



## How Fish Climb Trees: Illuminating the Experiences of Academic Mothers in South Africa

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### Abstract

The title of this contribution emerged from the truism that academic mothers seem to do the impossible. Mothers spend a significant amount of time and energy on parenting, often exceeding the hours of a normal job. When adding the responsibilities of an academic portfolio, it is not surprising that the wellbeing and mental health of academic mothers are constantly hanging in the balance. The COVID-19 pandemic redirected our attention to the importance of general wellbeing, but specifically for women who need to manage work, household, and childcare responsibilities. Using semi-structured interviews, this interpretive empirical exposition shines the spotlight on the experiences of four women in higher education in South Africa who have had to manage childcare in addition to their academic work. Using Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, the paper highlights how women are "taxed" for choosing to have children and pursue academia. Through centering their voices, this contribution advocates for taking sensitive discussions out of the bathroom and into the boardroom. It discusses the importance of creating enabling environments for these academic mothers through education, sensitive policy-making, realistic goal-setting, empathetic HR practices, and changing how we think about the value of what mothers do.

**Keywords:** mental health; higher education; wellbeing; academic mothers; diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI); HR practices

### Introduction

The importance of what mothers do daily have never been fully calculated and, as such, is never fully understood. This lack of understanding was highlighted in a recent article that went viral for vilifying women who need to leave work early to tend to sick children. The headline read "Child's Sickness Not An Excuse To Miss Work" (Singh, 2024). It highlights how many organisations, public or private, lack knowledge about the processes of mothering and have policies that militate against the mental well-being of working mothers. The ontology of being a woman presupposes certain biological and physiological experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. It also includes certain affective predispositions that women should not be vilified for. Instead, women should be supported to ensure inclusive and equitable working environments, particularly in high-pressure environments such as academia, which requires

empathetic working contexts and caring leadership. Whilst there is a significant amount of recent research focusing on the experiences of academic mothers in other parts of the world (Gilbert et al., 2020; Hillier, 2023; O'Shea et al., 2023; Pecis & Touboulic, 2024; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019), the same cannot be said for sub-Saharan Africa (Pillay, 2007; Pillay et al., 2017). The most recent discussion of women in academia in South Africa was a collection of papers edited by Agbede et al. (2024) where the challenges of being an academic mother are partially discussed. As such, this empirically driven paper provides a contemporary account of the experiences of academic mothers in sub-Saharan Africa, where the challenges women face are particular to the context.

Whilst the significance of advocating for the well-being of women in higher education should be obvious, three reasons are highlighted here. First, despite constant reporting on gender bias in the workplace, it seems as if gender

discrimination is, to some extent, woven into all our lived realities, where it is abhorred in policy but perpetuated in practice. The SDG Gender Index, the most comprehensive globally, highlights that no country in the world is on track for gender equality and that, in 2024, gender equality has stalled or regressed for more than one billion women and girls (Equal Measures, 2024). In addition, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (Global Gender Gap Report, 2024) notes that there has been a lack of "meaningful, widespread change" and that it will take approximately "134 years to reach full parity – roughly five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target" (p. 5). Second, academic mothers still face challenges when trying to procure leadership roles in academia because of the perceived idea that they lack commitment, when in fact, they are torn between motherhood and household responsibilities, as well as their academic careers (Minello, Martucci, & Manzo, 2020). Third, a lack of compassionate working environments, including disabling policies and procedures, disallow women from flourishing in the workplace. Toxic workplaces are cited to be the key reason women leave their places of employment (Sidick, 2023).

### ***Defining the Academic Mother***

Hirsch and Kayam (2020) define the academic mother as ranging from "... students to full-tenured professors, researchers, and any mothers who self-identified as an academic, based on their level of education and current or past professional activities that necessarily included an academic institutional setting" (p. 27). The discourse of academic mothers is a pushback against the masculine framework often used to describe academia. Castenada and Isgro (2013) argue that contemporary higher education, characterised as masculine and competitive, is a key feature of the modern neoliberal university. Advocating for the academic mother, particularly in contexts where there is a historical legacy of discrimination, is critical to realising gender equity and flourishing democracy. Savigny (2014 cited in Bowyer et al., 2022, p. 310) correctly asserts that female academics face "a complex set of gendered challenges that have a negative impact on their

