Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women About Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st-Century South Africa

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Abstract
Issues of women’s empowerment and gender inequality have been of paramount importance, particularly in the two decades since the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995. At that conference, the campaign for women’s empowerment was initiated to implement laws promoting gender equality. This research explored the perceptions of nine academic women at the University of the Witwatersrand with regard to women’s empowerment and the changing roles of women in a South African context in the 21st century. The research adopted a qualitative research methodology, and purposive sampling was utilized to select the study population. Data were collected in the form of semistructured interviews of approximately 30 to 60 min in duration, and thematic content analysis was applied to analyze the data. The data collected indicated that women in academia face challenges and experiences like other women in the workforce. These challenges and experiences are a result of the patriarchal nature of the workplace environment and the slow transformation at the university. It is also interesting to note that the gender roles of women in academia in their daily activities, married or single, are aggravated by the patriarchal nature of the broader society in which these women live.

Keywords
academic women, women’s empowerment, changing gender roles, 21st-century South Africa

Introduction
All over the world, women have been empowered by policies and laws that have been implemented to address various violations of women’s rights and well-being. Some of the injustices that women faced were domestic violence, harmful cultural practices, stigmatization, and marginalization. Globally, a vast amount of literature and research addresses women in workplaces, and how gender imbalances in the workplace remain a factor. There is also a great deal of literature on how women in households have experienced the empowerment of women. Historically, issues that concern women’s empowerment and gender have raised numerous arguments and generated debate regarding how best to empower women and how men can best support this endeavor to bridge the inequality gap. In South Africa, legislation has been enacted to redress the imbalances of the past, and some women have seized the opportunity and risen to the top. Women in academia have faced challenges similar to the challenges faced by any professional women who seek to occupy higher positions; however, women in academia face some unique phenomena. The purpose of this research is to explore how female academics experience women’s empowerment and how changing gender roles have affected their way of life socially and academically.

Theoretical Framework
Social Capital
According to Lent, Cook, and Burt (2001), the basic idea of social capital is that a person’s family, friends, and associates compose an important asset, an asset that can be called upon in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged for material gain. People who fall on hard times know it is their friends and family who compose the ultimate safety net. This theme is essential to this research, summing up some of the arguments in the literature reviewed in this article. The issues of connections and networks both at home and at work are of paramount importance in examining how academic women at the University of the Witwatersrand can utilize these networks. Recognizing the interlocking nature of race and gender underscores the significance of two important theoretical

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concepts: social location and standpoint (Collins, 1991). Social location refers to the position an individual occupies within society, particularly with regard to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other marked categories. These social locations are privileged and oppressed, depending on the access to power that one has within particular categories and how the categories intersect. A group’s position in hierarchical power relations and the experiences attached to differential social locations influence perceptions and behaviors. A standpoint as defined by feminists is a critical perspective of marginalized or oppressed groups regarding how power relations operate within society (Collins, 1991). It is important to stress that it is a group’s location within intersecting hierarchical social structures, not individual variations per se, that fosters the development of standpoints. According to Valian (2005), practices that unintentionally and inadvertently disadvantage women compared with men are not inherently sexist. Such practices are undesirable and should be changed but are not sexist. What allows anger, aggression, and violence against women and what allows sappy sentimentiality toward women are ancillary belief systems such as authoritarianism and heterosexist and personality structures.

**Academic Women**

This study defines academic women as scholarly, intellectual females teaching or conducting research at an institution of higher learning. The researcher primarily considered this definition in her sampling to select her research participants.

**Women Empowerment**

In this study, the definition of women’s empowerment is derived from Mosedale (2005), who defined women’s empowerment as the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for women to be and do in situations in which women have been restricted, compared with men, from being and doing. Another definition is the processes by which women redefine gender roles in manners that extend their possibilities for being and doing. The researcher also adopted the definition from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which defines women’s economic empowerment as “having access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long-term basis and receiving the material benefits of this access and control.” Such a definition extends beyond the short-term goals of increasing women’s access to income and seeks longer term, sustainable benefits, not only in terms of changes to laws and policies that constrain women’s participation in and benefits from development but also in terms of power relationships at the household, community, and market levels (Carr, 2000). Some policies and laws have been implemented to address injustices against women and to promote women’s empowerment. Evidence indicates that these policies and statutes are merely good on paper because what is responsible for women’s lack of progress in the professions and in academia is the gender schemas by which both males and females perceive and evaluate women. According to Valian (2005), the small but systematic undervaluation of women culminates in women having smaller salaries than men and slower rates of promotion. Hence, laws and policies are mere stepping stones to the true empowerment of women, which involves a change in attitudes and behavior toward women in society and workplace communities.

**Changing Gender Roles**

In this study, changing gender roles are defined as a social construct that is being developed over time with relevance to society, including social values and norms expected and agreed upon by society (Carr, 2000). Perhaps, then, whether one wants to be male or female is not a choice because the structures society dictate what it is to be male and female by establishing roles and cultural norms in a manner that inevitably constructs a person’s gender. Previously, by social values and gender roles in the South African context, the role of women in society has always differed from the role of men. The woman’s roles were in the family and at home, and her time was devoted to supporting her husband’s career, as expected by society (Walker, 1998). Things have changed; women are holding leadership positions in areas such as academia, business, law, and Parliament. However, women are less likely to obtain the automatic deference that leadership confers on men. Women are objectively hurt in such situations, even if societies intend no hurt. A woman must work harder to demonstrate that her apparent position of leadership is a real position of leadership (Valian, 2005). This study’s purpose is to examine the participants’ attitudes regarding gender to create a platform in which women discuss gender issues.

