

**Students' gendered experiences in higher education post #MustFall  
movements and during the COVID19 era**

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this or any other university. All sources are acknowledged as references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.M. xa'.

7 February 2025

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Signature

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Date

## Abstract

This research explores the gendered experiences of students in South African higher education; it does so within the context of post-#MustFall movements and the COVID-19 era. Following South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the government introduced policies aimed at addressing historical exclusions and inequalities within public institutions. While these policies sought to create more inclusive spaces, issues of privilege and oppression persist in higher education. This study, situated within the field of higher education studies, aimed to deepen our understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by students as they navigate the university as a physical and social space. Specifically, it investigates how gender, as a social construct, intersects with other identity markers such as race, class, sexuality and so on to shape students' lived experiences.

The study contextualises the #MustFall movements and its calling for the decolonisation of universities and the rejection of fees as a key moment in student activism and explores how gender functioned as an intersectional mechanism of student experience, both during and after the protests. The study also highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities within the higher education system, with the shift to online learning.

Using intersectionality as a tool of inquiry and praxis, this research employed experience-centred narratives, Ukuncokola (Conversations), and photovoice methodologies, engaging eighteen undergraduate and postgraduate students from Rhodes University, Nelson Mandela University, University of Fort Hare and Walter Sisulu University. The study reveals key findings on the ways students experience intersecting forms of oppression and privilege, including racial microaggressions and challenges related to sexuality, social class, mental health and masculinity. Another significant finding is the widespread sense among female students of being unsafe, who report experiences of gender-based violence and the psychological burden of pre-existing traumas, Amanxeba. The study also explored the intersection of curriculum-related issues such as the digital divide, language of instruction and social class issues that were brought into sharper focus during the COVID-19 transition to online learning. The research underscores that to address marginalisation and epistemic exclusion of students, it is essential to understand the intersectional nature of their experiences. Such an understanding is key to tackling pedagogical challenges and advancing the processes of decolonisation and transformation in South African universities.

## Ushwankathelo

Olu phando luphonononga amava abafundi ngokwesini kwimfundo ephakamileyo yoMzantsi Afrika, kugxilwe ngokukodwa kwiintshukumo ze-#MustFall kunye nexesha le-COVID-19 njengeemeko iyunivesithi ezizifumana zikuzo. Emva kokutshintshela enkulekweni koMzantsi Afrika ngo-1994, urhulumente wazisa imigaqo-nkqubo ejolise ekuhoyeni ukungabandakanywa nokungalingani kwamandulo kumaziko karhulumente. Ngelixa le migaqo-nkqubo ibizama ukudala iindawo ezibandakanya wonke umntu, imiba yenyhweba kubantu abathile nengcinezelo isaqhubeka kwimfundo ephakamileyo. Olu phononongo, olumi kwiziko lemfundo ephakamileyo, lujolise ekuqiniseni ukuqonda kwethu imingeni abafundi abadibana nayo xa bejonga iyunivesithi njengendawo ebonakala ngeliso lenyama nendawo yokuhlala nokuhlalisana nabanye abantu. Ngokukodwa, luphanda indlela isini, njengolwakhiwo lwentlalo, esidibana ngayo nezinye iziphawuli-sazisi ezifana nobuhlanga, umgangatho wentlalo, isondo, njalo njalo ukubumba amava eempilo zabafundi.

Olu phononongo lumisela umxholo kwiintshukumo ze-#MustFall eyayilinyathelo elibizela ukuba kupheliswe ubukoloniyali kwiiyunivesithi kunye nokukhatywa kokubhatalela imfundo njengomzuzu ophambili kubutshantliziyo babafundi. Lukwaphonononga ukuba isini siqhubeka sisebenze njani njengendlela yokudibanisa amava omfundi, ngexesha loluqhankqalazo nasemva kwalo. Olu phononongo lukwaqaqambisa indlela ubhubhane i-COVID-19 aveze kwaye wandisa ngayo ukungalingani okukhoyo kwinkqubo yemfundo ephakamileyo, ngakumbi kutshintsho lokufunda kwi-intanethi.