careers ... [and] there are major gaps in the rate of advancement, wage, and workload, among other variables". In describing her experiences of being an academic mother, Caldeira (2023) notes that academia becomes hostile when women choose to live in both worlds simultaneously. There is an unspoken prevailing myth that when women become mothers, they become less capable of producing good academic work, when, in fact, as Pillay (2009) notes, it actually enriches the intellectual process. In their recent work, titled *Academic Mothering*, Guyotte et al. (2023) argue that the notion of academic mothers requires expansion to include those who perform the practice of mothering, but who are not necessarily mothers as we traditionally understand them to be. However, in this paper, based on the respondents, academic mothers refer to women who have birthed and raised their children whilst pursuing academia as postgraduate students or full-time academics. I understand, as a limitation of this study, that this is only one of many categories of academic mothers, acknowledging men and the LGBTQI community who are often sidelined in discussions relating to mothers and motherhood.

### ***Crenshaw's Notion of Intersectionality as a Soapbox to Advocate for Academic Mothers in South Africa***

Crenshaw (1989) argues that "intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking" (p. 149). This means that the oppression of gender, race, culture, sex, class, age etc. cannot be examined separately. As such, the nexus of multiple identity markers becomes the hallmark of Intersectional Theory. This theory is useful for understanding the experiences of women in a South African context where there has been a history of discrimination against women, particularly women of colour. In addition, Intersectional Theory applies to the respondents in this study because not only are academic mothers women who operate in a highly unequal society in terms of equality for women, but they are also women who occupy a historically male-dominated, clinical working environment. In South Africa, discussions of race and racial

discrimination can often overshadow the discussions about discrimination based on other identity markers. As such, this paper focuses predominantly on gender/sex but does not dismiss the importance of the racial dimension and also the dynamic link between race and gender.

South Africa has a protracted history of racial inequality, which, as Wheeler and Wiese (2024) argue, has contributed to gender inequality in the country and higher education is not exempt from this. This is evident in the fact that higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, public and private, continue to struggle to achieve gender equality despite having democratic policy mandates (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023). Whilst there has been an increase in female student enrolment numbers, the same cannot be said for faculty positions, which are still dominated by men, particularly in the science domains. Several reasons account for the prevailing gender inequality in South African HEIs that adversely affect female academics. Wheeler and Wiese (2024) note that traditional gender roles and stereotypes remain embedded in mainstream thinking in South Africa and permeate every aspect of social life, including employment, education and executive leadership. The burden of childcare still falls disproportionately on women (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023). HEIs remain unsupportive and create additional barriers that disallow female career progression (Walters et al., 2022). In addition, cultural beliefs that are often patriarchally constructed have a strong foothold in South African social life. And, as Morrell et al. (2012) note, the colonial culture strengthened the entrenchment of a gendered society. The respondents in this study straddle several identity markers, but the combination of two (specifically, being a mother and an academic) has resulted in a negative ascription that needs to be dismantled through (re-) education. This would hopefully culminate in Intersectional Justice within South African higher education.

### Methods

This research is a sub-study of a continuing research project initiated by the South African Research Chair for Teaching and Learning (Post School Education and Training) that

investigates women's experiences of higher education, with a particular interest in doctoral students in South Africa, Kenya and Australia. The main study aims to investigate the experiences, trajectories, and supportive and limiting variables for women in higher education. This sub-study selected a specific cohort of women in higher education to highlight the experiences of women who must manage their academic portfolios in addition to managing childcare responsibilities.

### *Research Paradigm*

This study was framed within an interpretive paradigm, "characterised by a concern for the individual," and aims to understand "the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 19). As such, this paradigm is most suitable for investigating the varied experiences of academic mothers in South Africa.

### *Research Approach*

This study employed a case study approach to highlight the experiences of a selection of women who differ racially, in terms of age and career stages. Research into the value of case studies asserts that case studies are useful as they use "a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle" and they also generate a deep understanding of a complex issue (Nisbet & Watt, 1984 cited in Cohen et al., 2018, p. 375).

### *Research Methods*

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Interviews are a useful tool to acknowledge the social situatedness of research. In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) note that the interview "is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, nonverbal, seen, spoken, heard and with online interviews, written" (p. 506). In this sub-study, all respondents participated in online interviews using MS Teams. The interviews were between 60 and 75 minutes long. Respondents were asked questions relating to their journey to motherhood, support structures at home and with their institution, experiences related to managing childcare and academic responsibility, challenges relating to completing tasks, including discussions about time management, and insights into their

mental and physical health. Many of these questions and prompts were developed through an understanding of the literature on academic mothers.

