academia having increased, significant challenges remain, such as barriers to career advancement and the influence of intersecting identities like gender, race, and motherhood. The under-representation of women in leadership roles underscore systemic issues, rooted in stereotypes and unconscious biases that undermine women's competence, character and, authority. The paper employs Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice and Crenshaw's intersectionality framework to investigate these dynamics, emphasising the need for economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. It discusses how, institutional policies often marginalise women's voices in decision-making processes, contributing to a crisis of gender inequality within academic echelons. The findings indicate that while initiatives have been employed to promote gender equality, the unique challenges faced by Black women in academia remain largely unattended. This study aims to magnify the voices of these women, encouraging a deeper understanding of their experiences and the structural barriers they encounter in their professional journeys.

**Keywords:** Academic. Black, bullying, higher education institutions, identity, intersectionality, women

## Introduction

The South African higher education landscape has experienced significant transformation since the end of the apartheid era in 1994. With an increasing number of women, mainly Black women, entering academia (Govender, Khumalo & Agbede,2024). It should be noted that the term "*Black women*" in this paper incorporates the South African racial groupings of, Black, Coloured, and Indian. Despite these changes, Black female academics still face numerous challenges that hamper their professional development and holistic well-being. These challenges include: barriers to academic progression and career advancement., as well as intersections of gender, race, motherhood, identity, and belonging (Agbede, Govender & Pillay, 2024) . It is evident that higher education institutions show disparities in the gender composition of their academic hierarchies, with an under-representation of women in leadership positions (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2023). This disparity is primarily observed in higher education hierarchies, where there are more male full professors, and more males in university management positions (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023; Mousa, 2022). Thelma and Ngulube (2024) found that the factors contributing to the marginalisation of women in leadership are deeply rooted stereotypes, and unconscious biases, as women are often considered as being less authoritative and competent than their male peers. These cultural barriers not only hinder women's confidence and ambition but also thwart their ability to assert themselves in leadership roles. In the South African higher education context, female representation in academic leadership remains concerning. In 2023, women represented approximately 18.5% of professors and 29.8% of associate professors (Klopper & Moyo, 2023). The increase in cases of the exclusion of women together with various forms of prejudice in academic spaces has been surprising with some having declared it a crisis (Mama, 2012, Nyoni & Agbaje. 2022).

The aim of this conceptual paper is to draw from relevant literature and explore the complex experiences of female academics in South Africa, emphasising their voices and perspectives on issues of gender, race and institutional dynamics, as they negotiate a historically male-dominated sphere. Furthermore, to discuss these dynamics through the lens of Nancy Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional theory of justice and Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw,1989, 1991).

### *Gender Inequality in higher education*

For the past decade, breaking the barriers for women in higher education institutions has been an international priority (Agbede et al.,2024). On the global front, the presence of women in higher education has steadily increased since the middle of the last century. However, this increase in the participation of women in higher education has not eliminated the gender gaps and inequalities that still exist (Araneda-Guirriman et al. ,2023). The possible reasons and effects of gender inequality in the various spheres, including higher education, have been widely studied (Cooper, 2018). Nonetheless, there is a multidimensional nature of this inequality which exists particularly in the university context and therefore there are several factors that impact the eventual promotion and advancement of the careers of female academics (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023). This gender imbalance in higher education is a global problem that no country has solved (Diezmann & Grieshaber, 2019).

### *South African Higher Education*

South African higher education has undergone major changes and advances since the end of Apartheid in 1994. The implementation of White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) and the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, was a serious attempt by government to transform the higher education sphere from its racist, patriarchal Apartheid reasoning, to having higher education spaces that are democratic, tolerant and inclusive. Furthermore, the increase in the availability of research grants for women and more positions for women academics became available, mentoring projects were developed and many other interventions were implemented to ensure parity for women in higher education (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo, 2023; Naicker ,2013). However, despite these initiatives, women's voices often remain marginalised concerning academic discourse and the institutional decision-making processes. This finding is not unusual for a developing country like South Africa, as research confirms that in developing countries, the effective implementation of gender equality laws, is a significant challenge, thus hindering gender parity (Khan et al., 2024).

