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Abstract
Sustainable prosperity requires nations to use their full human capital, thus, both males and females. It is concerning that challenges such as inadequate funding, domestic responsibilities and a lack of networks and adequate mentorship for females in academia are leading to lower research outputs. The international research arena is far from correcting the underrepresentation, discrimination and inequality women in academia face. To this end, this research explored the challenges associated with sustainable research capacity building (SRCB) of women in the South African academic arena. To achieve the research objectives, ten semi-structured interviews grounded in a postmodern research paradigm and guided by the principles of phenomenology were conducted. Although many studies discuss women in academia and their challenges, males' perspectives on the topic are not represented. In addition, there is a scarcity of literature that explores the context of research capacity building for women at South African (SA) higher education institutions (HEIs). This study addressed the latter two gaps in scholarly literature. The findings revealed that male participants in one SA HEI acknowledged that cultural norms and caregiving responsibilities disadvantaged women. However, in the other HEI, male participants viewed women as having equal or better promotion opportunities. Across both HEIs female participants agreed on challenges they faced but differed in how severe they are. In addition, across the two sampled HEIs cultural and societal norms delegate women the dual role of caregiver and academic. In turn, their capacity for research building becomes unsustainable, as low research output and stagnant academic positions for women follow. With sustainability in mind, HEIs should implement reforms such as equitable workload allocation, reduced teaching and administrative burdens, and targeted research support in the form of mentorship and funding. In addition, institutional and societal efforts to redistribute caregiving responsibilities are essential to enabling women to build research capacity sustainably. Although



the findings are relevant to multiple contexts, they cannot be generalized due to the small sample size.

Introduction

In all its forms, topics and functions, research could be a powerful driving force that a country can employ to strengthen its economy, preserve the environment and address societal inequalities (Mafenya, 2019). New knowledge is generated, disseminated and implemented through research, potentially improving institutional and societal practices (Mafenya, 2019; Malhotra et al., 2022; O'Hara & Naicker, 2022). On a global and national scale, high-quality research can lead to nationwide prosperity and contribute to the United Nations (UN) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to Squires (2019), sustainable research capacity building (SRCB) is encouraged by SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and is a core component of SDG 9 (building resilient infrastructure and nurture innovation). In this study, SRCB was defined as the ongoing sustainable development of the ability of research practitioners and higher education institutions (HEIs) to conduct impactful, high-quality research that could have a lasting, beneficial impact on local and international communities (Cash-Gibson et al., 2015; Cordrey et al., 2022; Daniels & De Beer, 2026; McGuire et al., 2020; Niemczyk & Rossouw, 2018; Van Wyk et al., 2020; Wittayapun & Nawarat, 2021). At the heart of SRCB is the improvement, growth, and empowerment of individuals and institutions, as well as the sharing and application of the knowledge generated to solve societal challenges (Daniels, 2026; McGuire et al., 2020; Van Rensburg et al., 2017). According to Cash-Gibson et al. (2015), SRCB is not limited to developing research knowledge, values, and competencies in theory; its implementation in practice is equally important.

An analysis of the scholarly literature reveals that the sustainability of research capacity-building (RCB) initiatives for women in HEIs worldwide is questionable. Scholars (Agbede et al., 2024; Al Bawab et al., 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023; Mbarga et al., 2024; Paz & Pardo-Dıaz, 2024; Puertas et al., 2023) worldwide are concerned that the research arena in developed and developing countries is far from correcting the underrepresentation, discrimination and inequality that women in research face. Ensuring SRCB for women is a key priority for HEIs, as the UN 17 SDGs prioritise women's equality and empowerment through SDG 5 (Mbarga et al., 2024). In fact, the UN (2024) goes as far as to state that "gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world". However, when zooming in on the scholarly literature from countries across different continents, gender equality in research remains far from achieved, as women in academia lag behind their male counterparts (Adewale, 2025; Dube, 2024).

