

Aug-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Parry, Bianca Rochelle and Segalo, Puleng (2017). Eating Burnt Toast: The Lived Experiences of Female Breadwinners in South Africa. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(4), 182-196.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss4/13>

## **Eating Burnt Toast: The Lived Experiences of Female Breadwinners in South Africa**

By Bianca Rochelle Parry<sup>1</sup> and Puleng Segalo<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

In South African society, many women have overcome traditional notions of gender by becoming primary breadwinners in their homes and providing primary financial support for their families. Employing a Phenomenological viewpoint, this paper contextualises the individual lived experiences of South African female breadwinners, utilising data collected from ten female breadwinners from the Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces respectively using in-depth, semi structured interviews. Taking into consideration their intersectional experiences of gender, race, as well as cultural, traditional and patriarchal societal pressures, the study represents voices that have for a long time been silenced and marginalised, to understand how these women make meaning of and negotiate their roles as breadwinners. The findings of this study expose the perpetual archaic divisions and discriminations of gender within society, which continue to hide behind constructions of reform advocating equality among the sexes.

*Keywords:* Female Breadwinner, Gendered Identities, Phenomenology, Feminism, Gender Role Construction, Unpaid Labour

### **Evolution of Traditional Gender Roles**

Historically, major differences have shaped the lives of women from various racial backgrounds in South Africa, but a dominant, patriarchal society has always been present as the one constant, non-racial institution that has permeated all communities (Frenkel, 2008). This was most evident through the patriarchal political policies of the apartheid era, such as the migrant labour system, a gendered system where African women were often retained as migrant domestics under white employ in distant urban areas far from their families or else expected to remain home, working in subsistence agriculture while depending on their male migrants to send wages home (Seidman, 1993). The later industrialisation of the 1970s and commuter employment provided female workers some economic independence, however sex-stereotyping concentrated women in the least-skilled, lowest paying jobs (Jaffee, 1988). Despite, or perhaps conversely as a result of these policies, working women became active economic contributors to society as their domestic

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responsibilities increased. Paradoxically, these aforementioned systems, along with other governmental policies, increased instances of female headed households and employment, which enabled women to escape patriarchy through “opportunities for increased personal autonomy and mobility at an individual level” (Walker, 1990, p. 168), which challenged the traditional male dominated, unitary household model.

Today, women are still assigned a secondary place by prevailing customs and cultures in South African society, whose sanctioned gender roles are intimately connected with gender based violence (Strebel et al., 2006). Beyond the scope of the mostly superficial changes in the inherent patriarchal structures that pervade their lives, it can be seen that women have always managed to play an important role in public life and contribute as a part of the economically active population. Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the earlier considered unique idiosyncrasies of South Africa’s past, working women have furthered their domestic, economic and societal influence by becoming primary breadwinners in their homes. Evidence of the increased feminisation of the workforce in South Africa is corroborated by research conducted by Posel and Muller (2008, p. 469) who made use of the Household Survey data for South Africa from 1995 to 2004 and found that “Total wage employment grew by some 1.3 million jobs over the period, with almost 90% of this increase driving from the change in female employment.” It would seem that in the workplace, the evolution of gender roles has resulted in the women of South Africa further demonstrating their economic independence within modern society by becoming the primary, and often sole, breadwinners in their homes (Mosoetsa, 2011).

### **Societal Influences on the Gender Role Construction of Female Breadwinners**

As the aforementioned research and other studies done worldwide prove, in our industrialised society there has been a significant feminisation of the workforce. The espousal of non-traditional characteristics has been met with mixed results, as reported by Diekman and Goodfriend (2006), and Brescoll & Uhlmann (2005). The traditional patterns of gender which insist that the maternal instinct is specifically female and that motherhood is self-sacrificing, are well embedded in our social culture, so that this social construction of gender, along with the culturally induced concept of caring tasks being uniquely feminine tasks, instil institutionalised patterns of self-denial and economic dependence in women (Grbich, 1994).