**21st-Century South Africa**

According to Barker (1999), previous policies and laws during apartheid in South Africa deliberately favored males, both in the public and private sectors. This favoritism created inequality of power between men and women, which inevitably led to an unequal sharing of powers and resources such as time, information, education, and income. Currently, South Africa is endeavoring to transform women’s status quo as mandated by the Constitution to promote the rights of all citizens regardless of gender. According to Ntsele (2014), this transformation yielded the adoption of new policies and strategies such as gender equity and affirmative action measures, which essentially were intended to be the vehicle that enables women to deconstruct gender while advancing in the workplace. Hence, 21 years after independence, women constitute the largest numbers in the workplace within most sectors.
Literature Review

According to Neuman (2006), a literature review is an effective evaluation of selected documents on a research topic. A review may form an essential component of the research process or may be the research project itself. In the context of this research article, the literature review is a critical synthesis of previous studies and research, providing a detailed review of the literature used in this research project. Its aim is to explore the perceptions of Wits academic women of women’s empowerment and the changing roles of women in 21st-century South Africa. The study was conducted in the United States by two researchers (Bell & Nkomo, 2001), authors of a book called *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*. That book compared women of two different races, Black women and White women, in corporate America. Another study by Elaine M. Kelly (2008) explored the intersections of the female sex, the working class, and academia. The third study was conducted by a researcher in South Africa on the experiences of academic women, in which 13 women were interviewed to obtain their educational autobiographies and narrative accounts and explore their personal experiences as academic women. These research studies will be utilized as points of reference for this article to determine whether the issues raised are incongruous with the research topic under study or have different connotations that can be enhanced or rejected by this study.

Race, Class, and Socialization Background

Determines Different Experiences Among Academic Women

The research conducted by Bell and Nkomo (2001) challenged society’s assumptions that race, poverty, a lack of education, a dysfunctional family life, or sexual prejudice are obstacles to professional success. The study showed that some successful women in corporate America do not come from stereotypical White, middle-class families or graduate from first-class schools. This study concluded that White women growing up in middle-class families frequently must work hard in the corporate world to learn to network effectively, whereas Black women often have a large group of people in their childhood who play significant roles in their lives. Consequently, Black women have a much richer background and greater self-esteem (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Bell and Nkomo asserted that Black women’s self-esteem is less tied to achievement alone and that Black women may be better prepared to thrive in the workplace. Similarly, women raised in poverty, although suffering obvious disadvantages, develop a type of protective social factor that is beneficial in the professional world. The research conducted by Bell and Nkomo differs from this study because this study focuses on academic women in the context of 21st-century South Africa. Hence, it is worth examining whether academic women face challenges similar to the challenges of women in the corporate world.

Academic Identities: Women in a South African Landscape

Walker (1998) argued that the myth that the experience of first-world White, middle-class women is the experience of all women is absurd. In South Africa, the contextual lens differs fundamentally because of apartheid divisions based on race and entrenched in patriarchal structures. Apartheid also had various effects on women in different social groups. Historically, race is a central carrier of power; certainly, South African women’s social identity is profoundly shaped by the effects of race and racism for both Black and White women. Thus, although it may be fair to say that all South African women have been and remain oppressed, all South African women have not been oppressed equally and have experienced women’s empowerment differently. Therefore, the lesson of Walker is that some women have some common interests and some common experiences, for example, working in universities; however, these experiences are by no means universal, explicit, or conflict-free. In South Africa, there is a difference. Having said this, the researcher also realizes the availability of affirmative action and new empowering policies for Blacks such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Amendment Act of 53/2003. Hence, such changes in contemporary South Africa may indicate that the researcher’s findings will differ from a study by Bell and Nkomo (2001) that focused on America.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to clarify whether the experiences of academic women at Wits in a 21st-century, South African context are similar to the experiences of executive women in 20th-century corporate America by virtue of gender or whether variations in location and context cause differences and the emergence of new experiences and new themes. Walker’s assumptions are quite different from the study by Bell and Nkomo (2001) in the United States in which Black women in corporate business were in a far better position than White women. This contrast is essential in this study to obtain a clear picture of the situation in South Africa nearly 20 years after Walker’s research to clarify whether her findings apply after changes in the cultural context and after many laws have been implemented to advance women’s empowerment and gender equality. It will be of interest to know whether some of the defense mechanisms of resilience in identity formation are being utilized by academic women at Wits.