Becoming a prominent researcher is a tremendously challenging path for women residing in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mbarga et al., 2024). According to Cisternas et al. (2021), in Chile, undergraduate enrolment rates are comparable between females and males. However, the statistics revealed that as researchers climb the academic ladder, the proportion of women declines. Mbarga et al. (2024), reporting from the context of Cameroon, informed that all their female study participants believed they were required to work harder than their male counterparts to receive recognition. Krebsbach (2022) stresses that females employed in academia are underrepresented relative to males and are less likely to be promoted. In

Norway, policy and institutional practices supporting female research practitioners have been implemented on paper but have not yielded sustainable capacity-building outcomes (Agbede et al., 2024).

Scholarly literature (Mbarga et al., 2024) calls for further research into the inequity in publication rates between male and female researchers. Scholars in Africa (Agbede et al., 2024; Al Bawab et al., 2024) noted that more studies exploring the contextual challenges women in academia face in developing countries and across Africa are needed to develop sustainable solutions. Although the number of studies documenting the empowerment of female researchers and the challenges they face has increased (see Agbede et al., 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023), research on their daily work experiences and perspectives is scant (Cisternas et al., 2021). This study addressed the latter. There is an obvious gender gap in the scholarly literature, as most studies cited in the research are limited to the perspectives of female academics and do not include the opinions of male researchers. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the discourse surrounding women in research from a heterogeneous perspective. Therefore, the researchers decided to include five female and five male participants in this study. It is important to note that "heterogeneous perspectives" mainly refer to gender-based differences between male and female participants. However, it also extends to variation in academic rank (novice and experienced academics) and disciplinary affiliation across faculties.

The main problem is that although SRCB is recognised as essential for advancing gender equity and institutional productivity in HEIs, women in South African universities continue to face structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit their participation in research and output. Another problem is that despite the growing body of literature on gender inequities in academia, there remains a limited understanding of how male and female research practitioners in SA HEIs perceive the SRCB of women. Existing studies have predominantly foregrounded women's experiences, often excluding male perspectives. Thus, limiting a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This study addresses this gap by exploring heterogeneous perspectives, encompassing gender, academic rank, and disciplinary variation, on the challenges associated with SRCB of women in South African HEIs. The study is crucial because Al Bawab et al. (2024) recommended that government, educational leaders, and researchers employed at HEIs acknowledge these challenges and act accordingly to promote SRCB for women in research. The same authors reminded that, regardless of the challenges, gender equity in higher education should not be viewed as a privilege; instead, it is a requirement for economic and social sustainability. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: How do male and female academics experience and interpret the challenges influencing SRCB for women in South African HEIs?

Literature review

Mbarga et al. (2024) suggest that advancing gender equality and strengthening the research capacity of HEIs should begin by charting the challenges and opportunities associated with women's research capacity. The challenges associated with SRCB of female research professionals are numerous and interrelated. Each reviewed study pointed to distinctive yet pressing challenges that HEIs globally face when building the research capacity of the women employed at their institutions. Following the recommendation of Mbarga et al. (2024), a detailed discussion of six interconnected challenges that women in academia face follows below.

Marginalisation in academia leads to harassment as the first challenge faced by female research practitioners (Seshadri et al., 2024). Mbarga et al. (2024) found that over 50% of women in Cameroonian HEIs reported harassment, humiliation, or intimidation. Approximately 40% of women academics reported experiencing unwelcome sexual advances and remarks, a trend also observed globally (Cardel et al., 2020). These challenges are intensified for women of colour, who face compounded marginalisation based on race and gender (Agbede et al., 2024; Seshadri et al., 2024; Toledo et al., 2023), alongside limited access to education and restrictive cultural norms that prioritise domestic roles (Agbede et al., 2024; Mbarga et al., 2024). Similarly, women in India and African-American women in the USA report heightened pressure to perform, conform, and justify their presence, while facing limited access to credibility, mentorship, and opportunities (Seshadri et al., 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023), contributing to isolation, imposter syndrome, and significant psychological strain (Agbede et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2023). The second challenge is that many female academic professionals enter academia during their childbearing years, thereby reducing their time available for research and capacity-building initiatives (Cardel et al., 2020). Females in academia reported performing more childcare duties than their male counterparts (Petrović, 2021). According to Al Bawab et al. (2024), some women fall behind in promotion and reaching full professorship because of parenthood. More women than men choose not to be in a relationship, pause their family lives, and decide to have fewer children (Cardel et al., 2020). Mbarga et al. (2024) reported that one out of two female academics employed in Cameroon had taken career breaks to care for their children. Mbarga and colleagues explained that one in four female academics had the privilege of taking maternity leave during doctoral studies or in employment. However, among the female researchers who took maternity leave, a third received paid maternity leave. Furthermore, female academics fear taking maternity leave, as it may result in loss of employment and suspension from their doctoral studies. Despite the challenges, female scientists receive less social support from family and faculty than their male counterparts (Toledo et al., 2023). According to Ntshongwana (2024), women in academia are under pressure to juggle their careers as scholars with their responsibilities as caregivers, which hinders their SRCB.