Ngokusebenzisa inkcazo-bungcali i-intersectionality njengesixhobo sokubuza nokuziqhelanisa, olu phando lusebenzise amabali agxile kumava ngokuncokola, kunye neemethodoloji zomfanekiso-lizwi. Kubandakanywe abafundi abalishumi elinesibhozo abafundela izidanga nabasele benezidanga kwiYunivesithi i-Rhodes, kwiYunivesithi i-Nelson Mandela, kwiYunivesithi i-Fort Hare, nakwiYunivesithi i-Walter Sisulu. Olu phononongo lubonisa iziphumo eziphambili kwiindlela abafundi abafumanisa ngayo iindlela ezidibanayo zengcinezelo kunye nenyhweba, kuquka izithuko zobuhlanga ezichuliweyo, kunye nemingeni enxulumene nesondo, umgangatho wentlalo, impilo yengqondo, kunye nobudoda. Esinye isiphumo esibalulekileyo luluvo olubanzi phakathi kwabafundi ababhinqileyo

lokungakhuseleki. Ababafundi baxela amava obundlobongela obusekelwe kwisini kunye nomthwalo wengqondo womonzakalo wangaphambili obusele ukhona, Amanxeba.

Olu phando lukwaphonononga iziphumo zokudityaniswa kwemiba enxulumene nekharithulam efana nomsantsa phakathi kwabo banofikelelo kubuchwepheshe, i-intanethi noqeqesho lolwazi lokufunda nokubhala lwedijithali kunye nabo bangalufumaniyo (okubizwa nje ngolwahlulo lwedijithali), ulwimi lokufundisa, kunye nemiba yomgangatho wentlalo eye yafakwa kwingqalelo ebukhali ngexesha lotshintsho lokufunda kwi-intanethi le-COVID-19. Olu phando lugxininisa ukuba ukuze kulungiswe ukujongelwa phantsi okuqhubekayo nokungabandakanywa kwabafundi ngokwengqiqo, kubalulekile ukuqonda ubume bokuhlangana kwamava abo. Oku kuqonda kungundoqo ekujonganeni neningeni yokufundisa kunye nokuqhubela phambili iinkqubo zenguqu nokupheliswa kobukoloniyali kwiiyunivesithi zaseMzantsi Afrika.

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother (27/04/2024) uJola, Mphankomo, Phahlo, Qengeba, Mthwakazi, Sabe, Ndleb'endlovu, Mzi welanga, Somarhwarhwa, Ngwanya, Somadolo, Zwelibanzi, Nomakhala, Mfaz' obele' nye omabele made, oncancisa naphesheya komlambo, Thole lenkwakha! And my late father (22/08/2024) uMpehle, Khawuta, Cabashe, uDikane, Masila, Nkomo z'bomvu, Goc 'inyonga



## Acknowledgements/Imibulelo

I would like to first thank God for the power, energy, strength and will to finish this project. Secondly my ancestors who granted me life and guidance throughout this journey: ndiyabulela kuni (thanks to you), MaMpehle, ooCabashe, ooDikane, ooVete, ooNotyedo, Goc' iNyonga, Masila, Nkomo z'bomvu (Clans from my father's side), nakuni (and to you) MaMpondomise, ooJola, Mphankomo, Phahlo,Qengeba, Mthwakazi, Sabe, Ndleb'endlovu, Mzi welanga, Somarhwarhwa, Ngwanya, Somadolo, Zwelibanzi, Nomakhala, Mfaz' obele' nye omabele made, oncancisa naphesheya komlambo, Thole lenkwakha! (Clans from my mother's side). This project would not have reached its conclusion without the uplifting support of my spiritual community, whose guidance has been a beacon throughout this journey.

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To my precious little Yololwethu (Phanxixi kaMama) Mxalisa, one day you'll stumble upon these words, and I want you to know that this adventure began while you were still in mama's belly. I submitted my proposal when you were just a tiny one-year-old, and I like to think of my PhD journey as growing alongside you. You are my sunshine, my heart wrapped in a little human form, and I cherish every sweet hug and kiss you give me. Those adorable "Mama Uyaphi?" (Mom, where are you going?) moments, whenever I stepped out to write, have truly sparked this victory for both of us, my little angel.

I fondly recall the excitement of 2020 when I was invited to join the *Social Justice and Quality in Higher Education* project, funded by the Department of Higher Education and led by Sioux McKenna. Just as I accepted this thrilling opportunity, I received news about needing to resubmit my master's thesis. In that moment of uncertainty, I contemplated stepping back from the PhD programme. However, Sioux sent me a heartfelt email, filled with encouragement to focus on the master's and return back to the programme. That message ignited my fighting

spirit, fuelling my intellectual rigour and hope for this project. Thank you, Sioux, for being my guiding light from the very start.