It should further be noted that the majority of studies on the under-representation of women are based on institutional environments in developed countries (Calás et al., 2013), it is therefore, important to acknowledge that developing countries (like South Africa) may face unique challenges that serve as obstacles to achieving gender equality in higher education. These challenges include sexism, racism, and classism (Khan et al., 2024). Furthermore, little is known about the complex manner in which institutional barriers at different levels, affect women's advancement in academic careers. Given the growing number of women entering academia, research on women's careers can add to the body of empirical knowledge, beyond what is currently understood (Khan et al., 2024).

## Theoretical framework

This conceptual paper draws on Nancy Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional theory of justice as well as Crenshaw's ( 1989, 1991) Theory of Intersectionality.

### *Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice*

Nancy Fraser's (2008) theory of justice comprises three dimensions: economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. The theory is used to make sense of women academics' experiences of higher education and its implications for how we understand and address gender and social injustice in the current South African academic context. The use of the theory serves as a platform for the struggle for acknowledgment and redistribution. Below follows a brief discussion of the three dimensions of justice in Fraser's (2008) theory as cited in the study by Smaal et al. (2021) (refer to Fig. 1):

Economic redistribution meaning an equal share of opportunities or resources. Redistribution considers the (re)allocation of the material resources needed by individuals which allows them to participate in social life on equal terms.

Cultural recognition focuses on equal respect for all, and examines institutionalised value patterns that can permit, limit or deny individuals the social status of being full partners in social interaction, along with opportunities for achieving social esteem, and

Political representation, where individuals have equal say and addresses how decision rules around membership and procedures can allow or deny people equal voice in public discussions and democratic decision-making.

The use of Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice sharpens the focus when dealing with intersectionality.

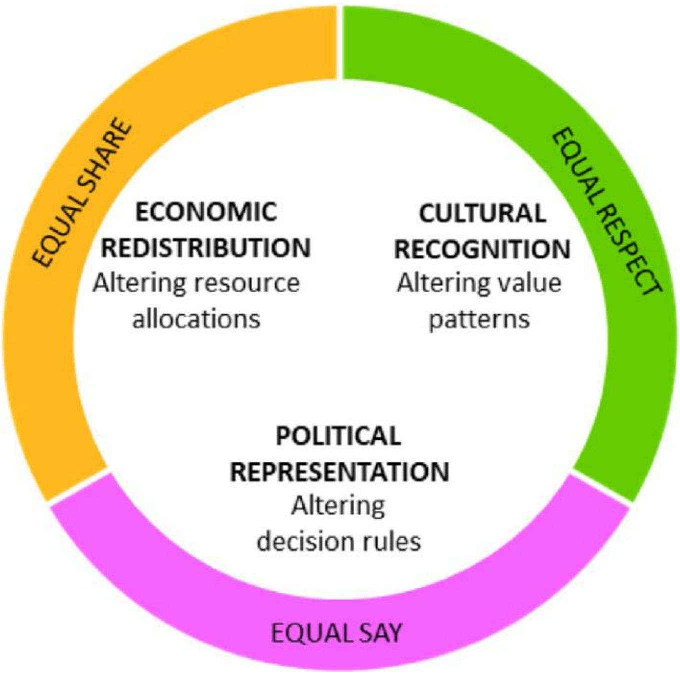


**Figure 1**: Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice (Smaal et al., 2021).

***Theory of intersectionality***

The theory of intersectionality, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), is used as another lens to examine how various social identities like: race, culture, gender, and class are, interconnected and interdependent and, how these influence women's multifaceted experiences in higher education. Crenshaw's theory suggests that social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability, interplay on various levels and cannot be addressed individually as these interactions create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. For Black women multiple layers of disadvantage intersect to create the way we experience race. She used the term "intersectionality" to explain the unique experiences of Black women, who face discrimination from both racism and sexism. Intersectionality theory can therefore be used to analyse the impact of policies, procedures, and laws on race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally, Crenshaw's framework (1991) encompasses three interrelated dimensions. They are:

*Structural intersectionality*-, which refers to the manner in which various social structures (such as, institutional policies, economic systems, legal frameworks,) inter-relate to produce complex layers of discrimination and disadvantage. It indicates how overlapping identities, can increase the effects of oppression (Crenshaw,1991).