### ***Ethics and Ethical Considerations***

Ethics clearance for this project was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's ethics committee. Respondents participated in this study voluntarily and were notified about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of prejudice or negative repercussions. The names of the respondents, as well as the people and institutions they mentioned by name, were changed to ensure complete anonymity. The interviews were recorded using MS Teams, and the respondents were informed that the interviews would be recorded.

### ***Sampling***

Two forms of sampling techniques were used concurrently in this sub-study. First, individuals were approached from an existing professional network, and secondly, snowball sampling, through the process of referrals, was also used.

### ***Data Analysis***

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by MS Teams and reworked manually for accuracy by cross-referencing with the audio. Interviews were coded manually using Braun and Clarke's (2012) process for thematic analysis. There were only four interviews, so thematic analysis was used for its accessibility and flexibility.

### ***Case Studies***

#### ***Geraldine***

Geraldine was born and raised in Cape Town. She is over 50 and identifies as a Coloured female. She is married with three children. Most of her experiences of higher education are based on private education, but she obtained her academic qualifications from public HEIs in South Africa. She is currently an adjunct lecturer at a private HEI. In the interview, she reflected on working and studying whilst being a mother and the physical

and mental challenges that accompanied this journey.

#### ***Fatima***

Fatima was born in a town outside of Cape Town, where she spent her school years. Identifying herself as a married Coloured female between the ages of 46 and 50, she has three children. After completing school, her religious conversion ruffled feathers with her father and resulted in her moving to the eastern part of South Africa to pursue her education in sociology. She is currently an associate professor at a public university in the country. In her interview, she reflected on her experiences of studying while being a new mother. She also discussed what it is like being a mum and a professor in higher education in South Africa.

#### ***Alicia***

Alicia identifies herself as a White English-speaking female between the ages of 31 and 45. She lives in the Western Cape Province with her wife and son. She is currently the director for a Non-Profit Organisation in the country and recently completed her Master's degree. She reflected on working and being a new mum whilst juggling her studies.

#### ***Leila***

Leila, a primary school teacher, self-identifies as a Coloured female between the ages of 31 and 45. She is married with two children. In the interview, she reflected on her experiences of studying and juggling motherhood.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The themes privileged in this discussion were selected based on the argument that they need to be foregrounded more emphatically in discussions relating to gender equality and social justice. Discussing female "issues", such as menstruation, menopause and female well-being in the workplace, has long been considered taboo, unprofessional, and "complicated", with discussion being relegated to bathrooms rather than boardrooms. More positively, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in research focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of working mothers, and this paper

contributes to the discussion from a South African perspective (Coe et al., 2021; Kirwin & Ettinger, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023).

To frame the discussion, each respondent was asked to describe their initiation into motherhood, including their experiences, support mechanisms, psychological state, and imagined motherhood. The extracts highlighted below suggest that the process of becoming a mother is laden with challenges and demands and has a fundamental impact on the psychological well-being of women.

Leila highlighted that there is an anxiety that emerges when you become a mother for the first time that stems from having to chart unknown territories. She mentioned that there is no textbook for being a mother; you just need to figure it out as you go along:

*“... if you're a new mother, everything is new. So, you basically just learn as you're going along, nobody tells you how to really be a mother. So, you just have to figure it out yourself and juggle everything. But, as a first-time mom, I can tell you it was crazy. I actually feel sorry for my first born because you make so many mistakes with him.... I would actually think that, you know, it's a scary thought ... How am I going [to] as a 27 [year old] ... how am I going to be a mother and look after another human being?”* (Leila)

Alicia said that when you have challenges getting pregnant, having a child can add an extra dimension of worry and protectiveness. In addition, the stereotypes associated with first-time mums are often inaccurate, as she experienced:

*“My journey to motherhood was probably a little bit more different to others ... You know, being married to a woman, we had to undergo IVF, in vitro fertilisation, so it was a long journey. It was ... a lot of money and time and messing with all my hormones and weight gain and all sorts of craziness ... I'm rather fiercely protective of my child ... My breastfeeding was not a goddess journey for me at all ... and you meet other moms, and everyone seemed to be freaking perfect ... and I'm a freaking mess. It was very difficult to see this portrayal of perfection, of love, of togetherness when I was nowhere near it.... It was nothing like*