Research can be a rollercoaster ride, often leaving us tangled in our thoughts. I frequently found myself discussing my project but struggling to put pen to paper. My supervisor, Kirstin Wilmot, imparted a valuable lesson: write more, talk less. She would sit beside me, writing together, sharing laughter and tears as we navigated this project hand in hand. Thank you, Kirstin, for your unwavering mentorship.

I will never forget the 18 individuals I met as my collaborators who trusted me with their stories and journeyed with me in this project. This project sometimes opened wounds but mainly it opened a path of healing for many including myself. So, thank you for your work and energy poured in this project.

This endeavour was made possible through the collaboration with the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, where a team of exceptional supervisors provided invaluable feedback during our Doctoral weeks and online sessions, empowering me to persevere and grow. A heartfelt thank you to all the supervisors involved in the SJ&Q group.

This journey has been a collective one, and I am deeply grateful to the SJ&Q in Higher Education group, a community of brilliant minds from various South African institutions. Together, we demonstrated the power of collaboration and mutual support, proving that dreams are not just personal aspirations, but shared triumphs. The encouragement and camaraderie from this group have been monumental in helping me stay focused and inspired throughout this process.

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Each of you has played a unique role in shaping this work and my journey, and I am forever grateful for your presence in my life. Thank you for being my strength, my inspiration and my reminder of what it means to persevere with love and community.

## Definition and Translation of IsiXhosa Terms and Phrases

- Abahlali baseMjondolo – Literally Shackdwellers, this is an organisation of and for those who live in so-called squatter camps of ‘Umjondolo’
- Abantu - People
- Amanxeba - Wounds
- Bekunzima - It was difficult
- Esam isipili sokuqala - My own first mirror
- Ibali Lam- My story
- Ikhaya sisonka esibhakwayo - Home is the smell of fresh baked bread
- Impepho - An Indigenous African plant
- Indoda ayikhali - A man does not cry
- Indoda izikhotha amanxeba - A man must lick his own wounds!
- Isipili sokuqala - The first mirror
- Kwabe sekungena uSister wam esikolweni kwanyanzeleka ndiphangele mna – My sister then went to school so I had to find a job
- Mama - Mother
- Molweni - Good Morning
- Ndaphanda - I hustled ‘Hustle is a slang for trying to navigate financial woes through various side jobs, entrepreneurial activities and so on’.
- Ndingubani - Who am I?
- Ngoba umama wohluleka ukundithumelela imali kuba NSFAS wayendisokolisa – my mom struggled to send me money as NSFAS was giving me issues
- Siphefumla ngenxeba - We are breathing through the wound
- ufumaneka lula - Was easily accessible
- Ukuncokola - Conversation
- Ukuphanda/Ukutabalaza - Hustling ‘Hustle is a slang for trying to navigate financial woes through various side jobs, entrepreneurial activities and so on.’
- Umgalelo - Stokvel
- Yena - He/She

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

- #FeesMustFall (#FMF)
- #RhodesMustFall (#RMF)
- African National Congress (ANC)
- Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA)
- Bachelor of Arts (BA)
- Bachelor of Law (LLB)
- Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19)
- Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA)
- Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR)
- Gender-Based Violence (GBV)
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI+)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+)
- National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)
- Nelson Mandela University (NMU)
- Philosophy Doctor (PhD)
- Rhodes University (RU)
- South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)
- Student Representative Council (SRC)
- United States of America (USA)
- University of Cape Town (UCT)
- University of Fort Hare (UFH)
- University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)
- Walter Sisulu University (WSU)
- Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi)

## Chapter One: Situating the Study: Isipili Sokuqala

Lo mzimba awunyengezeki  
uyagqezula

Lithamsanqa lesiqalekiso

Yimbewu ebolileyo

Ecaweni waphuncuka

Kubaprofeti bewukhupha idimoni

Elwandle ndawoxutha  
kwizigantsontso ezibini

Zamadoda ziwuxuba notywala

Udadobawo uboleka imali ezalayo

Uza kuxhela ibhokhwe

Lo mzimba usixheshisa ngobumnyama

Ndiziqhelise ukuwushiya ekhaya

Xa ndiphumela ngaphandle elizweni

Ndoyika amangabangaba antliziyo  
zikrakra

Amilomo imdaka evuza izinkcwe

*Original Version in isiXhosa*

*This vessel of mine resists confinement,*

*it reveals its essence,*

*a twist of fate wrapped in misfortune,*

*a decayed seed of existence.*

*It broke free from the confines of the church,*

*where prophets sought to exorcise its demons.*

*In a tumultuous sea,*

*I wrested it from the grip of two hefty drinkers.*

*My aunt is in need of funds,*

*preparing for a goat's sacrifice.*

*This body casts shadows upon us,*

*and I've grown accustomed to leaving it behind*

*when I step into the world.*

*Outside, I tremble at the sight*

*of those with hardened hearts,*

*their filthy mouths drooling.*

*Translated by Asiphe Mxalisa for meaning version*

Poem by Mthunzikazi Mbungwana (2021, p. 13)

