Professional Black South African Women Speak Out in Resistance to Patriarchy: Overcoming Barriers to Self Development

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Professional Black South African Women Speak Out in Resistance to Patriarchy: Overcoming Barriers to Self Development

By Padhma Moodley\(^1\) and Corné Meintjes\(^2\)

Abstract

The professional and social spaces occupied by educated Black South African women are arenas marked by multifaceted challenges and struggles. This study looks into the resistance strategies employed by Professional Black Women (PBW) against patriarchal norms and the ways they navigate cultural, gender, and self-development barriers. Utilizing a qualitative research design grounded in the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, the study aims to elucidate the lived experiences of PBW as they confront various barriers. The purposive sample comprises three professional Black women pursuing doctoral degrees and serving as lecturers within higher education institutions. This paper illuminates the familial and cultural patriarchal structures that impede PBW’s journey towards self-development. Through their narratives, it becomes evident that PBW actively resist patriarchal influences within their cultural context, recognizing these norms as hindrances to their personal growth. Their resistance signifies a paradigm shift towards prioritizing self-development and forging independent identities. The study applies an intersectional lens to analyze the interconnectedness of themes, highlighting the complex interplay between intra-cultural patriarchal oppression and PBW’s aspirations for self-realization. By focusing on familial and cultural barriers, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping the experiences of Black South African women in their quest for empowerment and autonomy.

Keywords: Professional Black women, Intersectionality, Patriarchy, Phenomenology, South African Black women

Introduction

South African professional Black women (PBW) have historically lacked full access to opportunities extended to other racial groups, given the previous political dispensations in the country exacerbated by gender oppression (Boesak, 1980). The period of South African history known as colonialism started in 1652, during which the white colonialists enslaved Black men, women, and children (Mkhesu, 2020). Apartheid, which succeeded colonialism a few centuries later, was particularly harsh on South African Black women. Black women’s quest for liberation was evident in 1956 when 20,000 women marched to challenge the “systematic oppressive and racist rules of the apartheid regime” (Velelo, 2022). This event is commemorated still today on 9 August each year as Women’s Day. However, the transforming political landscape and national

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imperatives of race and gender empowerment have created expectations for PBW (Rammund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020) to achieve self-development which has not been without challenges. These challenges include issues of gender, race, and ethnic culture in the form of workplace and everyday discrimination and harassment. Some of these challenges are not discrete or isolated from one another and need to be viewed through an intersectional framework. Intersectionality means that race, gender, ethnicity, and other identities operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that shape complex social inequalities (Collins, 2015).

According to Aptheker (1981), educational institutions have historically and politically focused on white men’s experiences, histories, and cultures—typically those belonging to the elite. Black women have been silenced for generations, according to Kobo (2018), because men were supposed to be the ones with knowledge who could think not only for themselves but also for women. In response to this history of discrimination, the leadership ambitions of PBW are high, such that Black women are nearly three times more likely to aspire to senior leadership with prestigious titles than their counterparts (Hewlett & Green, 2015). Numerous academic works (Divala, 2014; Khunou et al., 2019; Mokhele, 2013; Naicker, 2013; Schulze, 2015) explain how Black women academics in South African higher education institutions are not immune to the racism and sexism that befall Black women in other spheres of professional and social life. Due to the racism and patriarchy in higher education institutions, Black women have been among the most isolated, underemployed, and demoralized personnel in the higher education community (Rollock, 2019; Collins, 2001; Zulu, 2013). Black women’s life experiences differ from those of Black men and white women, given their history, culture, and socio-political factors that include the effects of years of racial oppression worldwide (Crenshaw, 1989; Matsuda, 1987; Williams, 1991). The pursuit of self-definition through independence by PBW evidences their strength to succeed against the odds frequently stacked against them. Therefore, the current study examines the lived experiences of PBW, focusing on how they address gender, cultural, and self-development barriers to achieving success.