This conclusion is in line with the statistics found in the South African Board for People Practices Women’s Report which was compiled in 2011. Initially encouraging, the report found that despite the global economic downturn at the time, and the high levels of unemployment in South Africa, there was still a 1.3% increase in female employment from 2010 to 2011 (Geldenhuis, 2011). However, an alarming truth regarding the gendered division of labour in South Africa was also revealed; the majority of women in the country are employed in the poorest paid sector of the labour market, namely the social or service sector, as domestic and retail workers which are traditionally defined by gender as women’s work (Fakier & Cock, 2009). It is critical to note the significant increase of women employed in the informal sector, which unlike the formal labour sector, shows a high representation of work that has low skills requirements (Geldenhuis, 2011). This over representation of women in informal work, and formal work mostly in social or service industries, indicates that the majority of women are poorly paid due to a lack formal training, and are engaging in forms of income earning that can accommodate their obligatory family and care-taking responsibilities (Geldenhuis, 2011).

## **Gendered Identities and the Consequences for Female Breadwinners**

The consequences of these social constructions of gender that are imposed on working women, and on female breadwinners in particular, is most evident in the homes of said women, where they surface in the form of unpaid reproduction of human resources, or unpaid labour in the home. Traditionally these non-economic domestic labours are considered women's work and include housework, care for children, the sick and/or the elderly, and in some cases, non-wage income generating activities such as subsistence farming (Lambert & Webster, 2010). According to the SABPP Women's Report, (as cited in Geldenhuys, 2011, p. 19), "women do more unpaid work than men in all countries across the globe." The report revealed that the average woman in South Africa devotes 180 minutes of her day to unpaid labour versus the 80 minutes men spend daily on these tasks (Geldenhuys, 2011). Society's lack of recognition of these vital, yet unpaid contributions is not unique to the lived experiences of women in South Africa. Similar patterns have been reported by other studies (Meisenbach in the USA, 2009; Winslow-Bowe in Australia, 2006; and Yodanis and Lauer in Canada, 2007) that focused on the discursive management of housework in female breadwinner households. These studies all found that the uneven distribution of unpaid labour in the home means that many female breadwinners are subjugated workers, bearing the double load of all household and wage earning responsibilities.

A further consequence of the struggle between the evolution of gender roles and sanctioned gender identities in society is that the dominant position of primary breadwinner does not secure female breadwinners safety within the home. In her research study concerning abuse perpetrated against women in South Africa, Boonzaier (2005) attributes the changing gender climate as a contributor to the alarmingly recurring statistic. During interviews with fifteen men and their female partners, who were members of two programs concerned with victims and perpetrators of intimate violence, Boonzaier (2005) stated that it became apparent that it was challenging for the men to relinquish the role of breadwinner in the home and that this led them to feel emasculated. This may be seen in Boonzaier's (2005, p. 102) assertion that "Men attempted to maintain these forms of identity through the exertion of power in the relationship, through violence as well as sexual coercion and marital infidelity". The men's justifications of their behaviour, coupled with the declining marital rates among women in South Africa (Posel & Casale, 2003) are of significant importance for female breadwinners in South Africa.

It is with this background in mind that our paper seeks to provide an understanding of subjective, individual experiences of female breadwinners (FBW) within the South African context. We are interested in troubling the so often taken for granted narrative that women have equivalent opportunities to become parallel earners to men in the workplace, with equal access to empowerment in the home and society in general, afforded to them through the gender equality the FBW role provides. Through this paper we attempt to offer a space for the not so often audible voices of women who inhabit multiple platforms, and highlight ways in which the women's experiences are culturally and socially diverse, yet also converge, showing similarities in their lived realities.