*Political intersectionality*- Political intersectionality refers to how numerous social identities affects political representation and advocacy. It examines the ways that political movements may overlook or inadequately address the needs of individuals who represent multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw,1991).

*Representational intersectionality*-. Representational intersectionality relates to how different identities are portrayed in cultural narratives and institutional representations. It highlights the importance of diverse representation in public, academia and media, discourse. (Crenshaw,1991).

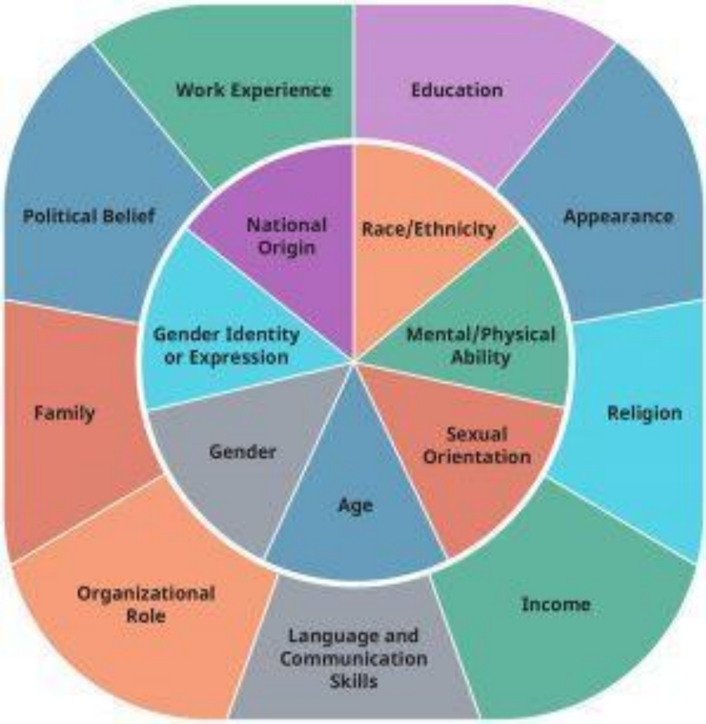


**Figure 2:** *Theory of intersectionality* (Lumen, https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-introductiontosociology/chapter/theoretical-perspectives-of-race-and-ethnicity/)

Moreover, Collins and Bilge (2016) provide six core ideas that consistently appears when intersectionality is used as an analytical tool: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice.

One definition of intersectionality from the United Nations (2000) highlights key aspects of economic power, diversity, gender, power relations, and discrimination as a concept to capture:

...the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination…(Intersectionality) specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages and other discriminatory systems contribute to create layers of inequality that structure the relative positions of women and men, races and other groups.

Seabrook (2019) avers that intersectionality is a particular feminist theory that examines how various identities link to form the unique and complex dynamics of oppression and power for both individuals and communities, and including, the broader social structures that maintain the marginalisation of certain identity positions. Intersectionality theory is critical in this paper because it highlights identities and includes the intersection of structural systems, resistance, and power, which is ubiquitous in higher education. Thus, the issues of race, sexuality and class cannot be considered independently, neatly isolated and disconnected from one another. They all have a dialectical and intersectional effect on the individual's "lifeworld" (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo, 2023). Intersectionality is associated with various factors that shape our identity, as illustrated in Figure 2 (sometimes represented by using intersecting wheels). Generally, the outer ring of the identity elements comprises of elements that undergo more frequent changes while the elements in the inner circle are often considered as more permanent (note that some exceptions do occur). Also, note that a detailed discussion of all these factors is beyond the scope of this paper.

***Application of the theoretical framework to this study***

The two approaches of Fraser (2008) and Crenshaw (1989) are particularly relevant in contexts like South Africa, where historical injustices and systemic barriers persist in affecting marginalised groups like Black women. In the university context Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional theory of justice and Crenshaw's intersectional theory could be applied to delve into the various barriers and related issues, which women of colour have to negotiate in this terrain.