**Literature Review**

**Imagery of the Strong Black Woman**

Research suggests that conceptualization of strength forms a central part of the identity of Black women (Littlefield, 2004; Shorter-Goode & Washington, 1996). Moreover, strength has been suggested as a culturally specific coping mechanism critical for the survival of women of African descent (Nelson et al., 2016). Historically, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) image was stereotypically used to justify the exploitation and abuse of Black women, a group presumed to possess subhuman emotional and intellectual capacity yet immense physical strength that would enable them to withstand abuse by slave owners (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 2000). However, in the present day, the SBW image is considered by many Black women and non-Black women alike as a badge of honor, reflecting Black women’s ability to maintain a family and have success in the workplace while also overcoming daily instances of incivility (Davis & Jones, 2021). The SBW is an archetype that many Black women embody and is characterized by extreme independence, self-sacrifice, and emotional silencing. For many Black women, strength means being self-reliant and independent, caring for others (often at the expense of one’s self-care), and silencing one’s emotions even when faced with mistreatment (Nelson et al., 2016; West et al., 2016; Abrams et al., 2014; Walker-Barnes, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011; Woods-Giscombe, 2010;
Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Such conceptualizations of strength are both empowering and damaging.

**Moving Past Gender and Cultural Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are generalized societal beliefs about traits and behaviors of groups of people and are conceptualized as a core cognitive aspect and the justifier of stigma and/or prejudice (Major et al., 2013; Pratto & Pitpitan, 2008; Link & Phelan, 2001). Even though stereotypes are a natural part of the human experience, they are often harmful because they overgeneralize the characteristics of groups of people and are highly resistant to disconfirming evidence (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Social norms perpetuate gender stereotypes and are often influenced by cultural beliefs. Discrimination faced by Black women is fueled by fear and is expressed as racism, sexism, ageism, classism, or ableism (Chance, 2022). As a result, Black women have had to overcome significant adversity, including gender and cultural stereotypes, to achieve professional success (Assari, 2017).

Black women’s primary role in South African society and elsewhere was domestic work, i.e., cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, and babysitting (King, 2007). The way Black women were portrayed in society limited their access to jobs, education, and equal rights with men, among other things. It relegated Black minorities and women to stereotypes such as “whore,” “virgin,” “savage,” and “heathen” (Montle, 2021, p. 233). This norm was cultivated from one generation to another until the emergence of feminist activists and scholars who worked to counter gender inequality. Nevertheless, expectations about attributes and behaviors appropriate to women or men and the gendered relations between women and men are shaped by culture (Schalkwyk, 2000). The relational issues between gender equality and cultural diversity in South Africa remain complicated because the concept of gender in many South African nationalities creates several contradictions (Baden et al., 1998, as cited in Pillay & Teleki, 2018). One of these is related to the fact that the role of women in South Africa has always been influenced by a diversity of cultures, with identity steeped in rigid definitions or traditions (Baden et al., 1998, as cited in Pillay & Teleki, 2018).

Davis, Levant, and Pryor (2018) mention that the ideology of traditional femininity is a central construct in the gender role strain paradigm that identifies gender role stress and strain for both women and men emanating from adherence to conventional (i.e., patriarchal) gender norms. Moreover, Levant and Richmond (2016) assert that the process is influenced by gender ideologies which inform children’s socialization to adopt traditional gender roles and adults’ performance of these roles. Critics of traditional leadership in non-Western countries, such as South Africa, often fear that governance in this setting is likely to compromise the principles of democracy due to the customary nature and systems of governance that are often found in traditional leadership, where equity, human rights, and gender equality are bound to suffer (Ubink, 2016). It is argued that patriarchy as a concept gives rise to a particular state of being, where power influences gender norms and pervades all systems of living (Jewkes et al., 2015).

One of the UN Sustainable Development Goals addresses gender equality (The International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2016) with specific targets to end discrimination against women and children and to ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making. This has been criticized as a Western principle of universal human rights since it conflicts with the traditional patriarchy of cultural norms in a culturally diverse country like
South Africa, where African traditions hold fast. According to Awololo (2001) the formation of
gender equality in Africa has been perceived as foreign interference in African cultures for quite
some time. Scholars who are proponents of cultural relativism believe that permitting human rights
to override cultural dictates violates sovereignty. The right to (gender) equality and culture are
guaranteed rights under the Constitution of South Africa. The Constitution, however, does not
explicitly state which right takes precedence over the other where a conflict arises. Thus, the
government (executive, legislature, and judiciary branches) as principal duty-bearer for human
rights has to explore ways in which both these rights are respected, promoted, and protected in the
manner contemplated by the Constitution (Nkhat & Kalunga, n.d.).