## **Method and Sample Demographics**

The ten primary/sole FBW who contributed to this study stemmed from various ethnic, racial, and socio-economic populations within two contrastingly diverse South African provinces; the suburban cities of Gauteng and the primarily agricultural communities of Mpumalanga.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were currently breadwinners. The sample unit included not only married, but unmarried, single and divorced primary FBW, as the study's focus was not primarily concerned with the interpersonal relations between husband, wife and family. The major prerequisite participants had to fulfil is that they needed to be female, with dependants (either their biological/adopted children or grandchildren or any other family members), and been the primary source of income in their households for at least two years (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Biographical Composition of Sample Unit**

<b>Pseudonym:</b>	<b>Race and Language:</b>	<b>Marital Status:</b>	<b>Education Level:</b>	<b>Employment Sector:</b>	<b>Dependants:</b>
Linda	Caucasian, English	Divorced, Co-Habiting	Matric	Formal	Two children
Caroline	Caucasian, English	Separated, Co-Habiting	Tertiary	Formal	Two children
Sarah	Caucasian, English	Married	Tertiary	Formal	One child
Martha	Caucasian, English	Divorced, Single	Tertiary	Formal	Two children
Aaminah	Indian, Hindu	Divorced, Single	Matric	Unemployed	Two children
Rose	African, Zulu	Divorced, Single	Matric	Formal	Three children
Sunette	Caucasian, Afrikaans	Married	Tertiary	Formal	One child
Ela	African, Xhosa	Single	Matric	Unemployed	One Child
Ronel	Caucasian, Afrikaans	Co-Habiting	Tertiary	Formal	Partner's child
Nombuso	African, Sotho	Single	Matric	Informal	One child

Primary data for the study stemmed from the transcripts of twenty semi-structured, in depth interviews conducted with ten FBW. The initial interviews with participants were followed by secondary interviews to validate preliminary findings through in-depth member checking. Both interview appointments were secured in a setting that was comfortable for participants, allowing them to feel confident to talk freely. The interview questions were guided by, but not restricted to, predetermined research questions and were conducted in English, with the duration of interviews varying from between forty five minutes to an hour. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to interpret the data. After each dialogue with the FBW, the audio-recordings were carefully transcribed and notations of additional verbal and non-verbal nuances recorded. What followed was an intensive and detailed analysis of the verbatim accounts for categorisation of broad themes and connections available within the text. This overtly interpretative analysis

endeavoured to present a critical and conceptual understanding of the FBW personal 'sense-making' activities, and to contextualise these within their cultural and physical environments in order to provide a renewed insight into the lived experiences of FBW in South Africa.

## Results

Analysis of the individual stories shared by the varied group of FBW revealed startling mutual commonalities of experiences. Despite the fact that the women came from various racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds with occupations ranging from unemployed, to small business owner, to artist, to chartered accountant, the FBW narratives were connected via the communal thread woven through their gender, and their role as primary provider to their families. The use of IPA allowed the women's voices to come to the fore and from these accounts, several themes were identified.

### *Subjective Experiences of Female Breadwinners*

Every dialogue began with each woman explaining what it meant to her personally, to be a breadwinner. There were many similarities of meaning expressed by the FBW, and these included the feeling of independence that the role of primary breadwinner brings, as well as a sense of security in being able to provide for yourself and your family. Nombuso, an attendant in a restaurant and single mother of one, who also helped to support her mother and four siblings, expressed how important those experiences were to her:

*You know, all these people, I mean like my brothers, when they need something they can just come to me. They don't go out, looking for help from the outside, they know that they must come to me. It makes me feel special...*

Eight of the ten women apportioned their role as breadwinner due to the necessity to take care of their family, either because they were single with no support from their children's fathers, or because their partner earned too little to sustain the family. Only Sarah, a married mother of one and small business owner, and Caroline, a divorced mother of two and entrepreneur, felt that they had been afforded the choice to undertake their role as breadwinner. They ascribed this opportunity to their educational qualifications and the support from their partners. Neither felt that they would have been happy as stay at home mothers and had strived from an early age to build successful careers. Sarah expressed her gratitude for her husband's support in enabling her to advance in her career. She also stated that she felt as though she was in a minority group of women who could afford to choose their role as breadwinner:

*I think a lot of women who are breadwinners are breadwinners out of necessity, whether they are single moms or divorcees or their husbands can't get jobs... And I think a lot of women who are breadwinners aren't necessarily in senior positions or earning a lot of money... I think it is really hard... I think women who choose to be breadwinners are probably most often privileged...*

The majority of the challenges that were discussed by the FBW during interviews centred on personal and interpersonal challenges within their home environment. The duality of the feeling of control that the role of breadwinner affords was also discussed, with all ten of the women

experiencing feelings of pressure and responsibility for others in their care. The pressures and responsibilities of being the sole or primary provider and caregiver could be overwhelming and had also meant that some of the women had to sacrifice their own aspirations, like Rose, a personal assistant and divorced mother of three who had had to put her studies on hold in order to provide for her children and her ex-husband who was unemployed.