Method

This research study adopted a qualitative research method, and thematic content analysis was utilized to analyze the data. Qualitative methodology is useful in such research because women’s empowerment and gender issues are social
constructs or a social phenomenon that can be understood and explained by individuals who experience those issues. According to Neuman (2000), people construct their own meaning for certain actions or reactions that people experience in their daily lives. Sometimes, individuals who experience the same situations share meaning; individuals who experience the same situations, however, no matter how common the experiences and meanings may be, face unique elements and subjective meaning. This study explores the perceptions of Wits academic women in terms of women’s empowerment and changing gender roles in a 21st-century, South African context. Triangulation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Because the researcher needed to be objective, keeping extensive notes and checking those notes regularly were useful in adjusting the research design as the project progressed. Babbie and Mouton (2001) asserted that one of the reasons why exploratory studies are conducted is to satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for better understanding. This researcher is considering venturing into academia and would like to develop a sense of what it is like to be an academic woman.

A purposive sampling included participants who were academic women working at Wits as lecturers or researchers regardless of age, marital status, race, class, or historical background. Hence, interviews were conducted according to the availability and willingness of these female academics. The researcher managed to interview nine female academics at Wits University from four different schools and departments. Semistructured interviews were utilized to gather data, and these interviews comprised predetermined questions with a mostly fixed order but allowed flexibility for adding further questions for clarification during the interviews (Neuman, 2000). The participants included four Blacks, three Whites, and two Indians. Five of the participants were South Africans, two were foreigners, one from Zimbabwe, and the other from Germany. Data analysis comprised two components: data management and data interpretation. The former requires managing the data, and the latter involves making sense of the evidence by descriptive or explanatory accounts. According to Greenstein (2003), data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. This research study was primarily focused on the thematic content analysis form of data management and hence followed that order. Thematic analysis seeks to analyze the themes of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Making sense of the gathered data required conducting a data analysis. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using the thematic content analysis and anticipated procedures involved in identifying themes using the format as stipulated by Greenstein.

Observation was an essential component of the method used to analyze the data gathered. Walker (1998) asserted that Black and White South African women may have been engraved with patterns of desire that hold gender identities in place; however, Black South African women are more likely to see their racial identities as crucially shaping access to and success in the academic world. The attitudes expressed during the interviews indicated to the researcher that race and gender are extremely sensitive issues; hence, much anger and bitterness were heard from the Black academic women who were interviewed. The White academic women showed a great deal of contentment and calmness in their responses. This observation speaks volumes to the differing experiences that academic women at Wits face in 21st-century South Africa in relation to women’s empowerment and changing gender roles.

Discussion of Results
Judging from the above literature, concepts, and theory, it is essential to note that some recurring themes emerged in all of the literature despite different methods, population samples, historical context, location, and type of research study. This study has adopted the majority of the themes and results that were highlighted above to determine whether the Wits academic women’s perceptions of women’s empowerment and changing gender roles are a reflection of some major themes that have been highlighted in some previous research. The results were interpreted using quotes from participants in the study and also how the quotes related to the literature that was reviewed for this study. Examining the various themes that will be discussed at length, the interpretation of the findings helped explain the research question, which seeks to explore the perceptions of Wits academic women regarding women’s empowerment and the changing roles of women in 21st-century South Africa. The themes that emerged were consistent with the purpose and objectives of the study. Those themes and subthemes emerged throughout the study.

The major themes emerged throughout the study, and subthemes emerged depending on the participant.

Intersectionality
Intersectionality is a dominant theme, primarily because it incorporates every theme that emerged from the interviews and some of the dominant literature examined for this study. Race, class, position, historical background, age, sexuality, competence, and nationality are fundamental issues that create the experiences of academic women. Although those women may hold identical positions and are of the same gender, female academics experience their lived experiences differently. These subthemes are discussed throughout the research report. Walker (1998) affirmed that the identities of academic women are constructed at sites of complex and chaotic struggles, at the nexus of multiple subject positions; their identities are socially produced in a range of economic, social, and political practices saturated with power.

Intersectionality as a theme is consistent with the study conducted by Bell and Nkomo (2001) in which those authors illustrated how race, class, social upbringing, and background
affect and determine how women’s empowerment is enhanced and hindered in the corporate world. The literature review indicated that other professionals face an intersectionality of challenges that is somewhat similar to the intersectionality of challenges faced by academic women. This research illustrates that some struggles that women face in academia are linked to how race and class affect the manner in which women are empowered or can fully work in an equal environment with men and women of different classes and races without being favored or disadvantaged because of their class background and race. This study also illustrates how ethnic groups and nationalities affect the manner in which academic women are perceived and treated. Differences in position, experience, and age are some of the causes of inequalities and marginalization leading to the numerous challenges academic women face in achieving their goals. Such challenges result from structural and institutional forces. This study was conducted in a different context from the context of Bell and Nkomo; however, it is significant that some of the themes that those authors identified in their research remain applicable in 21st-century South Africa. Clearly, then, women issues with regard to empowerment are somehow similar regardless of location or career.