Colonialism reinforced some of the indigenous African cultural structure, which ensnared,
hegemonized, and denied Black women a feeling of self (Montle, 2021). This marginalized Black
African women by asserting inequalities between men and women in terms of gender roles that
favor men (Crawley, 2006). African cultural societies were formerly built on traditional systems
that often, but not always, excluded women from certain essential activities of life, such as
education and job opportunities. These patriarchal notions fostered Black women to become good
housewives to cook, clean, wash, iron, and sexually please their husbands (Montle, 2021, p. 233).
Moreover, Hadjithedorou (1999) asserts that “the experiences of marriage and womanhood
traditionally dominated the lives and identity of women in Africa, that is, it was expected of every
girl or a woman to marry and have children where she would have a family and enjoy the benefits
of motherhood” (p. 76). Given the argument above, cultural notions of marriage detract from
women’s right to identity and independence, which justifies Radebe (2012) to view marriage as an
oppressive institution that women endure for the sake of financial security. This is fortified by
cultural stereotypes that deprive married women of independence, thus causing a high rate of
unemployment among them. Data from the statistical authority in South Africa reveals that
approximately 6.7 million people in South Africa are jobless, whereas women remain the most
powerless of the unemployed (Mahlangu, 2019). Cultural diversity in South Africa arguably exists
within patriarchal social frameworks. It thus compels the question of whether gender equality or
cultural diversity is antecedent to the other or whether one is more important than the other (Pillay
& Teleki, 2018).

Self-development and Identity

Previous research on Black women’s gender identity shows that there tends to be an
overlap between their racial and gender identity development (Watt, 2006; Parks et al., 1996;
Martin & Hall, 1992). Black women tend to endorse more flexible gender role attitudes (White,
2006; Kane, 2000) and are aware of gender bias at a young age (Brown et al., 2011; Thomas et al.,
they must sort through what it means to be a woman and what it means to be Black because
stereotypes of those identities are often incongruent.

Methodology

The study acknowledges the intricate interplay of gender, cultural, and self-development
barriers faced by PBW. Scholars like Moorosi and associates (2018) emphasize the importance of
intersectionality in understanding the multifaceted challenges encountered by marginalized
groups. This framework, echoed by researchers such as Porter and Byrd (2021), rejects the notion
of treating race, class, and gender as isolated factors, instead highlighting their interconnectedness.
By recognizing the simultaneous operation of various forms of oppression, as advocated by Shields (2008), intersectionality research underscores the coexistence of these barriers. Drawing parallels to Black feminist theory, as noted by Collins (2000), this framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the intertwined dynamics of race, gender, and oppression. In South Africa, discussions on liberation are often centered on race and class, as Morrell and associates (2012) point out, marginalizing the significance of gender. This study employs a phenomenological approach to delve into each barrier individually, aiming to uncover how gender, race, and self-development hurdles impact PBW.

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and explicating common and shared meanings, while hermeneutics seeks understanding and knowledge by interpreting language elements such as words or texts (Al-Raisi, 2020). Aligned with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study aimed to extract meaning from subjective realities through personal interpretations of their lived experience. This type of analysis permits detailed, in-depth exploration of people’s experiences and the meaning these experiences have for them (Matharu & Perez, 2018). Creswell (2012) further endorses the use of IPA by emphasizing that phenomenology focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon.