### *Unpaid Labour in the Home*

Eight of the ten women were responsible for all tasks related to the home and care giving, even though three of these women had partners. During their dialogues it became apparent that all the women faced challenges as a result of their role, the most common of which was attempts to strike a balance between the duality of their homemaker and provider responsibilities, presented to them by their position as FBW. At home, the surplus of unpaid labour and tasks traditionally defined as women's responsibilities necessitate much of the FBW time and effort. For Linda, a divorced mother of two and construction equipment manager, these responsibilities extended beyond the realm of housework and childcare, to caring for her ex-husband who suffered from a chronic illness. After the divorce, Linda had met a new partner, but had again found herself in a position of breadwinner, and although her caregiving responsibilities had lessened since then, the amount of unpaid labour she had to perform had not declined. This had caused major conflict in the home, especially with regard to her partner's lack of involvement in his biological daughter's life and the amount of pressure it placed on Linda, as well as the restrictions it placed on her mobility in travelling for work:

*...I tried not to go away [for work] 'cause I used to worry about [their daughter] at home, 'cause I know [her partner] doesn't cope with it...The teacher used to say to me "Aw, I can see you've been away" because [their daughter] used to just cry, cry, cry at school all the time...*

The conflict that arises due to the surplus of home and childcare duties, in addition to primary breadwinner responsibilities, was also an issue in the marriages of divorcees, Martha, a mother of two and chartered accountant, and Caroline. Both women commented that a lack of time due to numerous responsibilities, and an absence of support from their partners concerning the home environment and childcare had led to an imbalance in their lives and relationships with their husbands.

In contrast, Sunette, a married mom of one, and Ronel, a single foster mom of one, deemed this absence of support from their partners to be perfectly normal, as unpaid home tasks were traditionally a woman's responsibility. Although both were in the medical field and described their jobs as having long hours and being "exhausting and demanding", they both believed that the household and caregiver duties were a woman's domain. For Ronel, these tasks involved taking care of her partner's child from a previous relationship:

*You know, um, actually for me I felt that I spent more time with her than he did...when I come home at night, and there was stuff that she had to get done, then I still have to do assignments at seven o'clock at night...*

For Sunette and Ronel, the responsibilities of the primary breadwinner role that are amplified by unpaid labour in the home are not a source of conflict with their partners, but rather an accepted position.

Incongruously for the single FBW, the demands on their time attributed to unpaid labour, and the absence of support from the fathers of their children, directly threatened their ability to fulfil their primary role as breadwinners. Not one of the five single women received financial support from their children's fathers, making them wholly dependent on their jobs to support themselves and their families. Care giving and household responsibilities had limited their abilities to advance their educational development and or employment prospects.

### *Violence in the Home*

The serious issue of violence perpetrated against women and children in South Africa demands consideration within the discussion of interpersonal relations in FBW homes. The dehumanization and objectification of women that results in violent acts perpetrated against them, including physical violence, sexual coercion and infidelity, is not excluded from homes where women are the primary benefactor. The violation of traditional gender norms that occurred within the homes of the women often resulted in violence and abuse. Nombuso, who had left her father's child due to his adulterous behaviour, felt it was better to be a FBW if you were single because if you were married, your husband may become frustrated and violent or indulged in "some funny stuff" like alcohol and extramarital affairs. Three of the ten women disclosed experiences of physical abuse at the hands of their partners. Aaminah, an unemployed mother of two, maintained that her now ex-husband wanted her to work and bring in her income, but explained the resulting violence she experienced at his hands in this way:

*It was about the small things, minor things, maybe... I didn't put enough sugar in his tea or something like that, and he says one, I'll say two and it blows out of proportion.*