When considering Fraser's cultural recognition dimension the importance of acknowledging and valuing the diverse identities and experiences of faculty staff within higher education is emphasised. This includes understanding how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, influence and shape individuals' experiences and access to opportunities. Crenshaw's intersectional theory would be demonstrated in the daily exclusion, and erasure experienced by Black women academics in universities, which are generally hidden in subtle ways, and deeply ingrained in the micro-politics of the daily formal and informal interactions occurring within the university (Nyoni & Agbaje,2022). Monnapula-Mapesela (2017) found barriers to the advancement of Black female academics included disadvantage, oppression, resistance, psychological pressure, scrutiny, bullying and discrimination. Idahosa and Mkhize 2021) cautions that it is imperative that institutions be conscious of how assumptions linked to identity, has an influence on who is included or excluded. This infers that institutions should be aware of the ways in which institutional practices may have an impact on feelings of belonging which influences inclusion, participation, success and retention of Black women academics. Phaswana (2019) concurs, and purports that despite the transformational gains in South African higher education, Black women still grapple with barriers of racism, sexism and classism.

Fraser's (economic) redistribution dimension focuses on the equal distribution of resources, opportunities, and support necessary for achieving success in higher education. Cross and Naidoo (2011, p. 519) highlight the role of micro-politics which includes the use of informal and formal power, by individuals and groups to achieve their set goals and agendas in organisations. This power is thus used to include or exclude individuals from opportunities, participation, promotion and recognition. Furthermore, recent literature on Black women academics' experiences at higher education institutions focussed on the invisible labour that many Black women academics frequently participate in, and that this, is often unacknowledged, under-valued, marginalised and alienated (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo, 2023). Different workplace realities experienced by Black women academics, such as workload and support will be unpacked using the redistribution dimension as a lens

***Workload inequity***

Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023) found that some Black women academics were given unfair workloads. Schultz and Rankhumise (2023), concur that workload may present a barrier, particularly heavy administrative and teaching workloads, for those who teach at undergraduate levels. High workload is also used to prevent Black women from producing research. This is particularly detrimental for career progression for these Black women especially because of the *“ publish or perish*” culture which prevails in South African higher education institutions (Maphalala & Mpofu, 2017; Schultz & Rankhumise, 2023).

***Lack of support for Black female academics***

Schultz and Rankhumise (2023) found that Black academics are exposed to challenges such as a lack of support from both institutional policies and, sometimes, senior management. Where the necessary leadership and individualised assistance required, is not provided. Nkosi, and Maphalala (2025) concur, they state that factors, such as biases in hiring and promotion, societal expectations, and inadequate institutional support , create hindrances for Black women in academia. These factors hinder the progression and success of Black women academics, and needs enquiry if Black women academics are to be successfully employed (King & Frederickson, 2021).

***The muffling of women’s voices in academia***

Blell, Liu, & Verma, (2022) highlight the inequity of the ability to speak up in academia. They note that not everyone has the power to speak freely, (particularly Black women) and more so, to speak to those in power, without having security, especially when employment frequently depends on institutional compliance, goodwill and networks. McCarthy and Muthuri (2018), found that particularly, in patriarchal environments ( like the higher education setting), women often experience cultural obstacles that hamper their economic, political, and social participation, thus silencing their voice. It should further be noted that gender stereotypes are further barriers that Black women in academia have to face. Smyth and Nosek (2015) note that while implicit gender preconceptions persist even in fields with high female representation, explicit gender prejudices are more persistent in male-dominated fields (like academia). Fraser’s political representation dimension echoes the need for marginalised groups (like Black women), to have a voice in decision-making processes within higher education institutions.

From the intersectional perspective Black women are under-represented and are undervalued in academia, due to the patriarchal practices and the legacy of Apartheid ideology, hampering the sector (Govender et al., 2024).

***Structural inequalities and Black female academics’ career trajectories***

Additional factors that add to Black women’s experiences in higher education institutions can be identified via structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) which highlights how systemic inequity can create different levels of barriers and disadvantage for individuals based on their various intersections.

In the higher education sector, intersectionality is determined by ensuring that equitable societies are formed and that inequalities are challenged through cross-examining strategies and policies (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Considering this, I focus on the following structural inequalities:

***Bullying and incivility***

Researchers have found that higher education institutions are ideal settings for bullying and harassment (Higgens, 2024; Hodgins et al., 2024). Bullying in the workplace relates to regular harassment, offending, socially excluding the individual or negatively affecting someone’s work, to an extent where the person being bullied feels powerless to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2011).

Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) posit that incivility is on the increase in South African higher education. They define incivility as negative social behaviours, often the result of negative behaviours, that occur together with bullying. Examples of these behaviours are; making disparaging remarks, participating in or creating gossip, ignoring or purposefully misinterpreting requests, or being constantly rude (Higgins, 2024; Smith & Rae Coel, 2018,). It should be noted that defining incivility is problematic particularly regarding policy-making in higher education, as researchers found that behaviours that can be regarded as incivility , commonly occur in the work place (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021; Higgins, 2024, Hodgins et al., 2017). It should further be noted that these behaviours result in a toxic work space , with continuous incivility resulting in psychological harm to those who are targeted. Incivility is also more subtle than bullying as bullying deals with the display of outward aggression while incivility is demonstrated through more discrete patterns of behaviour or actions (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021; Higgins, 2024).

Bullied targets in higher education experienced lack of recognition, discrimination, blocked advancement and isolation. Additionally, studies have highlighted issues such as unequal work distribution influenced by race or gender, favouritism, the withholding of information, rumour-spreading, undermining behaviour, humiliation, inappropriate jokes, belittlement, and intimidation (Mangolothi & Mnguni, 2022; Mokgolo, 2017).

Additional bullying behaviours include: the setting of unreasonable deadlines, ignoring or overlooking contributions, interfering with an individual's work activities, excessive monitoring of work and activities, undermining the individual, silencing someone, intentionally misinterpreting instructions, and having one's requests for assistance denied (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020; Higgins, 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Nyoni & Agbaji, 2022). Moreover, a form of role erosion could occur by deliberately removing key areas of responsibility and replacing them with trivial tasks to replace one's core duties. This could also be done to undermine the individual and the position they hold. In addition, deliberate under- utilisation of the individual's skills and experience is a further means of bullying (Tight, 2023). Furthermore, what is concerning, is that there is generally a noticeable shift in negative higher education workplace behaviour (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). This is because, the nature of bullying is changing amongst higher education staff – it is becoming more subtle. This is proven by the increase of complaints relating to grievance and appeal procedures (Heffernan & Bosetti; 2021, Higgins, 2024). Thus, research confirms that high rates of bullying(harassment) have been reported in higher education institutions (HEIs), where many of the organisational factors that drive bullying exist (Hodgins et al.,2024).

In line with the theory of intersectionality, bullying impacts on some groups of academics more so than others; more specifically on the marginalised. Sallee and Diaz, (2013) found that academic culture facilitates the marginalisation of particular social identity groups. This marginalisation results in higher rates of bullying among gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual, identity minorities in higher education. Baumgartner et al., (2024) agree that difficulties are further intensified when relating to women belonging to ethnic groups or minorities. Mkhwanazi, (2021) found that gender and racial dynamics are contributing factors in women academics experiencing higher rates of bullying in higher education.

Interestingly, Conco et al., (2021) found more specifically, that, in South African HEIs, two of the three minority groups, namely: Coloured and Indian women academics, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, are more inclined to be bullied, by seniors, peers, administrators and students. It should also be noted that White South African women academics, also experience gendered challenges, however, their race and relative academic seniority serve as a form of protection (Mangolothi, & Mnguni, 2022; Mkhwanazi, 2021). This implies that there is diminished reputational risk to the higher education institution, if bullying mainly includes these minority groups (Coloured and Indians). These minorities become targets, as they seem less likely to be protected (soft targets) by the institutional system because of their various intersectional statuses. This implies that, to prevent the possibility of reputational risk to a South African higher education institution, its policies and practices are particularly sensitive to accusations of racism relating to Black African academics, while a similar level of sensitivity is not applied to the two minority race groups. These particular circumstances provide a glimpse into the multi-faceted dimensions of intersectionality in terms of race, ethnicity and gender in the South African higher education sector.