Below are some of the responses of some of the participants that show the intersectionality of issues that academic women at Wits are experiencing:

. . . First of all, I am a foreigner. Every day is a challenge just because you are a foreigner, and then you are female. It is a challenge in this ***school; then you are overloaded all the time so that you can’t do your actual work. These are the challenges. There are a lot. You just can’t say the same things, also because you are white. I’m a white foreigner, even worse, so you can’t say what you actually think because otherwise you might be considered as racist; or you are a foreigner, so it won’t help you know those kinds of things. That’s what I . . . I’m just honest; that’s the way it is, so instead, I will keep quiet. That is basically what I find as a challenge. Not being able to speak my mind. (Participant 8)

. . . At this particular point in time I, over the past five days, I had a total of five hours of sleep so there is a lot of pressure and a lot of academic and administrative work. So it is quite exhausting, and there is a sense that I am a new academic and a female academic as well. So it is very taxing and most of the time emotionally draining. I love what I do, but it is taxing. So my partner feels that these are fairly difficult conditions, especially for work. She perceives it to be awful being in academia. She is an executive in marketing and strategic finance. When I left the corporate world, my partner and I thought that things will be different for me. But no, there are tacit forms of racism, which are very real. Just the different treatment, especially on the part of white colleagues, and there are also kind of overlapping areas, so there are race and age. It turns out to be older white colleagues’ turn to be more experienced, and racism is just there, and it has some contemporaries to my heart and shared experiences for colleagues who are black. So there is that sensitive and very racially tense environment and the challenges practically just come with that, for example, working with a coordinator and constantly being treated like you just magically appeared in this position but yet you are also qualified to be here. (Participant 2)

Sincerely . . . it’s a combination of gender and race or other things, and I think that’s the most difficult aspect of working at the University. (Participant 9)

I think Wits is much better resourced than historically black universities; yes, I think I am in a relatively privileged position in that way being white. I think my race and my class help me, and my gender has not been too disadvantageous. That happens because of my race and class. (Participant 1)

These findings are consistent with Bell and Nkomo (2001), who stated that although there are crucial differences in the experiences of White and Black female executives in the corporate world, the similarities suggest the persistent power of gender discrimination in the workplace and the extent to which managerial careers are immersed in patriarchal ideology. Bell and Nkomo provided insights into some important aspects of race, class, and gender in corporate America. Those authors concluded that it is not always the case that Black women must struggle to obtain recognition; middle-class White women experience the same difficulties. This finding was affirmed by the following findings on institutional culture and patriarchy.

**Institutional Culture and Patriarchy**

The evidence indicates that the institutional culture at Wits is a result of a broader patriarchal spectrum in South Africa as a whole. Female academics have expressed that their lived experiences with regard to women’s empowerment result from the patriarchal nature of their environment, which connects to the broader lived experiences of any other women or men. Some of the subthemes that emerged are sexism, competence, and expectations, and it was alleged that Wits is lacking as an institution in creating an environment conducive to female empowerment. Hence, some research has noted that even the most progressive settings, such as universities, display themselves as being gender neutral yet in practice are male-dominated with male biases and inherent cultures that ensure that the global balance of power remains under a male patriarchal system (O’Connor, 2010). Some responses are as follows:

Yeah, I think Wits has a history of powerful women, predominantly white, but not exclusively either, so it is quite a complex environment. I think I have to be honest and say that white women in South Africa have done genuinely quite well out of the production of policies, so in that sense if there has been any kind of transformation in the university sector, genuinely, it’s been women becoming more a part of it, and particularly in the *** department actually, women are the
majority so I could never say it’s a simple narrow gender inequality. I could also never say that it isn’t the most sexist place; as it is, there is no difference from the rest of society. There is sexism on campus like everywhere else. It is not new to say that women are new in academia; in the *** department, actually women are the majority. That is why I said race is totally important because I think that women have secured a place in academia, but more importantly, white women, and I think transformation regarding race is needed, and I feel it’s the new challenge. (Participant 9)

When I moved across the corporate sector, it was still quite sexist actually because I moved to the *** Centre and it was full of white men who were quite boyish, but I worked on a gender project. I worked for women’s rights, and so that gave me space to be more empowered to find a space that was not dominated by men, and I think that was really important for my personal development. I was able to gain access to opportunities and form relationships mostly with women, and at least in the early 90s, there were sort of a lot of white women. I got involved in politics with constitutional writing in a setting where women were not; that was very empowering. When I came back into a more mixed space in academia managing the ***Centre and being at school ***, it’s not really different from that other world in terms of sexism, but I think I had the confidence to manage that I would not necessarily have gotten if I did not work in feminism and gender law and human rights. (Participant 1)

I think the most interesting comparison is prior to independence; I think that around 1994 perhaps up to 2000, we had a very progressive moment in South African history that was reflected in the laws; it’s today reflected in the constitution. It was about equality at a number of levels. I think what we have seen echoes of gender relations back in some quite brutal and quite patriarchal sets of relationships. I think one of the difficulties around inequality is that most people see gender equality as a positive thing. I don’t think that’s true gender equality because gender equality is often put forward as love and care for the family and so it does make it particularly tricky to criticize, you know what I mean? I think that we have seen a massive retreat across society into demands for more traditional relationships and often for unequal relationships accompanied by real hostility. And this is not only happening here at Wits; it is a universal issue. (Participant 5)

Sexism

Sexism as a theme emerged when the majority of the participants explained the challenges they faced. Responses from the majority of the participants, regardless of position and age, indicated that there is sexism at the University of the Witwatersrand. According to Valian (2005), gender schemas play a significant role in evaluations. Not only do schemas affect perceptions of competence but schemas also render it difficult for women to reap the benefits of their achievements and be perceived as leaders. This intersects the themes of competence and expectation, as explained in the following section.