Similarly, Ronel described a previous partner's behaviour in this way: "he was a little bit rough on me". For Rose, the violent abuse was directly attributed to her role as FBW and the frustration her now ex-husband and other men in the same situation feel:

*...but then, being a black man, it's different for them. They feel that insecurity and unfortunately there is no medicine for that. So hence the abuse, he started beating me up...you know, that insecurity he had, I couldn't take it anymore. I was gonna stay if he was not abusive, but he was physically fighting...*

This sentiment was present in Boonzaier's 2005 study on Woman Abuse in South Africa, where she specifically mentions the combative position of breadwinner as a prescriber of 'successful masculinity' in regards to male identity, and its justified use by men to commit acts of violence against their partners, whose non-traditional role as FBW leave these men feeling powerless. This may explain why Rose felt it was better to be single as a FBW than to be married, an opinion echoed by the majority of the other women. Indeed, these experiences may explain why eight of the ten FBW interviewed for this study were unmarried, an occurrence also reported by Posel and Casale. Their 2003 research study of labour migration trends in South Africa found that a woman's ability to find work may be subject to the will of a male partner and that the freedoms



afforded to women who are not married has resulted in changes to the household composition with the rate of African women aged 15 years and older, who have never been married, increasing from 38.4% in 1993 to 51.5% in 1999 (Posel & Casale, 2003).

### *Challenges Female Breadwinners Face in the Workplace*

Interpersonal interactions regarding the workplace had far-reaching effects on the lives of the FBW, more so than those within the home environment. Questions asked during the interviews that focused on the intrapersonal dynamics experienced by FBW in the workplace revealed that the FBW found employment empowering. Nine of the ten women specifically referenced how their employment position, which afforded them the ability to provide primary financial support for their families, made them feel a sense of pride, empowerment and achievement. Aaminah felt that the opportunity extended for FBW to support their children meant freedom from cultural restrictions:

*...Indian men, like my ex-husband, they are very dominating and they will dominate a woman wherever they can, you know, whenever they can. And, uh, yes – from like my perspective, Indian women are somewhat finding their way out of it now and they are looking at the other races and saying “Oh, why can’t we also be free”...*

That said, six of the FBW explained how challenging it was to ensure that their work environment did not encroach on their home life. Linda and Aaminah both felt that they had managed to keep the two settings separate, but then later admitted that they often had to bring work home in the evenings. All six of the women felt that although they tried their best to keep their home life independent from their careers, they admitted that work had to take precedence as it was the principal, and often sole, vehicle to provide for their dependant’s needs. The progressive and complex undertakings involved in the role espoused by FBW revealed a lack of balance in everyday life that challenged their relationships with others, both at home and in the workplace.

In regards to the employment positions held by the ten FBW interviewed, only four worked in the social or service sector. Of those four, Rose and Ronel were well remunerated, even though their chosen careers would be considered typically female vocations. The six remaining FBW were well qualified, with a tertiary education, two of whom worked in male dominated industries and a further two owned small businesses. That said, the FBW shared experiences did inadvertently confirm the findings of the SABPP Women’s Report of 2011, concerning the most common employment sector of women in South Africa, by identifying that eight of the ten FBW employed women as domestic workers in their homes. The only two FBW who did not hire domestic help, could not afford to do so, but expressed a desire to in order to reduce their workload. Each of the eight women relied heavily on the domestic workers they employed as a form of support, to alleviate their household duties like cooking and cleaning, and to take care of their children while they were at work. Martha explained how she would leave her sick children in the care of her domestic worker when she had to work. For Aaminah, the support she received from the woman she employed extended from general cleaning to collecting the children from school and helping with their homework, responsibilities she would have loved to perform herself:

*... if I had an option I would be at home with the kids when they got home from school – I would take them to school in the mornings and sit down with them in*

*the afternoons to do their homework – I would give them their lunch... But I can't do that, I have to be breadwinner and I have to go out there and work to support them. And I feel like I am missing so much...*

The fact that the reality that these women (domestic workers) face is very similar to their own, as FBW, seemed to be overlooked by the women, except for Linda, who acknowledged her domestic worker as a fellow breadwinner and expressed her gratitude for the support she received from her.