A lack of time gives rise to the third challenge: a minority of women hold senior research positions (Al Bawab et al., 2024). Liu et al. (2024), in the context of Norway, report that more than 50% of doctoral candidates in the country have been female since 2013. However, the percentage of female professors has shown a gradual growth of 1% per annum. Liu and colleagues noted that novice female academic professionals outnumber their male counterparts. However, there is a gap in their research capacity, as male researchers dominate among assistant, associate and full professors. Seshadri et al. (2024) pointed out that men dominate the upper echelons of research because many women in academia face personal and professional challenges, such as choosing between family and professional life, that hinder their research capacity. During their childbearing and early marital years, there is an unrealistic expectation that women produce excellent scholarship, develop their research capacity, and climb the academic ladder to professorship.

Ntshongwana (2024) explained that female research professionals are often excluded from larger social, professional and informal networks, which accounts for the fourth challenge. Paz and Pardo-Dıaz (2024)

found that women had lower participation in international collaboration networks, resulting in fewer co-authorships and less knowledge production than their male counterparts. Compared to male colleagues, women have fewer and smaller networks. Even though such networks were open to females, female faculty reported feeling as if they did not belong in their male colleagues' networks (Ntshongwana, 2024). According to Van der Wal et al. (2021), women in academia tend to have smaller, more clustered networks, which leads to fewer publications. As a result, women in academia are more likely to experience marginalisation and miss possibilities for SRCB, as they are excluded (or exclude themselves) from the "boys club". A lack of professional networks is compounded by the fact that women in academia lack mentors (Cardel et al., 2020; Toledo et al., 2023). The RCB of female academics is unsustainable because access to mentorship for novice women in academia is often few and far between (Seshadri et al., 2024). In fact, the development of women in academia is unstable because their careers stagnate, a situation attributable to inadequate mentorship opportunities (Ntshongwana, 2024). For women of colour, the absence of female mentors intensifies feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome, which further hinders the SRCB of females (Agbede et al., 2024). An additional challenge is that the process of identifying a mentor is associated with a degree of extroversion, independence, autonomy, and ambition, which younger female scholars, and especially female faculty of colour, may not feel comfortable displaying (Seshadri et al., 2024).

The fifth challenge is grounded in the ongoing marginalisation of female academic professionals and a lack of career progression (Paz & Pardo-Dıaz, 2024), which causes female researchers to leave the profession more often and at a younger age than their male counterparts (Van der Wal et al., 2021). Krebsbach (2022) reports that women are three times as likely as men to leave professional jobs, such as academia. Strauβ and Boncori (2020) attribute women's early departure from academia to additional commitments outside academia, such as domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles.

The above-mentioned challenges give rise to the last challenge, which is that women are underrepresented in all departments of academia, especially in higher research positions, such as senior lecturers, associate and full professors (Agbede et al., 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023; Hipólito et al., 2022; Krebsbach, 2022; Ntshongwana, 2024; Sá et al., 2023). In Ghana, only 8% of all professors at public HEIs are females (Agbede et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in Brazil, women are deeply underrepresented at the senior and leadership levels in academia (Oliveira et al., 2021). Moreover, Abraído-Lanza et al. (2022) found that Latina women and women from other ethnic and race groups remain underrepresented in STEM fields.