*Vicarious bullying*

Hollis (2019) asserts that vicarious bullying occurs when the institution fails to contain managerial abuse. She defines vicarious bullying as a form of institutional aggression where the main bully sends or instigates a messenger, or henchman, to diminish staff accomplishments, and in so doing, extends the bully's rule through fear. In vicarious bullying, the henchman/secondary bully uses the power of the primary bully to inflict emotional and psychological abuse on the targeted individual/s. Interestingly, these henchman / secondary bullies could include women.

Thus, these elements of structural intersectionality have adverse effects on these marginalised female academics. Workplace bullying behaviours have been found to negatively affect targets' wellbeing- contributing to burnout and depression, Furthermore, it negatively impacts targets' job performances, family life and productivity (Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2016; Celep & Konakli, 2013, Higgins, 2024). Additionally, it is noted that women tend to experience physical and psychological symptoms of bullying more often, and more severely than men do. Therefore, not only are women more likely to be the victims of bullying, they are also more likely to suffer severe and long-term symptoms from the experience (Higgins, 2024). Valverde (2013) concurs and posits that bullying and mobbing forms part of the various types of power, which can be used to torture and oppress individuals. When these behaviours continue for years, it causes harm to the body and mind, reducing what once was wilful and strong, scholars, into physically weakened ones.

Structural intersectionality affecting Black women academics, is affirmed in South African HEIs. As research confirms that workplace bullying, like other organisational factors in South Africa, takes on a racialised, classed and gendered tone which is consistent with international studies, (Pietersen, 2007).

*Political intersectionality as a barrier to Black female career progression*

Political intersectionality observes how different forms of oppression and privilege are reproduced in political discourse and policies. It highlights the idea that marginalised groups can be overlooked within support structures because their experiences are not aligned into singular categories of identity politics.

According to Nyoni and Agbaje (2022) there are risks that women academics face regarding grievance reporting mechanisms that are available in higher education institutions. This occurs, because generally, female victims have to face the same male perpetrators to report incidents or seek assistance. The outcome is, an unsustainable situation that presents challenges when dealing with prejudices affecting women. Thus, it creates a political intersectional situation through a combination of prejudice and institutional power that produces a system which regularly and harshly discriminates against some groups (like Black women academics) and benefits other groups.

Mangolothi and Mnguni (2022) found that despite universities having set promotion policies in place, promotions were difficult for Blacks (particularly Black women) because of unachievable criteria pertaining to work overload, personal obligations and subjective and inconsistent policies. Union representatives in these higher education spaces, agreed that promotions are subjective and controversial particularly relating to Black female promotions.

The Workplace Bullying Institute (2021), found that the most common administrative institutional responses to reports of bullying in the workplace, are that the bullying behaviour is justified, and /or the legitimacy of the report is denied. This indicates that higher education institutions do not treat Black women academics with parity when implementing policies and procedures, particularly when these women need protection from unfair practices in the higher education system. Additionally, Black women are marginalised and oppressed because of this unfair implementation of policies and regulations in these higher educational settings, and their experiences are also considered unimportant or non-existent.

*Representational intersectionality and bullying*

Representational intersectionality deals with how various identities are portrayed in media, academia, and culture. It underscores the importance of diverse representation in shaping perceptions and narratives about marginalised groups. Black women may want to report bullying or other forms of prejudice. However, these accusations of bullying may be dismissed as fair comment or 'the way things are generally done. Resulting in the person/s who laid the complaint, being accused of, bullying those they accuse, by laying unnecessary complaints (Tight, 2023). Moreover, while processes may exist to report bullying, many Black female academics opt to self-silence, not only for self-preservation, but because of past observations, related to the unequal power dynamic -that "speaking up", results in silencing. They learnt to accept that bullying is part of the institutional culture - designed to preserve the status quo (Mangolothi & Mnguni, 2022).

Nyoni and Agbaje (2022) agree that the support systems where women academics can speak up against the prejudices have many limitations. They further state that it is inaccurate to think that women in higher educational institutions do not "speak out". However, it is important to recognise the power imbalances existing in these spaces, and how these counter any forms of agency that women may attempt to apply, in efforts to become established within these academic spaces.