Samples in IPA studies are usually small, enabling a detailed and time-consuming case-by-case analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Mandleco (2010) highlights that South African Black female academics often leave their careers during the early stages. A purposive sampling technique was applied in selecting the participants for the study. The study engaged three PBW in their second year of studying towards their PhDs within a higher education setting. The interpretive approach also puts less emphasis on the phenomenological attitude and reduction. It applies more focus to the jointly constructed interpretation of an individual’s life world and the individual’s natural orientation to the phenomena (van Manen, 1990). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) IPA aims to examine certain phenomena in-depth, rather than generating a theory to be generalized over the whole population. To ensure rigor, Alase (2017) advises that phenomenological research should ensure that quality is paramount in everything the study does and produces. The inclusion of Sandelowski’s (1986) technique, which addresses several quality indicators, enhances the study’s rigor. The aim of participant selection in phenomenological and hermeneutic phenomenological research is to select participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience (van Manen, 1997b). Diversity (mother tongue language, marital status, and age) among the participants was carefully considered to contribute to the richness of the data.

Phenomenological studies conventionally use interviews to understand the participants’ lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2007). This lived experience in higher education institutions includes emphasis on gender and racial disparity (Dlamini & Adams, 2014). Due to their frequent victimization by both sexist and racist oppression, Black women bear a particular double intersectional burden in both their professional and social lives (Zulu, 2021). Following this standard, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed that allowed for probing and additional questions to be raised during the interviews. The barriers this study sought to explore informed three distinct areas (gender, cultural, and self-development barriers to success) on which the interviews were based.
Background of the Participants

Three Black women in the second year of their PhD studies at a South African higher education institution participated in the study. These women are all employed as lecturers at a higher education institution. All three women are Black South Africans; two are single, and one is married. The status of the participants is relevant as it influences their self-development and the cultural/gender barriers they face.

Interview Methodology

The researcher conducted the interviews of approximately sixty minutes each. Interviews were conducted electronically and were recorded with the participants’ permission. Open-ended questions were raised for each barrier. In some cases, separating each barrier was impossible as they were inextricably linked. Open-ended questions were developed to encourage participants to share their lived experiences and express their opinions and insights on specific aspects of the study. The recordings were then transcribed under specific themes addressed during the interviews.

Data Analysis Using van Manen’s Approach

Once the data was transcribed, the researcher followed van Manen’s six-step data analysis. The steps are reflected in Table 1. Van Manen’s research method is structured and blends philosophical theories and hermeneutic phenomenology concepts from thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer. It involves six stages to guide hermeneutic inquiry, permitting the researcher to use this process to reveal the phenomena within the lived experience (van Manen, 1997). This method offers flexibility for researchers, allowing them to delve into the essence of lived experiences.

Table 1: Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples from Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Desire for Independence</td>
<td>Individual strength, decision-making, self-governing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Need for Approval</td>
<td>No approval from family, lack of shared understanding and acceptance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intra-Cultural Gender Bias</td>
<td>Men make decisions; women are expected to cook, clean and iron.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Subjugation</td>
<td>Women are trained to be wives and mothers; they should not aspire to have careers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Mechanisms</td>
<td>Abandonment of specific cultural values, becoming independent, self-motivation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Researchers’ Data

Thematic Analysis

The analysis follows the five themes identified in Table 1. These are detailed to demonstrate how meaning was attributed while interpreting participants’ responses. Excerpts of their responses indicate their relevance to each emergent theme.

Theme 1: The Desire for Independence

The desire for independence emerges as a central theme among the participants. This theme underscores the participants’ conviction that independence symbolizes individual strength, aligning with the concept of the SBW schema (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). The narratives illustrate how these women pursue independence by making their own life choices and career decisions, even against familial and cultural expectations (Montle, 2021). The participants’ stories
resonate with existing research on women’s empowerment and autonomy, highlighting their determination to defy constraints and prioritize self-development (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021). Their desire for independence was expressed in several ways, such as making their own decisions when incorporating or rejecting some cultural norms within their lives, or making career choices that family members did not entirely support. Responses about this theme included:

I feel I should do what I want to do; the comments I received already being in the middle of my PhD studies where people tell me I won’t get married because guys will feel intimidated by my independence. (P1, Sotho, 32, single, personal communication)

I like providing for myself and not having to depend on someone else. What interferes with my personal development, I no longer practice. Balancing Western ideologies and my culture is difficult. (P2, isiZulu, 29, single, personal communication)

As a married Black woman, I have the support of my husband mainly because we share similar career aspirations, yet I still maintain a certain sense of independence. (P3, Shona, 34, married, personal communication).