Method

This study employed the principles of phenomenology in data collection and analysis. Phenomenological research, rooted in the seminal works of Husserl (1970) with further development by Merleau-Ponty and Bannan (1956), explores research participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Therefore, phenomenological research focuses on the meaning participants ascribe to their lived experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). This study explored the lived experiences of male and female research practitioners employed in academia. In line with the principles of phenomenology, the aim of the study

was to determine how male and female academics experience and interpret the challenges influencing SRCB for women in South African HEIs.

A strategic decision was made to adopt a postmodern research paradigm. According to Forghani et al. (2015) and Hossienia and Khalili (2011), the objective of a postmodern philosophical research perspective is not to find definitive realities and facts but to examine and explain a specific setting and how it applies to a particular group of people in a particular situation at a particular time. A postmodern research paradigm was the most suitable for this study, since the objective was not to establish definitive realities and facts but to explore researchers' perceptions of the SRCB of women (a specific group of people) in South African academia (a specific setting). The postmodern approach was applied during the analysis by interpreting participants' narratives as context-dependent and multiple realities. There was a focus on subjective meanings and diverse perspectives rather than on a single, objective truth about SRCB among women in South African HEIs. Nieuwenhuis (2020) noted that most qualitative research studies are exploratory in nature and aim to better understand a topic, group, process, or setting. In this study, the topic was the SRCB of women in academia. Nieuwenhuis (2020) also contended that exploratory research does not start with a fixed theoretical stance. Therefore, adopting a postmodern research perspective entail rejecting a single perspective and acknowledging multiple realities (Forghani et al., 2015; Hossienia & Khalili, 2011).

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interview was selected as a data collection method for this study because it offers a flexible structure that can be adapted to the research purpose and objectives (Kallio et al., 2016). In addition, these interviews allowed the researcher to attend to the participants' responses and identify new lines of inquiry (Nieuwenhuis, 2020) related to their perspectives on the challenges associated with SRCB among women in academia. The interview questions focused on institutional support, workload allocation, research productivity, promotion processes, caregiving and family responsibilities, and professional networks. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim by the researchers to ensure accuracy and consistency in data analysis. To enhance trustworthiness, participants were provided with their transcripts for member checking to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses. The interview guide was developed in line with the study objectives and was pre-tested to ensure clarity, relevance, and methodological rigour. Creswell (2013) recommends using purposive sampling of participants in qualitative studies because it allows researchers to better understand the phenomenon under investigation. In line with the recommendations of Creswell (2013) and Johnson et al. (2020), the researcher purposively sampled 10 researchers (five males and five females) from two SA HEIs. The sample size of 10 participants was deemed sufficient, as data and theoretical saturation were reached by the tenth interview, with no new themes or insights emerging. The table below presents the participant profile of the 10 participants included in the study. The table depicts their institutional affiliation, gender, level of research experience, and faculty. Participants were sampled from two SA HEIs (SA1 and SA2) and included male and female academics. Notably, the sample includes academics from different faculties and carrying levels of experience in academia.

Table 1: Participant profile

Name	Institution	Gender	Experience and Faculty
Participant A	SA1	Female	Experienced researcher in the Faculty of Education
Participant B	SA1	Female	Experienced researcher in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences
Participant C	SA1	Female	Experienced researcher who served two terms as the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Education
Participant D	SA1	Female	Novice researcher in the Faculty of Law.
Participant E	SA1	Male	Experienced researcher in the Faculty of Education with a proven publishing track record and the holder of a research grant.
Participant F	SA2	Male	Novice researcher in the Faculty of Education.
Participant G	SA2	Male	Novice researcher in the Faculty of Education.
Participant H	SA2	Male	Experienced researcher in the Faculty of Education with a proven track record of research outputs.
Participant I	SA2	Male	Novice researcher in the Faculty of Education.
Participant J	SA2	Female	Experienced researcher and head of postgraduate education in the Faculty of Education.