Women further reported that they became the victims of gossip concerning: their character and levels of productivity, after they had reported incidents of bullying and incivility. Thus, the actual reporting process led to additional attacks—and even job loss (Pheko, 2018). Researchers also refer to the lack of visibility, subservience and suppression that Black women experience in higher education institutions. This is evident through the absence and erasure that Black women academics have had to navigate, including being deliberately and politically ignored, unseen, misrecognised, and un-valued (Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo,2023; Khunou, 2023). Idahosa (2020) affirms that when dealing with issues of transformation in higher education, various studies indicate that women and Blacks, are excluded and marginalised by the practices and cultures within South African universities. Therefore, once again, supporting how these intersections of race and gender and, the issue of inclusivity, oppress Black women academics.

Thus, Idahosa and Mkhize (2021) highlights how the intersection of identity positions, social structures, cultures and power, interact to produce competition, "obligations for gratitude and gendered and racialised socio-cultural preference", which consequently influences Black female academic career-advancement, inclusion, and retention.

***Possible strategies to protect women academics in higher education***

Llorens et al. (2021), posit that if structural conditions of inequality are not dismantled, existing disadvantages will prevail. Therefore, to ensure the best outcomes institutions should thoroughly analyse these intricacies and involve affected minorities when developing policies. According to Sedivy-Benton et al.,(2014), bullied women use survival strategies to cope with bullying , these include; reporting and documenting incidents, avoidance, and eventually having to leave a higher education institution. Additionally, another learned coping mechanism is emotional detachment.

Researchers such as Baumgartner, Zarestky and Lechuga (2024), found that women had to learn to have a better life balance, incorporate spirituality and meditation in their lives and focus on important relationships such as family and friends . Bennett (2016 , p. xxvii)) suggests an antibullying, anti-sexism strategy as follows: "*We* (women) *need skills, hacks, tricks, tools, battle tactics to fight for ourselves while also advocating for change within the system…. This is not a solo task. We need other women by our side* ."

Govender, Khumalo and Agbede (2024) stress the importance of mentorship for Black female academics within South African higher education institutions, to assist in navigating the complexities of institutional expectations, practices, policies, and procedures. However, it should be noted that this strategy may be ineffective at institutions where the culture of bullying is embedded. It may also suggest that a potential victim must be able to adapt and accept the prevailing toxic culture and that the acceptance of emotional bruising is an accepted part of the induction of Black female academics into higher education workspaces.

According to Llorens et al. (2021), another strategy that could assist in the reduction of harassment of female academics is, to establish clear anti-harassment policies in university codes of conduct. Though these codes of conduct are challenging to enforce, future efforts should involve the drafting of clear policies including various situations. Llorens et al. (2021) further argue, that across all academic career stages, institutions should develop interventions and programmes that consider the specific needs of overlapping identities. For example, Flores (2011) suggested targeted mentoring or financial awards, could be of assistance to marginalised women to overcome the psychological and practical burdens linked to intersecting identities.

Valverde (2013) advocates for self-care by seeking mental health professionals where needed, engaging in exercise, getting sufficient sleep , and learning to say no to projects when experiencing heavy workloads. She encourages individuals to “recognize you are not alone,” (p. 405) to “tell your story,” (p. 406), “learn their rights,” and “mobilize for change” (p. 417).

## Conclusion

The experiences of Black female academics on a global scale and in South Africa, reveal a complex interplay of challenges shaped by systemic inequalities, gender and racial stereotypes, prejudice, gender inequality, intersectionality, and gender segregation in higher education. As a Coloured female academic in South African higher education, the above has formed part of my lived experiences. By amplifying the voices of particularly Black women academics, and by employing an intersectional approach, this paper underscores the urgent need for reforms in higher education institutions aimed at creating equitable academic environments. Furthermore, addressing these issues is crucial not only for advancing women in academia, but also for the general transformation of South African higher education.

Lastly, transformation in higher education requires a rethink of the criteria for selecting leadership at all levels. Academic credentials and curriculum vitae that attest to excellent scholarly achievements do not necessarily reflect courageous, service-based ,ethical leadership. More has to be done to identify caring empathetic and morally strong leaders who are not only focused on self- advancement and thus, protecting the status quo. Leaders should be appointed (regardless of gender or ethnicity), who champion real transformation and embrace female equity and participation.

## Disclosures

### *Conflict of interest*

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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