The narratives of the participants vividly illustrate their unwavering commitment to independence, showcasing their resilience in navigating cultural expectations and personal aspirations, demonstrating the desire for empowerment and autonomy echoed in existing literature on women’s agency and self-determination.

Theme 2: The Need for Approval

The theme of the need for approval reveals the multi-layered struggle PBW face in gaining support from both family and society. This theme echoes the complex negotiation between traditional cultural beliefs and personal aspirations. The participants’ experiences of hiding their educational pursuits and defying cultural norms in pursuit of their career goals mirror the tension between external expectations and internal ambitions (Chisale, 2017). The narratives demonstrate the clash between the desire for personal achievement and the significance of communal validation, adding depth to discussions on the intersectionality of gender and culture (Crenshaw, 1989). One respondent noted:

I hid my university enrollment from my family, who do not believe that a woman is required to work. Going against my parents was a breach of my culture as well. However, what I was taught and what I am transitioning to are quite different. My master’s studies were also kept a secret until I informed them of my graduation. Currently, just my brother is aware of my enrollment for my PhD. I receive no emotional support from my family, which I am learning to do away with. Even in my studies which is such a lonely journey, I feel I require support and motivation, but I find ways to cope with this on my own. My parents believe that no man will ever want to marry me because I am educated. (P2, personal communication)

P2 also expressed that the Western world created the space for her to pursue her goals and ambitions and obtained encouragement from this. P1 has received some approval in the form of support from her family; however, the family maintains that she must strike a balance between her
career development and her personal life. Her family does not mind her academic progress, but given her single status, there is some pressure to get married. P3 is married to an academic who shares her drive and ambition to succeed.

The responses of the participants highlight the complex dynamics of seeking approval from both family and society, amplifying the tension between conforming to traditional cultural expectations and pursuing personal aspirations (Chisale, 2017). These experiences emphasize the complex negotiation between external pressures and internal desires, shedding light on the intersecting influences of gender, culture, and individual agency (Crenshaw, 1989).

**Theme 3: Cultural Gender Bias**

Cultural gender bias emerges as a salient theme in participants’ narratives, revealing stark contrasts between gender dynamics in the higher education institution as a workplace and within their culture. It is difficult to separate gender bias from culture as these are viewed through an intersectional frame. However, the meanings extracted from the interviews reveal low levels of gender bias in the workplace, which was heavily present within their culture. The cultural stereotypes besieging Black women have occasioned gender inequalities, patriarchal ideals, and power struggles, thus favoring their male counterparts (Montle, 2021). The respondents explained:

Where I am, the majority of the people are Black, and the organization [university] does not have a huge gap of gender inequality. We are able to get along well. My male counterparts value our contributions, and there is mutual respect. In the family setting, we have men who make specific decisions. Women are not included in the decision-making. It is usually men. When I lost my Dad, the decisions were taken by the men and the women were just informed. My friends have a similar experience. (P1, personal communication)

There are quite a number of opportunities for females in the workplace, but there is no support structure in the work environment, or you don’t have a support structure at home. (P2, personal communication)

I have been side-lined for reasons other than being female as I am a foreign national. I still persevere and take up opportunities that do become available to me. (P3, personal communication)

The participants’ stories emphasize the need for a deeper exploration of the interplay between cultural norms and gender dynamics, contributing to discussions on cultural shifts and power struggles (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005), including how the work environment may be more supportive.