*what I expected. Nothing at all.... I really thought ... are the babies born and you just have this immediate euphoria and love? And I didn't have that. And I was like, what is wrong with me?”* (Alicia)

Geraldine noted that, even when you feel prepared to have children, there are elements of motherhood that you do not expect, and you need to learn to deal with these challenges as they happen:

*“I've always wanted children ... Er, ... It wasn't easy ... Yeah, I was prepared. [After giving birth to my first child] ... [but] I was working, and ... I just started so I could only stay home for the month ... it was really awful and having my breasts swelling and the pain and having to run to the bathroom each time and expressing my milk because I mean you can't sit there at work and expressing your milk into things. I just needed to go to the bathroom to relieve myself. Cabbage leaves didn't work, ... I used to wear the breast pads ... It was quite a terrible experience and going home ... and then having to, you know, make use of public transport ... By the time I get home, my son had just had his bottle. My goodness, I was standing under the water just so that the heat can, you know, relax my breasts because it was on fire. The weight was throbbing.”* (Geraldine)

Fatima highlighted that it was not an easy journey and that it got lonely, especially when studying. However, she believed that everything is on a continuum and that there will be good moments and less good moments:

*“Well, [motherhood] certainly, was not [easy]. It wasn't [hard] the entire experience. I mean, I think what motherhood teaches you is that anything is on a continuum and, as bad as it gets, is it as good as it gets ... But the first one was quite difficult. I think it got easier [with the second child] because, you know, that it does get better.... So, it was, it was tough.... I was studying full time but, at that point, I was writing the dissertation. So, it's not like I had regular contact with ... people at the university.... So yeah, no, it was, it was tough. And it was I, I guess, very lonely at that point ... Life is simple before you have children, you know, it's controllable.”* (Fatima)

As the reflections above suggest, matrescence is a common yet highly subjective experience. Earlier research into the phenomenon, conducted by Barclay et al. (1997), highlights that, when mothers were asked to reflect on their journey of motherhood, words such as “isolating”, “trapped”, “suffering”, “repetitive”, “exhaustion”, “drained”, “I didn’t realise ...”, “it’s really different ...” and “a whole new world” (p. 721) were commonly heard. Similarly, more recent studies have shown that the journey to motherhood is a major developmental milestone (McCarthy et al., 2021) and that this transition is extremely challenging (Beeck et al., 2022). In addition, the journey to motherhood results in a reconfiguration of identity where past experiences can impact future maternal behaviours (Mathijssen et al., 2024). However, women also believe that, despite these challenges, motherhood is also the most fulfilling journey. Nordin (2020) asked women, “Is it worthwhile?” All responded “Yes” and that “[the] love for our children is so great that we forget ways they may hurt us or the rocky roads we oft travel as parents; it’s a powerful force that erases the bad and allows only the good to be remembered” (Para. 5). However, being a mum is only one part of an academic mother’s identity. As complex sentient beings, the journey to motherhood does not presuppose a complete termination of passions, likes and dislikes previously held. This is why mothers who are passionate about higher education and academia pursue this passion despite the mental strain and anguish that seem to accompany this career choice.

### ***Theme 1: The guilt of studying whilst being a mother can be paralysing***

Women who choose to pursue careers or study whilst being a mother, especially a new mother, often highlight their immense guilt. As Bazelon (2022) notes “[o]vercoming working mom guilt isn’t easy. Intensive mothering ideals, the perfect mother myth, and social expectations tell us that we should put ourselves on the backburner and always put our children first” (Para. 1). Motherhood guilt also emerged as a challenge in this study. The quotes from Leila and Alicia, who were both postgraduate students with full time jobs, highlights this:

*“I felt guilty most of the time because I have to sit with work. But my kids are small. They want to go out, they have to sacrifice a lot of the time and spend time away from me.... Yeah ... now you carry that ... weight on your shoulders that can kill that you ... because you feel like Master’s can consume your whole life. Studying can consume your whole life, and you can’t enjoy life the way you want to. So, the guilt is definitely there like I said, I do stay at home every weekend. And even if I’m just thinking about Master’s and not even doing anything or reading, just the thought of having to do something ... really takes up all your time, you know, and then, at the end of the day, you didn’t get to do nothing that day because of the ... weight on your shoulders.”* (Leila)