## **1.1 Introduction**

The above poem reflects the poet's experiences concerning their body and the complexities of navigating sexuality, safety, religious beliefs, home life and cultural identity. This poem resonated with me as I embarked on an exploration of student gendered and intersectional experiences within the context of higher education. In this chapter, I present some background about myself as a Black female student, highlighting the interconnected gendered and identity experiences I have encountered throughout my academic journey. This is important to show how my gendered experiences have intersected with other identities in my journey. I position myself as both a researcher and a subject of research, articulating my motivations for undertaking this project.

In acknowledgement of the intricacies involved in researching one's own reality, this chapter will also address my reflexivity. While it is crucial to situate the study in relation to my personal narrative (and concomitant blind spots and insights), the chapter also offers a view of the wider study context by introducing the historical context of universities in the Eastern Cape. I studied at two of these institutions and come from this area and I elucidate why this region served as the focal point of my research. Furthermore, the chapter delves into a few pertinent concerns associated with Eastern Cape universities and emphasises the importance of understanding gender within the specific contextual framework of student experiences. Finally, this chapter outlines the study's rationale, research questions, aims and objectives, thereby establishing a clear trajectory for the research endeavour.

## **1.2 Isipili sokuqala (the first mirror): Ibali lam (my story)**

Isipili sokuqala, which translates to “the first mirror,” serves as a metaphor for introspection, particularly in the context of my experiences as a researcher engaged in this study. The term is derived from the title of a poem by Mbungwana (2021), which articulates the ways individuals navigate their bodies as spaces of safety, while also addressing the various systems that seek to exert control over and exploit these bodies. I find a personal connection to the themes presented in the poem, and I wish to contribute my own reflections or *esam isipili sokuqala*.

I come from Molteno, a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, renowned for its significant production of OUMA Rusks, a venture that has generated considerable employment

opportunities within the community. This economic landscape has created two distinct pathways for the youth in Molteno: the first path offers the possibility of pursuing higher education for those fortunate enough to excel within the public schooling system, while the second path, for those who are less fortunate, necessitates seeking employment at Nola, the production company behind OUMA Rusks. I opted for the educational route, which required me to exert significantly greater effort considering the limited resources available in public schools.

In 2014, I commenced my university education, entering an environment that I perceived as unwelcoming both to my racial identity as Black and to my socioeconomic background. Despite the existence of support structures aimed at assisting underprivileged students, the university landscape felt foreign to me. I faced significant challenges related to language, as my ability to articulate my thoughts in class was hindered by the fact that instruction was primarily conducted in English, a second language for me. In addition, I encountered difficulties with technology, particularly computers, as we never used computers in my high school education, and they certainly did not include computer literacy training. This situation reflects a broader problem in South Africa, where students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds often lack exposure to technologies for teaching and learning (Msomi & Bansilal, 2018). Therefore, despite performing well at school, I was caught in the pervasive digital divide in South Africa, which brought about several challenges during my initial year of study.

This experience marked the beginning of a lengthy journey, as I pursued higher education for over a decade, driven by a desire for knowledge and a commitment to contributing to the creation of knowledge. My aspiration has always been to succeed without compromising any aspect of my identity as a Black woman whose achievements are a testament to the sacrifices of my family. My parents lacked the opportunities and resources to pursue further education. Both of my parents were uneducated; my mother was a domestic worker, and my father worked in a mine. Both were employed by White individuals within a colonial framework; their jobs resulted in health complications due to the nature of their labour, which I believe contributed to their early deaths within months of each other in 2024.

As a result, I chose to pursue education on their behalf and fight: I had to navigate systemic challenges, enduring experiences of racism and sexism while grappling with feelings of inadequacy and a persistent internal dialogue suggesting that I did not belong in this academic

space. I committed myself to active participation in student activities, particularly as a gender activist advocating gender rights within the university context. This endeavour was often met with entrenched patriarchy and the dismissal by a university administration that did not fully embrace the agenda of gender equality and social justice, despite purporting to support such an agenda. While my narrative is ongoing, I have experienced moments of joy and hardship within higher education as I continue to navigate the system. The experiences of students at Eastern Cape universities, which this research explored, are thus informed by my own journey through Nelson Mandela University (NMU), where I studied up to my master's degree, and Rhodes University (RU), where I did my PhD and my work experiences at both of these institutions located in the Eastern Cape.