The principles of phenomenology were applied in the collection and analysis of data. Based on the recommendations of Nieuwenhuis (2020) and Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015), six steps guided the process. The first step involved identifying the phenomenon of interest, namely, the SRCB of women in academia (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). The second step involved collecting data from participants who had experienced the phenomenon, including novice and experienced male and female research practitioners. The third step involved reducing the data to statements and themes (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015), followed by developing textual and structural descriptions of participants' experiences in the fourth step. The fifth step involved "sober reflection" and the application of epoché to minimise bias and avoid preconceived assumptions (Nieuwenhuis, 2020; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The final step avoided computer-assisted analysis, and data were analysed manually through colour coding. This study was part of a larger study conducted at the NWU; therefore, the researcher obtained the official, required ethical clearance from the NWU's Ethics Committee. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the NWU (ethics number: NWU-00313-23-A2). During each step of the research process, care was taken to avoid risk and harm and to protect the anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of participants in the study (Johnson et al., 2020). For this reason, the names of HEIs and participants were kept anonymous.

Results

The research findings are divided into four sections. The first section contributes to the body of knowledge by charting the main challenges women in SA academia face. The second section explores the possibility that women in academia have a competitive advantage over men. The third and fourth sections discuss the findings and present recommendations for sustainable improvement. The perspectives of both male and female participants were included to avoid bias in the representation of the findings.

Challenges hindering the sustainable research capacity building of women

The following section discusses the four challenges specific to women employed at SA HEIs.

Cultural and societal norms

One of the main challenges in the SA context is cultural and societal norms and the expectation that women need to fulfil their "role" as caregivers and be subordinate to men. As a result, women's participation in RCB initiatives and their contributions to published research remain low. Although it depends on multiple factors, opportunities available to SA academics are grounded in their identity and personal circumstances. When compared to their male counterparts, women, especially those with children, face challenges that prevent them from climbing the academic ladder. Participant C raised a concern about gender equity in leadership and management roles. According to her:

"It depends on the identity. It depends on the status of that person. Is the person married or not? But sometimes you will find, and I mean if you look at leadership and management positions in businesses worldwide, especially in South Africa, you will find this disparity in terms of equal opportunities between women and men. I do think that females do not get the opportunities that males get, and it is it is particularly difficult for women especially when they have children. This depends on a lot of factors."

Participant H reflected on his personal cultural norms that reinforced gender roles in households. In his experience, men were usually not expected to contribute to domestic responsibilities. The voice of Participant H is captured in the following quote:

"I want to be honest; they know at home they do not even ask me to cook because they know that I am a man. They are just respecting me. Even my girl children, when they come back from school, they will cook for me, and then they start doing their work."

Taking care of children and elderly family members

From a male perspective, Participant E mentioned that men had inherent advantages in the academic environment. In most cases, men were not delegated childcare responsibilities, which allowed them more time to focus on research and publication. As a result, they could progress at a faster rate than their female colleagues. In his words:

"I think as men, we do have an advantage over women in terms of that we do not have to look after the children. It then gives us as men the opportunity to publish more and to promote faster, whereas women might not have the opportunity."

A male participant, Participant H, added to this discussion by pointing out that females had traditional societal and cultural roles that created expectations around caregiving and research responsibilities. Participant H's statement was grounded in an experience with a student who struggled to balance her academic pursuits with the responsibilities of motherhood. The acknowledgement that men did not typically face similar challenges revealed that, in most cases, caregiving duties often fell disproportionately on women. As revealed by Participant H:

"We are not yet transformed in such a way that we can say men play an important role like a mother does. I remember I had a student who even stopped studies. I tried to encourage her, but then at the end [sic], I saw that really, she is struggling because sometimes when I had a meeting with her, the children will cry. She had two children, young children. So, the situation was that there was no one was helping her with those children. So, you have to take care of the children, but we as men, we have that chance of continue with research because we do not always have to sit with children".

Lack of time

One of the biggest challenges is that female research professionals have limited time to conduct research due to their teaching responsibilities. Consequently, they prioritised their teaching commitments over research and CB opportunities.

"I think when you look at the job demands of teaching and the teaching load and the administrative load and with one's limited resources, then it does take away time from being able to go out and do research". [Participant A]

Lack of publications

A lack of time is likely the cause of a lack of publications. Participant D observed a lack of professional progress for women in the Faculty of Law while her male counterparts thrived. In fact, the male colleagues in her faculty progressed to professorships while the women faced hurdles. Concerningly, no females published research articles in the current year (2024). As articulated by Participant D:

I do not think things have changed really. If I look at who has gone forward, the men have. They are now professors because they do not have the same challenges. I do not know of any females at this point in time that had publications for this year, not in my department.