Competency and Expectation

When participants were asked about how they relate to their colleagues and some of the challenges women face as females in academia, the participants responded that some of their colleagues have certain expectations, particularly if the school is predominantly male and White. The expectation most often alluded to in academia is that academics should continue to write and to publish in addition to performing other academic duties such as teaching and evaluating student work, not to mention their social and domestic responsibilities. What generally occurs, however, is that women must prioritize, and when women prioritize, generally either their career advancement or personal care or leisure time or all are in jeopardy. In their responses, some participants asserted that competency and expectations are consistent with gender and race and that generally there are certain assumptions regarding the performance of Black women in academia. These women also experience such expectation and competency stereotyping from students in classes that the women teach. Potgieter and Moleko (2004) reported somewhat similar concerns as well as another set of problems often fueled by racist attitudes. According to Potgieter and Moleko, numerous incidents reported by participants suggest that some White academics assume or suspect that their Black colleagues lack ability or professionalism. In instances in which Black women excel, these women are often perceived to be singular or strange and different from the rest of their group.

The responses from participants that illustrate such sentiments included the following:

Challenges also depend on the kind of school that is predominantly male. A-a-a-a! In schools that are dominated by white females, the challenges of black females are totally different, and if you are in a context that is full of white and black males, that also has its own challenges. For example, in a context of predominantly black males, those men have cultural expectations that because you are a black woman, you are supposed to act in a certain way, and they can also talk to you in a certain way. Or they can ask you to do something that does not necessarily need doing or the thing that you cannot ask another person to do because she is not a black person or woman. (Participant 3)

In terms of race, I think you get racism wherever you go regardless of whether you are a man or woman. This is also attached to a perception that people have toward the services that you render. For example, I remember the first time I started lecturing here, some students undermined me because of my race. Once, I entered the lecture room and two white girls looked at me in horror because they did not expect that the woman who was walking in would be able to teach them. Only after I opened my mouth and lectured to them for a few minutes did they realize that, hey, she knows what she is talking about. (Participant 2)
Existing Gaps at Wits for Transformation and the Need for Change

Participants were asked whether Wits as an institution is doing enough to ensure gender equality and women’s empowerment. The general consensus was that Wits is lacking in terms of moving the gender balance agenda forward and in terms of transformation. Kelly (2008) noted that there are hierarchical systems in academia that silence the voices of some academics, particularly women from a working-class background, and prevent those academics from being accepted as valuable members of the academy because of their background, gender, or class affiliation. However, this study determined that Wits as an institution also has some of these barriers that not only hinder women from a working-class background but that also infringe upon women in terms of their race, nationality, position, and experience. The issue of institutional culture relates to the research that was conducted by Kelly, who examined certain stereotypes regarding working-class people. Kelly determined that a working-class background hinders people from forming ties and networks and having meaningful mentors to help working-class people succeed in academic careers. This study illustrates that stereotypes regarding competence and capacity are linked to gender, class, and race, particularly when the female academic is a new lecturer.

Women in academia constantly must prove to their male counterparts that women are capable of being in the same positions as men. This struggle, however, extends further for Black female academics, who must demonstrate twice the competency as White female academics because stereotypically, Black women are viewed as incompetent. According to Kelly (2008), organizational culture requires a review of these conditions and a change in consciousness by all people involved in certain family institutions and institutes of higher learning.

Below are some responses from the participants:

No, not really. I think it is not doing a lot. The time Adam* came, he had to take the issue of harassment seriously because there has been harassment on this campus for many years but it was not receiving any attention. This is handled by Gender Equity office, and this office has a serious intervention strategy and is attempting to deal with sexual harassment, but, sometimes I worry that they haven’t done that yet because I think that they haven’t dealt with gender . . . So now transformation is merely about race, and it is about African and colored, but it is not transforming intersectionally. (Participant 1)

I think this is done in pockets; so because it is done in pockets, then it does not seem to be real. For example, I went to this other school the other day for interviews; this school had 15 staff members, 3 of which were females. I asked myself, “How does that happen, three female members of a 15-member staff?” To me, that was so odd because I was coming from a school that already has more women. Unfortunately, here, the issue is that we do not have the certain types of races. For example, we do not have colored males; we only have one female colored. To me, that is a problem. I think the university has a lot to do to bridge the transformation gap. Maybe if the university can be identifying fourth years or those who are in post-grad and those who have a passion in for academia, by recruiting those kinds of people, it might help to reduce the burden. (Participant 3)

Traditional Compared With Modern Gender Roles

When participants were asked about their thoughts regarding gender roles, the majority explained that gender roles are socially constructed, that sometimes acting out some of the roles comes naturally and generally women are not aware of performing roles. However, it was also clear that there is a disconnection between traditional and modern roles. This dichotomy was reported by Black women who are obliged to perform certain household duties, not because there are certain clear, cut-in-stone rules but because these women believe that these roles are their social and cultural duty. Socialization and upbringing taught these women to perform these roles. Most importantly, the women individually choose to perform these roles; the women are not obliged but are expected by the society in which they grew up. Kelly (2008) asserted that female academics from working-class backgrounds feel torn between two worlds in the sense that these women want to maintain connections to their cultural upbringing while fitting into academia. This conflict was affirmed by the findings that women in academia do not want to give up their traditional roles as partners, wives, aunts, sisters, and mothers in their own home settings. Some subthemes that emerged under this theme are shared responsibility and negotiation and men and women as partners. According to Hunt (2006), motherhood and wifehood for South Africans and Africans, in general, are often accompanied by cultural obligations to forsake aspects of the self, to compromise independent desires and choices, and to limit women’s imaginations and intelligence. The choice not to mother or marry is the choice for independence: the choice to think, to produce knowledge, and to act in manners that are truly independent and different. Hence, many women find the choice threatening.