### *Discrimination in the Workplace*

When questioned with regard to discrimination at work on the basis of their role, there was a three way division amongst the women. Five of them felt it was not an issue, having never experienced it themselves. The remaining five FBW were divided between the issues of discrimination in general, or specifically on the basis of their role as FBW. Two of those five women believed they had experienced discrimination at work on the basis of their gendered role. The latter three women felt they had been discriminated against at work, but it was in no way related to their role.

Sunette was one of the two women who attributed the discrimination they experienced in their workplace to their gendered role. As one of the most qualified and highest paid FBW, Sunette felt discriminated against as she did not receive paid maternity leave from the company she worked for. This had caused her to be fearful of the financial situation she and her husband faced when she had to take leave to have their child:

*...its unpaid maternity leave and I mean four months without an income will be disastrous...I'm thirty three weeks pregnant now, so I'm gonna try work until I'm thirty seven weeks...I would have liked to deliver the baby normally, but because of the limited time that I can take off from work, I'll rather have a caesarean cause then I can plan the date the baby gets born.*

The remaining three women had experienced discrimination, but felt gender had nothing to do with it. For these FBW, the gendered positionality of their role was not the provocation for the inequity, but rather work ethic incongruity between colleagues. Aaminah admitted that she had experienced discrimination at the hands of male colleagues, so much so that she had left her job and was seeking alternative employment, but attributed this to their intimidation of her work ethic. This response of colleagues being threatened by their work ethic was echoed by Martha:

*And I have to say, while I've had challenges over the years with men who felt threatened, I don't think for one second they were threatened, except perhaps for one case, because I was a woman. It's more a case of their own instability with themselves. So from that point of view, it's been a relatively easy path, but that said, you know, I do work hard!*

Despite the obvious imbalance their occupations had on their home life, seven of the ten women believed that modern workplace shouldn't be altered to accommodate the evolving model of breadwinner in today's society. Even though they readily admitted that they faced challenges not encountered by their colleagues, these FBW did not feel that the workplace and employment terms in general should be adjusted to suit them specifically.

### *Changes Perceived in the Traditional Gender Role Schema*

The opinions of the majority of the FBW involved in this study expressed discomfort with the evolution of gender roles seen in today's society in South Africa. Eight of the ten women stated that they had seen changes in the employment sector pertaining to women and that opportunities for them had grown over the last fifty years or so, which was a positive and necessary development. However, six out of the ten felt discouragingly towards the influences these advancements had had on the role women played in the home environment. Most felt that it would be best if traditional gender roles were abided by in the home, as changes related to the typical gender schemas caused conflict and frustration with their male partners. Linda was reluctant to use the term "breadwinner" while describing the non-traditional role she fulfils, so much so that she seemed unable to even verbalise the term. She said that it was best that she kept her role as breadwinner quiet "And never brag or show it or let anybody else know, it's got to be kept very low key". Similarly, Ronel made every effort to make her partner feel as though he was playing the part of breadwinner to prevent tension in the home. This circumspect behaviour was also displayed by the remaining FBW, who felt the need to maintain traditional gender roles in the home. Ela, an unemployed artist and single mom of one, felt that adhering to the traditional gender norms prescribed by her religious following, where men are meant to be the sole providers, may lessen the burdens felt by FBW.

Through the above experiences shared by the FBW, a conflicting gender role schema was revealed. A schema where the emancipation of the people of South Africa in general, and our women in particular, was endorsed, but emancipation from traditional gender roles in the home was not. A schema where the improvement of educational and employment opportunities for women is endorsed, but conflictingly, the reconsideration of gendered division of unpaid labour in the home is not. This paradoxical dominant script of emancipation of women in general, but not individually within the home and work environments, is reflected in the FBW experiences imparted where instances of physical abuse at the hands of their partners and/or discrimination suffered in the workplace is not attributed to the effect on their non-traditional gender role in society, but rather to their own individual attributes. These women internalise the blame for instances of violent and prejudiced behaviour, rather than ascribe it to the parochial community they live in.