A (un)sustainable competitive advantage

The data collected at one SA HEI (from Participants G and J) in the Faculty of Education presented a contrasting perspective on the challenges women in academia face regarding SRCB and promotion.

Women have an easier route to promotion

Participant G argued that in his experience, women did not face barriers to promotion compared to their male counterparts. The participant noted a higher number of promotions for women in his department in recent years. He noted that some women may have benefited from a system that promoted their advancement more readily. Effective mentorship among women was identified as one likely reason for their promotion. Participant G's perspective indicated that although challenges exist for women, they may also be presented with unique opportunities that could facilitate their professional growth. As revealed by Participant G in the following two quotes:

"I have quite a lot of women colleagues, female researchers. I think the challenge is all the same. We have the same boxes to tick when we want to get promoted. I understand the challenges of having children and all the other stuff they have to pay attention to outside of work. But I find that women have an easier route than mine, because I think women are more easily promoted than men. If you look at the criteria for promotion, in my school, for instance, in the last year, I would say double the amount [sic] of women were promoted compared to men. So, when it comes to promotion, I do not think women are behind. I actually think they are in front".

"I found that some of them have better mentors because most of them had women mentors. Women helping women is also a powerful tool. You know, maybe they think because men have always dominated the field, now they need to look after their own. No, I do not find that women are at all disadvantaged in research".

Managing research and domestic responsibilities

A female, Participant J, shared a personal account that reflected a current privilege in her situation. She noted she could manage research activities without her domestic responsibilities being a challenge. The participant's ability to work late at night and focus on research while her children were still young offered a unique perspective that may not be universally applicable to all female academics. In the words of Participant J:

"I do not think I have felt it. My kids are still small and there is still time for me to do these things. I can manage myself in terms of research and working late nights because I do not have homework to do, not yet. I do not have school errands to run. So maybe when you ask me this in three years' time when I have a grade one child and I need to help him to write a poem, I will tell you listen, this is so unfair because of my duties. But at this current state, where I am in, I can still do research at nighttime when everyone is asleep from 20:00.

It is important to note that such a perspective may overlook the broader systemic challenges that many women face. The claim that women have an easier path to promotion may not reflect the experiences of all female researchers who juggle multiple caregiving responsibilities. The perspective that women were promoted because they received better mentorship revealed that access to supportive networks was crucial to their career advancement. However, mentorship and a supportive environment did little to mitigate the challenges many women in academia faced.

Discussion

The main research question of this study is: How do male and female academics experience and interpret the challenges influencing SRCB for women in South African HEIs?

Globally, women consistently report being unable to engage in scholarly activities due to their domestic responsibilities (Al Bawab et al., 2024; Ipe et al., 2021; Krebsbach, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Ntshongwana, 2024; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020; Toledo et al., 2023). This reality is mentioned in the findings, as female participants recounted similar struggles linked to their domestic roles. Conversely, one male participant (E) acknowledged experiencing a different reality, as he could dedicate more time to research undisturbed by the expectations of domesticity. However, it is essential to highlight the experience of a female participant (J) who managed to engage in research despite her childcare responsibilities. Her ability to organise her research activities around her children's schedules demonstrates that, while societal norms pose challenges, they can be overcome with determination and strategic planning. It is important to note that this example should not be misconstrued as a universal solution, as women's ability to balance these roles is not universally attainable. Her account should be understood as an exception that depicts the extent of invisible labour and personal sacrifice required for women to sustain research productivity and build their capacity. To incorporate sustainability into women's RCB, there must be a shift in cultural perceptions and expectations. An equitable, level playing field can be established by challenging the status quo and advocating for shared domestic responsibilities. This

challenge should not be seen as problematic for women. It is a societal challenge that all stakeholders should address.