However, individual women do negotiate their independence in relation to motherhood, being a wife, and legal marital partnerships. According to Bell and Nkomo (2001), the civil rights movement helped usher in the women’s movement, enabling women not only to increase their numbers in the workforce but also to enter nontraditional careers. In this historical era, women obtained the option of becoming career-oriented, able to devote more time and energy to developing their careers than ever before, and simultaneously being able to be the women they want to be in their social settings. A shift that frequently occurs, particularly at home, is that working hours and lifestyles change because of academic pressures; this shift also occurs with regard to
gender roles. Men, particularly as partners in a home setting, automatically take over the tasks of their partners and find themselves performing duties that were previously designed for women. Men generally fulfill these roles, not as an obligation but to support their partners.

It was alleged that such male support depends on the generation of men, particularly in a workplace environment in which some men refuse to change with the times, which results in the marginalization of women. This finding somehow collides with the findings of Walker (1998), who argued that identities are socially, economically, and politically constructed and that different roles and identities are created as a result. Walker strongly emphasized that the identities of women academics are shaped by the choices those women make, whether the women marry and whether the women have children. The effects for academic women underline the argument that these women must confront role conflicts and demands. Walker also asserted that male academics’ professional identities coalesce around marriage and a career; for women academics, it is more difficult because women are faced with a choice of either marriage or a career. This study, however, analyzes how men as partners are becoming more aware of their partner’s challenges in academia; hence, men are beginning to help out in the domestic arena. Today is a different era from the era of Walker’s research, affirming that gender roles are shifting with time in 21st-century South Africa.

Quotes from participants supporting these ideas are as follows.

Gender roles are realities, and you cannot escape them if you are a woman. Though I am a career woman, educated, my children and husband at home expect me to do the duties of a mother or a wife. This does not mean that I am oppressed because if there is something I like to do and I enjoy, it is taking care of my children and family. I am an educator, so I like educating my children, doing their homework with them, and they know that their mom will support them at home. (Participant 3)

I think gender roles are changing, and they are changing because increasingly more men are taking the responsibility that was previously for women in the domestic arena. Being a woman in South Africa today is something that I really celebrate because when I look at the generation of my mother and my grandmother and I also look at some of the challenges they were faced with, first as black women and secondly, particularly coming from a black culture . . . yeah, they were oppressed in so many different ways. I feel that today, as a woman, a black woman, I can make choices and decisions for myself. It’s such a liberating thing, and I count that as a blessing to live in this era. I cannot imagine what my life would have been; it would have been hard living in my mother’s and grandmother’s era because it meant that a man was making decisions on their behalf or the extended family was making decisions for them and their families. Today if I decide that I want to go to a conference next week, it’s a decision that I make. All I need to do is to organize the logistics, and no one would ask or question me. I am consciously and constantly aware that it is a blessing to be a woman in South Africa at this point in time. (Participant 6)

The Meaning of Women’s Empowerment

The participants explained what women’s empowerment meant to them and how they had experienced being a woman in academia. The women said that women’s empowerment was a term that has been misused to mean that women are helpless and require assistance from men. Rather, the women explained, the term women’s empowerment indicates that there is a need for an equal playing field for both men and women so that women can perform freely without any gender constraints. The women also emphasized that women’s empowerment does not mean disregarding social responsibilities at home because women’s choices are constrained by significant others. This result is consistent with Ntsele (2014) on gender stereotyping: Despite women’s emancipation by legislative policies, women continue to battle against unfair and unfriendly working environments dominated by traditional patriarchal attitudes.

Female academics must constantly reestablish their authority as leaders and equal partners in the workplace by challenging stereotypes that maintain that women are weak and that their role is to stay at home (Ntsele, 2014). Stereotyping continues to prevail; even now, when women have open access to all professions, women nevertheless opt for the more traditional female occupations simply as a preventive mechanism, and some women opt to leave academia because the majority of university practices do not favor the female academic. Hence, laws and policies are simply stepping stones to the true empowerment of women, which involves a change in attitudes and behavior toward women in workplace communities and society (Valian, 2005).

To some people, women’s empowerment indicates merit and being deserving. Most participants alluded to the idea that women’s empowerment is not about numbers games in which women are elevated to higher positions simply to fulfill an obligation to some government legislation. The majority of participants expressed the idea that women should be elevated primarily because women deserve to be elevated because of merit and ability. To some women, the term suggests solidarity and mentorship; participants were asked whether women are doing enough to empower one another and bridge the gender inequality gap. The dominant response was that women are doing some work but that more work is required. The participants asserted that women must work together to mentor other women, particularly junior lecturers who are struggling to fit in and work in the male-dominated system. The idea of working together and supporting one another as women and as a team was also emphasized, female academics voicing their concerns and trying to bridge the inequality gap between men and women. The participants believed that women are empowering one another by mentoring other women, enhancing skills, and providing the
support that is required to survive in the patriarchal nature of the academic arena.