### *Multicultural Effects on Individual Experiences of South African Female Breadwinners*

Most of the women had never contemplated their own role as FBW and found it very difficult to explain the particularities of their experiences when asked to place their experiences within the context of their multi-cultural society. Four of the ten women specifically mentioned that they had never considered themselves to be FBW until they were contacted in connection with this study. It may be argued that the women were not cognisant of the unique role their positions as FBW play in South African society today. They were mindful that society in general had changed, in most respects, for the betterment of women, and the largest part of the FBW were very aware of the past political regime in South Africa and how it may have benefitted, or alternatively subjugated, their individual existences and subsequent opportunities. For some, like Caroline and Sarah, this was an eye opening experience that led them to reflect on their own living situation and that of other women in our society who had the same responsibilities to perform as they did, and the differences that characterised those living situations and experiences. Sarah elaborated:

*I know I started off saying that I've never really thought about it, and as I'm sitting here, so many thoughts are coming into my head about how this issue can affect so many other things... like community, or giving back... maybe as women, who are able to generate money, we should be more responsible... to South African society.*

Sarah, Linda, Caroline and Martha, felt that they had benefitted under the past regime, even though they opposed its policies, and felt a need to give back to the community. For Martha and Caroline, it took the form of mentoring others in their respective fields, as described by Martha:

*I felt a social need to put some of my learning and maturity in the workplace back into the public sector, to help young people... who perhaps haven't had the personal background that would allow them to come with the skills that they need...you've got a lot of graduates... coming out of university with a lot up here [points to her head], but not a lot of work space skills.*

Sunette also noted the experiences of FBW in our society varied to her own, along the lines of race, with regards to her fellow FBW colleagues and their living arrangements:

*I think it's much more difficult for them because most of them have two houses. They've got their houses in the townships, which is far away...they have flats close by [to workplace]... so then they don't see their family...*

For Ela, Rose and Nombuso, this living arrangement mimicked their own childhoods where their mothers, who were breadwinners, had to leave them with relatives while they moved closer to their place of employment. Whereas this may have been a result of laws that restricted the movement of certain races under the governance of an apartheid regime, these living situations still exists today, as explained by Ela:

*The [friend] that I mentioned, she lives in [another province]...She actually doesn't even live with her child, she's left her child with her mother [here]... personally, I don't like it...I don't think it's fair, the child grows up having two [homes]..."*

Three of the ten women disagreed with the notion that the experiences of FBW in South Africa differed, and felt that in general, they had similar existences. Rose had been surprised at how many of her colleagues were also FBW, after discussing our approaching meeting at her work place, and how that role transcended cultural and racial lines. Nombuso felt that all FBW were united by their similar challenges and that they all "were struggling out there". Aaminah concurred with this conclusion and elaborated on the shared challenges:

*Any woman...on their own, it is the [same] throughout. The kids – home and work... even if you are a cashier at the store... you focus must be more on that. You have to! As much as you want your focus to be on your kids... you can't. You cannot neglect that piece of bread coming in.*

Unfortunately, none of the FBW had considered the critical role they played, and continue to play, within our societal structure and how these contribute towards the modern society that they are currently part of. The majority of these experiences shared by the women were intra and interpersonal in nature, and when the question was asked of their non-traditional gender role in relation to our society today, they responded with ambivalent answers relating to interpersonal experiences and how these influence their home environment rather than communal environment.

## Discussion

*Up 'til now, I ate the burnt toast. I learned that from my mother - metaphorically if not literally. As a loving and devoted wife and mother, she always took care of everyone and everything else before herself. This habitual self-sacrifice was well intended, but ultimately it's a mixed message for a child. I learned to accept whatever was in front of me without complaint because I didn't think I deserved good things. (Hatcher, 2006, p.1)*

In the course of interviews and analysis, the realities faced by FBW revealed experiences that expose archaic divisions and discriminations of gender within our society, which have been hiding behind constructions of reform advocating equality among the sexes. These discrete forms of discrimination masquerade as socially constructed values encouraging female emancipation and empowerment, but are more congruent with the out-dated conventions and policies still practised in various areas of society today, than the egalitarian ideals they profess to emulate.