**Theme 4: Cultural Subjugation**

The theme of cultural subjugation unveils how participants grapple with their cultural heritage, challenging traditional gender roles and norms. Their rejection of restrictive cultural notions reflects a shift towards self-actualization and empowerment (Chisale, 2017). The cultural aspect was highly contentious as it threatened their progress and self-development. The participants’ responses indicate that they saw their culture as oppressive or insignificant in their lives. They disagreed with the view of women’s place being in the kitchen. The historical background provided by Montle (2021) depicts cultural notions that have defined Black women’s
identities from ancient African societies. Dawood and Seedat-Khan (2022) posit that Black women’s primary role was limited to domestic work. This depiction hindered them from accessing education, job opportunities, and equal rights with men. The participants’ narratives highlight the transformative potential of education and personal growth in reshaping cultural perceptions and fostering emancipation from traditional roles (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021). The patriarchal views remain entrenched in African culture, with women rebelling by not observing traditional cultural beliefs:

I am from Zimbabwe, and being so far away from home means I do not uphold much of the cultural beliefs as my family does back home. The past norm has been that the place of a woman is in the kitchen, and a woman is groomed to be a wife and a mother. In the Shona culture, if you are educated, the monies that are going to be charged for lobola will be at least five times more. My husband and I share an understanding that cleaning the house and preparing meals are not just for me but for everyone. There are no specific roles that any individual plays in our household. (P3, personal communication)

It is not an easy thing to manage a balance between culture and wanting to excel as a woman. I try to bring my own perceptions in and try to blend them in. People do not understand at that level, so they make funny comments about that. When I come home from a tiring day at work, I cannot be expected to cook and clean and play two roles in one. I don’t think working women should bear the responsibility by themselves. My colleagues who are also Sotho believe you must cook, iron, and clean for your husband. I am not afraid to the extent of losing my cultural beliefs because of my education. There are certain things I will hold onto. (P1, personal communication)

I am expected to stay home, marry, and have children. My culture and those that practice [in] it have a negative perception of women who are career oriented. They are labelled using different names. In my Zulu culture, if you obtain your PhD and are unmarried, you will remain unmarried. They want you to first get married and then pursue goals if your husband allows it. When it comes to other perspectives, if a woman is educated, that woman automatically does not submit to her husband. Various labels are used which are not true. (P2, personal communication)

The participants’ narratives vividly depict their struggles with cultural subjugation, challenging entrenched gender roles and norms within their respective cultural contexts. Through their rejection of restrictive cultural beliefs, they assert their agency and pave the way for self-actualization and empowerment (Chisale, 2017). Despite facing societal pressures and backlash, their steadfast commitment to personal growth and education signifies a transformative shift towards emancipation from traditional roles, underscoring the transformative power of education in reshaping cultural perceptions and fostering individual liberation (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021).

Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms serve as a crucial theme, highlighting the participants’ resilience and agency in the face of barriers. Coping is the process of constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that exceed a person’s resources
Addressing barriers to success requires participants to cope with challenges, which can be seen in their organic strategies. These strategies help them survive backlash from family members and thrive in their quest for self-development. For example, P2 faced financial challenges by finding her own funding for her undergraduate and postgraduate studies. To avoid negative criticism, she hid her enrollment at a university and learned to cope without her family’s approval. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD and she found coping mechanisms by being in the company of her fellow students. P3 faced challenges as a wife and mother to two children under 10. She managed family commitments with her husband’s support, but navigating through work and studies required self-discipline and commitment. Coping methods and their effectiveness depends on the cultural context.

The coping mechanisms employed by the participants in Theme 5 can be summarized as follows:

- **Organic Strategies of Coping**: Participants employed constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the specific external and internal demands they faced.

- **Adaptation to Financial Challenges**: Participants coped with financial challenges by finding their own sources of funding for their studies. For example, P2 had to secure her own funding for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, demonstrating resilience in the face of financial obstacles.

- **Navigating Family Expectations**: Participants coped with negative criticism and lack of approval from family members by hiding their educational pursuits and learning to live with the decisions they made. P3 managed family commitments with her husband’s support, while P2 hid her university enrollment from her family.

- **Embracing Africultural Coping**: Participants embraced Africultural coping mechanisms, which better represent their worldview and coping responses. By incorporating culture-specific coping strategies, such as embracing values that align with their personal goals while disregarding others, they were able to manage the dissonance they felt towards their culture.

- **Cultural Context and Coping Effectiveness**: Coping effectiveness was influenced by the cultural context, with preferred coping methods and perceived effectiveness being appraised relative to social or cultural values or norms.