One important criterion for promotion in academia is the production of new knowledge (Hipólito et al., 2022; Krebsbach, 2022; Petrović, 2021). According to the same authors, producing knowledge generates income for HEIs and funding for individual researchers, thereby creating sustainability in knowledge production, as more publications and citations are likely to follow. Global scholarly literature indicates that women are underrepresented in senior research roles (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2022; Agbede et al., 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023; Hipólito et al., 2022; Krebsbach, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021; Sá et al., 2023). Similarly, it is concerning that this study found that women in SA academia struggle to produce research. Consequently, men in academia climb the academic ladder to professorship, while women remain stagnant as lecturers. Similar to the findings of Seshadri et al. (2024), SA males seem to dominate the upper tiers of the academic arena, as Participant D reported that no women in their faculty published in the particular year.

Three findings are distinct from the scholarly literature. First, there is an unconscious belief in the scholarly literature that women are less capable than their male peers (Cardel et al., 2020; Ceci & Williams, 2015; Oliveira et al., 2021), and women in academia reported bias, prejudice and discrimination (Mbarga et al., 2024; Petrović, 2021). This was not the case at the two SA HEIs under study. However, women were unintentionally excluded, as many could not attend conferences due to family responsibilities. It is important to note that the findings did not indicate explicit institutional discrimination within the two South African HEIs. Participants did not report systemic or policy-level assumptions that women are less capable than men. However, evidence of covert socio-cultural bias was present in participants' narratives, such as Participant H's account, which reflected entrenched gendered household roles that normalise unequal domestic expectations. To this end, unconscious beliefs about women's inferiority in research capacity were not overtly expressed at an institutional level. However, they were still embedded in societal norms that indirectly shape academic experiences and opportunities, which hinder progress towards empowering women (SDG 5).

The second distinctive finding is that scholars (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023; Cardel et al., 2020; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020) report that women earn lower salaries than their male counterparts in the same positions. It is promising that SA academics did not report any salary disparity. The last conflicting finding is the claim of a "competitive advantage" for women in promotion, which should be interpreted cautiously. The claim appears to be a minority perception (2 out of 10 participants) and is contradicted by the dominant view that women face greater barriers to promotion. While Williams and Ceci's (2015) findings suggest that women may, in some contexts, experience higher hiring or tenure rates, this does not necessarily translate into sustained career progression across all contexts. The perception of advantage may therefore reflect isolated institutional practices or mentorship effects. Furthermore, the suggestion that women can compensate for domestic constraints through after-hours work reinforces an unsustainable model of academic productivity that overlooks the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. (Al Bawab et al., 2024; Ipe et al., 2021; Krebsbach, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Ntshongwana, 2024; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020; Toledo et al., 2023).

The study is limited by its small sample size of 10 participants and its focus on only two SA HEIs, which restricts the generalisability and transferability of the findings to other contexts. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews may introduce subjective bias. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in experiences over time. One promising avenue for further research is conducting longitudinal studies on the career progression of women in academia. Furthermore, comparative studies across different disciplines (such as STEM and humanities) and between HEIs can shed light on the unique challenges women face in diverse settings.

Conclusion

The sustainability of RCB initiatives for women in HEIs worldwide is questionable. In the literature, scholars report that sustainability in the RCB for women is hindered by longstanding challenges such as gender-biased environments, harassment, time constraints, lower salaries, limited networks and mentorship, inadequate funding, and underrepresentation of women in academia. However, the findings from the 10 semi-structured interviews revealed that women in SA HEIs face challenges imposed by societal and cultural norms, such as caring for children and the elderly. Including male perspectives clarified that men generally benefit from fewer domestic constraints, which enhances their research productivity. Meanwhile, women's SRCB is constrained by limited time and caregiving responsibilities. SRCB is unsustainable because socio-cultural caregiving norms and institutional productivity expectations interact to disadvantage women, even in the absence of overt institutional discrimination. To improve the sustainability of research capacity building for women in academia, institutions should reduce workload pressures, provide protected time for research, and offer structured support for caregiving and conference attendance. These efforts should be complemented by targeted funding, strong mentorship, and equitable promotion policies that recognise contextual constraints and discourage reliance on after-hours work.

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