Credence in this supposition, revealed via the erudite discourse shared by the FBW, manipulates these women into believing that the challenges that they experience, lack of time, financial difficulties, gender discrimination and violence, are consequential self-sacrifices necessitated by their role, rather than resulting penalties of obsolescent systems used today which are based on previous prejudiced and repressive regimes. Readily they eat the burnt toast society tells them they need to, in order to secure their autonomy. Contextual and interpretive analyses of the FBW shared stories exposes their communicated contradictions as the influence of a patriarchal society on a group of individuals performing non-traditional roles within said society. This paradoxical dominant script of emancipation of women in general, but not individually within the home and work environments, is reflected in the FBW experiences imparted where instances of physical abuse at the hands of their partners and/or discrimination suffered in the workplace is not attributed to the effect on their non-traditional gender role in society, but rather to their own individual attributes. These women internalise the blame for instances of violent and prejudiced behaviour, rather than ascribe it to the parochial community they live in.

The instances of women crediting local, intimate justifications to global issues is addressed by Fine (2002), who states that women tend to see denunciation as personal incompetence rather than general discrimination. This conduct is condoned by patriarchal societies who have paradoxical dominant scripts to enforce such behaviour, because a woman, who blames herself for discrimination experienced as a result of her own shortcomings, is less likely to complain. A lack of counter stories to challenge the dominant script means that the status quo, social context and issues, are not recognised and confronted as such, and as a result these issues cannot be rectified. Unfortunately, this state of play is all too apparent when examining the shared lived experiences of the FBW who participated in the study, where gender equality seems to consist of a denial of

respective differences in favour of an inconsistent, one-size fits all view of egalitarianism. This 'new' model of equal opportunity for all genders is based on an idea that differences need not be accommodated and that they are a disadvantage. Rather, women should follow this new dominant script of fairness, which in actuality is still based on the hitherto dominant male breadwinner model of unfair distribution of unpaid labour in the home, and gendered division of labour in the workplace. Cognisance of past models and policies still practised today, under the guise of modernity, are exposed in these women's' discourses, as are the social ills that create the challenges they face in their everyday lives.

### **Practical Applications and Limitations**

The findings of this study specifically highlight the experiences of FBW in South Africa, with possible elucidations to the women of the populace in general. For the participants involved, comprehension of essential experiences shared may facilitate personal apperceptions in forming, and grasping, their own identities.

On an interpersonal level, information generated by this study may provide a supportive structure for dialogue between FBW and their significant others, about the role they play as FBW and what it entails. Communication of this nature may help men and women to understand their changing gendered identities and the way these may impact on their relationships, as well as the impact of cultural and traditional assumptions thereon.

On a global level, reconsidering FBW roles within the context of our modern economic climate is crucial considering the extensive contributions brought about by their growing presence within the formal and informal sectors. Restructuring patterns of employment and occupation to address issues pertaining to pay gaps, unpaid maternity leave, gendered division of labour and discrimination is vital, as is the implementation of policies that recognise female employees as the primary source of income for their families.

Being an exploratory study, the limitations encountered within this study were mainly due to the nature of this research, as well as time and financial constraints imposed, and could be addressed by future research on this topic. Although a diverse group of women participated in the interviews, the scope of the study was limited by the selection of participants able to join, all of whom had to be able to converse adequately in English. This monolingualism inadvertently created a requirement that participants had to have completed a certain level of schooling and indeed, all the participants had completed a senior high school education, with half having achieved a tertiary education qualification.

Secondly, the diverse nature of the connubial relationships of the women who participated in this study, ranging from single or co-habiting, to married, divorced or separated, were unintentionally confined to relationships with members of the opposite sex. Though this was not a prerequisite or even a considered focus in participant selection, it is limiting with respects to research regarding FBW experiences, and exploration of the dynamics of FBW households comprising of same sex couples could yield interesting truths in regards to the gendered division of labour in the home.

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