Alicia notes: *“You’re not there for your child. It’s the birthday parties missed. It’s the time you say, ‘get out of the room; I’m working’. It’s the late nights. The missed bedtime stories. It is not there. And even though you, physically present because you, you’re sitting on your laptop and you’re working, but you don’t play with him. I used to be the one that my child played with. You don’t do that anymore. He still doesn’t ask me to play Lego. I’m not the playful one anymore. So, the most challenging is just you’re just not available to your child as you could have been.... I mean, women working in academia at your job. So, maybe, you can put in the eight to 10 hours because I do. I work long hours anyway for work. That’s fine. You can still find the time. But when you’re studying part time, when you’re doing more than you should be ... that means that something had to give. And work did give time, particularly for data collection. I managed to do that, but the rest of the time was family. I had to give up family time.”* (Alicia)

Aarntzen et al.’s (2019) research concurs with these findings of mom guilt for working and studying mothers. Their research highlights that working mothers often think about reducing their work hours, reducing their personal time and the guilt associated with juggling childcare and work or studying impacted negatively on their overall well-being.

### ***Theme 2: Hormonal changes can severely impact women’s wellbeing and their ability to work***

Menstruation, perimenopause, menopause and post-birth hormonal shifts are normal biological processes that accompany women as they age. These processes are impacted by changing hormones that can have a catastrophic effect on women's ability to function optimally, including managing work, household and childcare responsibilities. Hormonal adjustments during and after pregnancy are also challenging for some women. As such, a lack of support to deal with hormonal changes has a negative effect on the well-being of women (Wieczorek et al., 2023). Although the effects of these biological and physiological processes differ between women, recent research highlights that one in three women must stop doing their daily activities because of menstruation alone (Schoep et al., 2019). In addition, women who enter menopause experience a variety of symptoms including night sweats, mood changes, hot flashes, sleep disturbances and cognitive difficulties that can impair women's quality of life, including having a negative impact on their work (Woods & Utian, 2018). Even though these challenging symptoms affect a significant part of the global workforce, "there remains a dearth of literature on the impact of menopause symptoms on work productivity" (Faubion et al., 2023, p. 1).

The stories of Geraldine and Leila reflect this. Geraldine explains how menopause impacted her throughout her studies. The symptoms gradually started getting worse over the years, and she did not feel comfortable highlighting the issue to anyone, including her supervisor. As she explains below:

*"... you have no idea [how menopause has impacted me] ... when I did my undergrad ... During exams ... I had a panic moment where I actually like ... they show on TV where you actually hold the desk with both hands and you, you're holding yourself back from jumping up and running out of the hall while you're writing exams.... And I couldn't understand myself because I've always been in control of myself ... my head and my emotions were all over the show ... Then my third year, the same things. Things are just going wrong in my body.... I couldn't go and write exams ... I just went blank.... And then, things were just going all funny, and I just couldn't*

*understand, things are now getting out of hand because I'm feeling like someone who's going crazy ... You know, I, I'm not speaking properly. The things that I want to say are coming out back to front. Things are not making sense when people talk to me. I don't understand ... what they're saying. And I said, no, no ... And I went to consult my doctor. I said ... I need your help. I said, I think I'm going crazy. I'm thinking I'm losing my mind. I said I'm studying. Something is wrong. [He asked] ... what are the symptoms I'm experiencing? And so, during that time [while doing my Master's], I was experiencing brain fog.... And then, in the mornings, I would wake up and feel like an elephant sat on my chest. I was exhausted every morning.... Mood swings ... Everything was just going wrong. I was gaining weight ... I was getting aches and pains everywhere. And then the doctor examined me. Did ... blood works. And all of that. And then he said to me, 'Oh, you're going through menopause' ... So he put me on the hormone replacement patch. The ... patch only gave me some relief to my symptoms, but I was still feeling really, really bad during that time ... I felt like somebody was partying every night. You know, when you wake up and you feel babalas [hungover] ... I didn't know if I should tell [my supervisor]."* (Geraldine)

Leila recounts how she had to manage the pains that accompany menstruation. Although, severe menstruation pains are not the experience of all women, it does affect a significant percentage of women:

*"...Like, when I got my periods, like because of your stress levels and your anxiety levels, you sometimes get your periods so bad. And then, there were times that I would flop out and faint at work, and I would get so sick and then they'd [other females at work would say] no, no ... she's acting ... she's being dramatic with stuff like that.... And these are females saying this. So that is why I'm emphasising that all females maybe don't have the same symptoms when they have the periods or menopause or mood swings ... so it's like they don't want to understand that it has a big impact, you know, on your mental state because periods can make you a bit emotional. You know, you would cry for days. And I'm like, oh, ok, it was my period. You know what I'm saying? So that*