The narratives exemplify how the participants navigate challenges by developing individualized strategies that draw from their cultural backgrounds and personal strengths (Greer, 2007). These findings align with existing research on coping methods, emphasizing the cultural specificity of these strategies (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Addressing the barriers to success required participants to cope with challenges. The cognitive and behavioral effort is visible in the organic strategies of coping with these challenges that helped the participants survive backlash from family members and thrive in their quest for self-development.

**Discussion**

This study sought to understand how PBW openly resist patriarchy to address cultural, gender and self-development barriers by exploring their lived experiences. This phenomenological study applied several methods to ensure rigor through carefully undertaking the quality indicators discussed and ensuring the data was meticulously analyzed using van Manen’s six-step approach.
The study highlights the complex interdependence of cultural, gender, and self-development barriers faced by PBW. The participants in the study demonstrated remarkable resilience in their coping strategies despite the persistent stressors they encountered. The data showed that patriarchal oppression within their culture is a significant stressor, and women in marriages may use forms of silence to resist and survive in a patriarchal order (Chisale, 2017). However, the participants in this study also showed a desire for independence and self-sufficiency, which they viewed as functional tools towards achieving their goals.

**Figure 1: Interdependent Themes**

![Interdependent Themes Diagram](#)

*Source: Researchers’ Data*

The themes from the data analysis were intricately linked with coping mechanisms at the center of each (see Figure 1). The participants showed signs of coping with the various barriers by suppressing the stressor, which could be seen as a form of resistance. The participants incorporated culture-specific coping strategies, such as embracing values that align with their personal goals while disregarding others, which enabled them to manage the dissonance they felt towards their culture. The narratives collected in this study provided a deep understanding of the lived experiences of professional Black women who endure pockets of intra-cultural discrimination. Despite their barriers, they learn to cope with adversity and display traits of the Strong Black Woman, such as providing for themselves and not relying on anyone.

**Implications and Future Directions**

The findings of this study have practical implications for fostering cultural shifts and empowering PBW. Recognizing the importance of independence, validating diverse aspirations, and promoting supportive networks can facilitate their resilience and agency. The participants’ strength and self-sufficiency emerge as potent tools allowing them to transcend intra-cultural gender biases and to manage their desire for approval from family structures. They responded to traditional patriarchal norms, often perpetuated within these communities, with an attitude of resistance. While they strive for independence and self-development, they also navigate the tension
between their individual aspirations and cultural expectations. Their resistance to patriarchal
norms is a multifaceted process that involves both asserting their autonomy and seeking validation
within their cultural context. The desire for independence and the aspiration to be applauded
necessitate reshaping existing structures. These findings contribute an original layer to the existing
body of knowledge, shedding light on the intricate interplay of intra-cultural patriarchal oppression
and self-development aspirations experienced by PBW in South Africa. Furthermore, this study
offers a deeper comprehension of the intersectional experiences of PBW, who defy conformist
roles despite enduring intra-cultural discrimination. Their resistance and rejection of patriarchal
norms signify a determined shift towards self-development and asserting their identities. The study
highlights the significance of open dialogue and the incorporation of structural changes to facilitate
the emancipation of Black women.

To further these efforts, future research could explore interventions that facilitate open
dialogues within communities to challenge cultural gender biases and promote inclusive
perspectives. Moreover, examining how these themes intersect with different cultural backgrounds
can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of PBW’s experiences and foster
empowerment across diverse contexts. This research amplifies the voices of PBW, revealing their
journey to overcome multi-faceted barriers. Their stories provide valuable insights that can
potentially inform interventions, policies, and dialogues aimed at dismantling entrenched gender
biases and fostering empowerment within these communities. This study prompts critical
reflection on the interplay between gender equality and cultural diversity—raising questions about
whether one is antecedent to the other or whether one holds greater importance over the other. As
we navigate these complexities, future research endeavors could delve deeper into these
intersections to unravel the intricate dynamics shaping the lived experiences of PBW and to
elucidate pathways toward greater inclusivity and equity.

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