Women’s empowerment as a concept has been and will always be contested. This study reveals that women’s empowerment is relative to individuals and is also a broad and complicated phenomenon that represents different things to different women.

Women in academia have expressed their views on women’s empowerment and how women are experiencing empowerment as females in academia. The desire to work with men as equals was illustrated by their emphasis that women in academia and generally women across the globe do not require pity and handouts. Women require opportunities to develop to their fullest potential. However, it has been alleged that destroying historically patriarchal social structures is extremely difficult, particularly in the White-dominated context in which soft barriers cannot be penetrated by women, particularly Black women. This finding is consistent with Mabokela and Magubane (2004), who, after studying a formerly White-dominated university, explained that there are certain forces that impinge on women’s empowerment and gender equality enhancement. People at the top are not willing to give up and share their power and privilege with the people at the bottom. This study has shown that Whites are associating more with Whites, juniors with juniors, and foreigners with foreigners, and vice versa; hence, there is a lack of solidarity and mentorship to assist those people who are less privileged. According to Mabokela and Magubane, this situation is why the barriers to complete change remain as fixed as it is.

Below are some sentiments shared by participants:

Women’s empowerment is not just putting women in positions and expecting them to contribute positively. There is this notion that, yeah, we will just employ women because we need to meet the quotas. You should employ women who have the ability and the capacities to do what needs to be done.

Now the criterion is that some people will say that we know why you are here because we need to meet the quotas and some because you are black. You know, they don’t think that you are here because of merit. So that’s how I have experienced it. (Participant 6)

To me, women’s empowerment is creating an enabling environment where women can have the kind of career fulfillment they need, for example, giving women opportunities that will improve their capabilities and careers, allowing them to take the lead at institutions, advancing in research, and much more.

I don’t believe that women’s empowerment should necessarily be divorced from roles that mothers must play in their houses or that empowerment should take away your gender. If you are a mother, play the motherly roles at home, and if you are at work, do your career work; but if you decide not to have children, then that is fine; focus on your career. (Participant 3)

Women’s empowerment means that women are given ability and opportunities to advance and participate equally in a workplace and in their lives and make choices they want to make as much as they can for themselves although our choices are constrained by people and the circumstances that we have. So women need to be given that ability through education, writing an institution’s culture, and so on (Participant 1).

Those who have children need to think about how much they want to put into teaching and research to avoid one thing having to suffer. I have noticed that women are not as active as men in research, as men are based on some research or surveys conducted before not just because of children, but I think women have that innate thing of not wanting to do a lot, and that needs to be actually discouraged. Men are actually doing a lot, and hence by merit they deserve that top position (Participant 4).

**Workload Demand**

When participants were asked about their workload and how they prioritize their work, there was a general consensus among the participants that the workload is too much. The women indicated that it is difficult to in fact balance the various areas of their lives. The women must be the mother, wife, and partner that are expected of them and simultaneously be a lecturer at Wits. It is, therefore, safe to say that the majority of the female academics interviewed must compromise their own relaxation and leisure time to attempt to meet the workload demands. This theme was expressed by female academics as they were explaining some of their daily responsibilities and how their careers have affected their personal relationships. However, what motivates these women to wake up every day and go to work is the zeal and passion for teaching and research. This finding is consistent with Ntsele (2014) on late starters and late achievers. Ntsele stated that academia is a front-loaded profession, requiring large investments of time and energy during the early stages. Thus, more often than not, the pressure to increase research output often coincides with the timing of choices such as whether to have children and whether to marry and most importantly whether to become an academic.

This study has illustrated that although there are workload demands, the support that female academics derive from their partners and loved ones motivates these women to cope with the demands on their lives. This finding is also consistent with the theory of social capital by Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton (2000) which explains how relationships and network connections act as support systems for working-class females.

The female academics at Wits contributed the following:
It’s extremely demanding, it’s extremely interesting, it’s very rewarding and exciting work, but sometimes it’s just too much work (laughing), if that makes sense . . . Just the quantity of it, it is just sometimes overwhelming, but the actual work is very stimulating. (Participant 9)

For the past five days, I had an average of 5 hours of sleep, trying to balance the work; it’s quite exhausting. (Participant 4)

At this particular point in time, over the past five days, I’ve had a total of five hours of sleep, so there is a lot of pressure and a lot of work in academics and administration. So it is quite exhausting, and there is a sense that I am a new academic and a female academic as well, so there is a sense that it is very taxing and the majority of the time emotionally draining. So I love what I do, but it is taxing so my partner feels that they are fairly difficult conditions, especially for work. She perceives it to be awful being in academics. (Participant 2)