*happened to me all the time. I constantly cry for a few days and keep my feelings to myself. Why am I crying then? I'm like, OK, my period's coming."* (Leila)

Whilst the experiences highlighted above by Geraldine and Leila are not representative of all women, severe menopause and menstruation symptoms are more common than not. It is similar for women during pregnancy. Peacock et al. (2023) note that, although there is variation in what women experience, more than 80% of women between the ages of 45 and 56 years of age experience menopausal symptoms. Similarly, Schoep et al. (2019) agree that heavy menstrual bleeding is common and widespread in women. In their research that investigated women's experiences of menstruation, 85% had dysmenorrhea (heavy bleeding), 77% complained about tiredness, and 38% said they could not perform their usual daily activities (Schoep et al., 2019). Given that women account for almost half of the global workforce, it is imperative that these challenges take centre stage. In the United Kingdom (UK) alone, 3.5 million women have considered quitting their jobs due to menstruation and menopause-related ailments (Simply Health UK, 2021). As such, educating staff, both men and women, about these challenges may be useful to create a more welcoming and empathetic working environment.

***Theme 3: Supportive supervisors and managers can alleviate stress and anxiety for women who must balance childcare and academic work***

Good leadership positively impacts employee's mental health and productivity (Lundqvist et al., 2022). When staff feel valued, heard and appreciated, they are more likely to go over and above the call of duty and remain loyal to their employers (Atiku & van Wyk, 2024). The same can be said for postgraduate students who must do the mentally exhausting work of completing a dissertation or academics who need to juggle teaching and research. When they have supportive supervisors and managers, it makes the highly stressful pursuit a little more bearable (Noor & Ampornstira, 2019). Whilst both men and women need good support and leadership, empathetic leadership is critical to the well-being

of women in the workplace, particularly in helping with the additional mental load that women often carry.

In reflecting on her journey as an academic, Fatima highlighted that she had a highly supportive manager. The researcher probed into the gender of her manager with the assumption that a female manager may be more supportive than a male supervisor. However, Fatima debunked the myth that only female managers can be or know how to be supportive to women and, because of the support she received, her journey in academia did not negatively affect her simultaneous journey to motherhood:

*"... you know, as I said the HOD that I had when I was in sociology, he was, he was male and he was so nice and ... He was a darling like. He just had this demeanour. He would even tell you ... you can come and tell me anything you want and I will sort it out. But you look at him and you know you can go to him and tell him anything you want and he will sort it out. And he didn't like make a big deal about it. You know, it wasn't like he was doing you like, a hundred favours. He just did it.... I mean, so I think that it's not that males are not capable of being supportive and ... And also, like the, I think, the sense that you get that were I to reach out ... and ask for support. I am not going to be stigmatised. I am not going to be that person. I am not gonna, you know, my trajectory is not going to change. I'll still be up for the next promotion. I'll still be, you know, I'll still be considered capable."* (Fatima)

When probing into how she managed her childcare and her academic work, she attributed her resilience to her learning journey in South Africa as highlighted below:

*"I think I'm generally calm; I'm able to sort of like work with chaos and I attribute that to the State of Emergency in 1985, when I started school in ... what is now grade one. You know, and I remember like driving to school one morning with my father, and everything was just quiet. And there were Caspers (army trucks), in the in the street, you know. And so, I spent most of my schooling in Township schools and they were crazy places. They were places where things happened, despite everything else. Not because it was calm,*

*you know? And so, I've always felt that, in as much as you know, people say apartheid education was, you know, not great. I feel like in terms of, for me, and [that] might not be the case for everybody, for me, it taught me that it doesn't matter what's happening. Shit can get done ... And so, you know ... I can deal with a lot ... of chaos at the same time.... There are moments when I try to think back to, sort of, the time, you know, especially when I was working and Salim was a baby and Wazeer was small, and I can't remember sometimes. Like, I don't know [how I managed].” (Fatima)*

Alicia noted that her Master’s supervisor was very good in terms of getting the work done, but there was no emotional engagement; it was always just about the work and, although this approach helped her in completing her dissertation, there was a lost opportunity for further mentorship and guidance:

*“[My relationship with my supervisor] was not bad ... I think, mostly, because we just held each other accountable to meet, even for 10 minutes every at a set time on a day. ... And, I think, if it wasn't for that, wasn't for that, [my work] would have deteriorated. ... the fact that we had that 10-minute Skype chat every Saturday at a certain time and I did it before the kid woke up and everything. We'd do it like sometime between 6:00 and 7:00am ... I think that really kept it going ... but it was very interesting because there was no personal connection. It was very academic ... I am the kind of person at every conversation. I'm going like, 'How are you? And where are you and what are you doing?' And he would just shut that down.... It was actually amusing to me at how he couldn't speak about himself or ask about how I am. It was just a work relationship. It was: 'I don't need to know who you are. I don't need to know how you are' ... He would just be like, so, what have you worked on? ... And a part of me understood and appreciated that it did mean I had to seek that connection elsewhere ... Whereas perhaps he could have offered more of that ... become a mentor. Instead, he was very clinical a supervisor.... I got it done because of him ... but there's no way I can send a message to him and say how are you doing? And I think that's weird.” (Alicia)*

The experiences of Fatima and Alicia highlight the vastly different experiences women have with leadership in higher education. Fatima reported having excellent and supportive management where her mothering responsibilities was not considered a burden and did not impact progression in her career. Alicia used the word “clinical” to describe her experience with her Master’s supervisor. Whilst he was good at the academic related tasks, he was not able to “connect” with her. Research by Khuram et al. (2023) suggests that supervisors, who can nurture the student cognitively and affectively, result in an increased sense of motivation and wellbeing for students. Specifically in the context of academic mothers, Sebastián-González et al. (2023) highlight that to ensure women do not leave academia, we need to ensure the system is set up to respect and value what mothers do.

This paper discusses the experiences of academic mothers by highlighting the experiences of four very different women in South African Higher Education. Three themes were selected from the semi-structured interviews. The first theme acknowledges the guilt that Academic Mothers face when they choose to have children and continue their career ambitions in academia. Constantly harbouring feelings of guilt has a negative impact on the well-being of women (Boogers & Langeveld-Ceres, 2023). Women should be supported in their academic careers and childcare endeavours as both contribute to society, albeit in very different ways. The second theme discussed in this paper is normalising discussions and the very real effects of hormones, including menstruation and menopause, on women’s work and well-being. This theme is important in discussions about academic mothers as it highlights how hormones affect women’s cognitive and physical abilities. The discussion of hormones also extends to pregnant women. Wiczorek et al. (2023) note that, in severe cases, fluctuating hormones can even lead to psychotic episodes. Creating an environment in which women can openly speak about their challenges without fear of repercussions is critical. Silencing these conversations militates against the call for gender equality and equity in society. The third theme highlights their experiences of leadership and supervision in higher education. The findings

suggest that being a good leader is not gender dependent. In addition, it also suggests that a good academic supervisor is one who can respect the affective dimension whilst nurturing the cognitive dimension of learning.

### Conclusion

This contribution highlights what often remains unspoken, particularly in societies where men and women assume traditional roles. The findings suggest three concerning challenges relating to being an Academic Mother in South Africa. First, despite living in a postcolonial, liberal, globalised space, women in academia still feel the pressure to “do more” to be deemed academy-worthy. These women put in substantial additional hours, including early mornings, late nights and weekends, to ensure they can appease both of their roles. Second, when women experience normal biological processes, such as menstruation or menopause, in addition to dealing with childcare and workloads, they suffer in silence and often do not complain or ask for help to avoid looking incompetent. Third, being an empathetic manager or academic supervisor is not gender-dependent. Supportive management and leadership are critical to improving working mothers' working conditions and mental health. It is essential for university management and human resource departments to be privy to the experiences of academic mothers and to educate staff about this. It is interesting how society recognises differences between men and women in sporting events, but not in the workplace. Recognising the role that women play in society and supporting them is an equitable route to attaining gender equality. Simple changes, such as educating staff, realistic goal setting, gender-sensitive policies, flexible working hours, encouraging work-life balance, inclusive office designs, investing in women's wellbeing, and providing a platform for women to discuss their challenges without fear of repercussions, can support academic mothers in the workplace and during their studies. In the context of global economic austerity and decline, two-income households are often required to maintain just a basic level of survival. In addition, in the sub-Saharan African context, where single female-headed households are commonplace, working is

not a luxurious self-indulgent endeavour. HEIs occupy a dynamic place in society. As such, they have the capacity to lead the call for social transformation, particularly for women.

### Disclosures

#### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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