Shared Responsibility and Negotiation

Shared responsibility and negotiation as a theme were reported by a majority of the participants. The women asserted that in a home setting, there is constant negotiation regarding who is to do what and how because gender roles are now fluid. Consequently, women are contributing economically like their male partners, and men are contributing socially to raising and being there for their children. The workload demands and competition in academia require female academics to produce work whose quality is as good as that of their male counterparts, hence the need to negotiate with their partners at home so that women can achieve their desired goals at work. Ntsele’s (2014) study on family and work overload observed that a number of authors have argued that work and family have never been easily combined by the same person. Working in academia negatively affects the ability of the individual to perform her family responsibilities, resulting in the likelihood of conflict between work and family roles. Typically, culture prepares men for leadership roles, hence their minimal involvement in care work at home. Culture allows men to excel in academia because men can remain in the office for long hours to do extra work without feeling guilty because it is a traditional expectation for the men to work hard in the public sphere. Because of the competitive nature of academia, female academics are constantly negotiating with their partners so that the women can fulfill their academic roles.

Some of the responses from the participants were as follows:

My partner and I both work long hours, and we are quite used to it. My partner is very understanding of the hours we have to put into research despite our salaries. You know, he is the primary breadwinner. When it comes to distribution of duties at home, basically during the week, we have arranged that whoever gets home first cooks, and I am the one who is generally at home early, so I would cook; it’s not a big deal, you know; he will cook during the weekends. We don’t have set rules; there are times when I feel that I need to do more, and I will rush home just to make sure that dinner will be ready when he gets home, and usually he will be the one who notices that I am trying too hard to fulfill my duties, and he is the one who says, “Don’t do it; relax, I will do it.” (Participant 4)

Conclusion

The results present similarities and differences among female academics in their perceptions and experiences, and the construction of sexuality, nationality, gender, class, and race reveals that one can experience both privilege and oppression simultaneously. Where these categories intersect, an opportunity is created to address these forms and the basis of a struggle over meaning, experience, and the availability of resources. Institutions such as Wits are aware of the various issues faced by women; however, there is a dearth of action to compact and abolish not just the transformation scenario but the connections between the various scenarios that encamps transformation not only on Wits campuses but also in wider aspect such as social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological, which renders achieving women’s empowerment so complex. Race and gender hierarchies are interwoven. “There is no such thing as the single struggle because personal issues are related to broader political issues” (hooks, 2004). Apartheid perpetuated gender inequality in South Africa; however, it has been 21 years since independence, and women are nevertheless facing identical structural challenges and forces. Hooks (2004) asserted that different patriarchal orders interlink, coexist, and compete, and women are generally at the center.

Changing gender roles are not changing with regard to context. Although there are forms of equality in households with regard to gender roles, being a woman and identifying as a woman include an inherent feeling of choosing to perform social construct roles. Although the platform is more equal, there is that sense among women that women must do more and appease their partners.

Sexism can be experienced by anyone on campus, regardless of age, race, class, or position, but primarily because of perceptions regarding gender roles. Sexism takes different forms and shapes; sometimes sexism focuses on competency and sometimes on worthiness. Even as the attitudes of men and women change with regard to their roles at work, home, and in their children’s lives, these changes cannot be actualized until work institutions realize that more flexible work schedules for women do not merely benefit women; flexibility benefits institutions and families as well. Women in academia reported that the workload demands are overwhelming. There is a need for more men able to participate in household responsibilities, particularly in child rearing; more men must nurture and engage their children. However, unless there is a change in the social patriarchal structure that prevents men from participating in bridging gender inequalities, these
changes cannot be successful. Hunt (2006) proposed that women have been doing double duty since the creation of humanity but that currently, there is a need to shift focus and determine how institutions can support men and women at work, and how to ensure that both men and women have the time to nurture happy and healthy families.

Walker (1998) presented the idea that in South Africa, women shoulder the majority of the burden of raising children, which is primarily unpaid work. Like many other countries around the world, men do the majority of the paid work in the professional workplace and hold the most senior positions. Although women have ventured into the workplace arena, females remain responsible for the unpaid care work at home. However, the academic staff at Wits have reported sharing responsibilities with their partners as a result of negotiations at home. The primary support system for these academic women is their husbands or partners. Thus, gender roles are components of everyday negotiations; women must negotiate gender roles on a daily basis.

This study confirms and emphasizes that men remain dominant, primarily because of the patriarchal context and the era in which we live. However, it is also evident that some women are acting as gatekeepers to this structural and violent force. Some academic women in top positions become complicit by their silence in not demanding action and change. hooks (2004) said, “We need to highlight the role men and women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system” (p. 24). The fact that a gender gap remains 21 years after independence in South Africa despite the Constitution and laws implemented to achieve women’s empowerment is upsetting. Institutions such as Wits must realize the importance of having women on an equal level as men. Many participants reported a lack of solidarity among women and that men must do more to ensure gender equity, not only by supporting women but also by giving up their power and privilege over women.

In conclusion, issues surrounding gender inequalities and women’s empowerment are quite complex and structural, and women in academia are addressing these issues in various manners regardless of race, age, marital status, or position in their everyday lives. This study clarifies the experiences of academic women at Wits in 21st-century South Africa, presenting a situation similar to what other women experience by virtue of being the same gender and living in a patriarchal context. Hence, because of differences in location and context, there may be slight differences in how women experience empowerment and address the issue of gender roles both in the workplace and in their homes.

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