### **1.3 Exploring positionality through a practice of reflexivity**

Addressing matters of identity and power dynamics is integral to the ethical standards governing research (Ortbals & Rincker, 2009). My research involved soliciting insights from students at various universities regarding their experiences within the higher education system. Positionality is critical in such intersectional gender research, potentially having significant effects on research outcomes. The researcher's identity can influence their access to participants, their safety, their psychological wellbeing and the overall findings, particularly within feminist studies (Harding, 1991; MacLean, 2013; Wood, 2006). Consequently, it was essential to acknowledge my positionality throughout the research process and design.

The examination of the research process in relation to my positionality can be characterised, in part, as a practice of reflexivity. This entailed a deliberate effort to reflect on my positionality and its influence throughout the research process and to recognise and acknowledge its impact on the research findings. In essence, reflection involves including the researcher's identity in the research process, thereby acknowledging their continuous presence throughout the research experience, especially in interactions with people (Tau, 2024). In researching the experiences of students in higher education, a space in which I am also actively engaged, I encountered several considerations about my positionality that required careful attention. Reflexivity entails moving from reflecting on these matters to taking action in the research process.

Throughout the study, I practised reflexivity to minimise potential errors and biases in the research process. To effectively practice reflexivity, researchers are advised to engage in self-

reflection regarding their cultural backgrounds, environments and personal histories, thereby enhancing their awareness of their identities within the research context (Rapley, 2012). In this regard, I captured my ongoing reflections in my PhD journey journal, which included my observations, frustrations and missteps throughout the research process. While individual stories may vary, their content can illuminate shared phenomena. This research aimed to highlight the experiences of many individuals as they navigated the university environment, particularly concerning gender. This collective included me as a researcher who also inhabits the university space. The research therefore worked in part as a collective, a community. A community is cultivated through diligent effort, which requires reflection, critique and renewal.

This study was conducted at universities in the Eastern Cape and includes two universities with which I am associated, namely, NMU and RU – both of which I have attended and where I have held employment, with the former being in the past and the latter currently. This is significant as it reflects my dual experiences as both a staff member and a student. While reflexivity is a common practice in qualitative research, its application can vary among researchers. For instance, some scholars use reflexivity as a form of self-disclosure to articulate their “positional validity” (Macbeth, 2001, p. 38), while others engage in a reflexive analysis of their personal experiences as part of their fieldwork (Williams, 1990). In my case, both approaches are relevant, as my personal history and the historical marginalisation of Black women in academia deeply influenced my engagement with this study. I have made it a point to emphasise the significance of this research in documenting the experiences of previously disadvantaged students, akin to my own. I referenced *isipili sokuqala* in the preceding section to illustrate the experiences that motivated my decision to undertake this research project. However, it is important to note that I did not analyse my own experiences, nor were they included as part of the data used in this study, a matter I discuss in more depth in the methodology chapter.

During my time as a student at NMU, I engaged in social activism and gender advocacy, striving for social justice and gender equality through various initiatives. These personal political commitments informed my research, where my pursuit of social justice and equality is articulated through academic inquiry. It is imperative for researchers to disclose the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that they bring to their studies and reflect on their experiences with the phenomena under investigation. Such reflections are crucial for

understanding how these experiences shape the researcher's comprehension of the topic, recognising that data interpretation is influenced by shared experiences and relationships with participants (Creswell, 2013). My background and involvement in the research context have been beneficial in elucidating the dynamics of higher education. My shared experiences with some of the students I engaged with positioned me as an insider, which I anticipated would confer certain advantages, including a pre-existing familiarity with the phenomenon, enhanced access to participants and a deeper understanding of their experiences, which may parallel my own.

Nevertheless, my research was not without its challenges as I encountered unforeseen difficulties that necessitated a commitment to reflexivity and a negotiation of my positionality. The interplay of position and identity cannot be fully understood without a continuous awareness of the intersecting systems of race, age, education, religion and other factors. My affiliation with RU and my pursuit of a PhD resulted in receiving preferential treatment from one of the institutions, highlighting the power dynamics associated with my background in a historically White institution and my educational status. While this advantage was evident from an administrative perspective, I had to exert considerable effort to ensure that my research collaborators, who were all students, felt comfortable communicating openly and in a language they preferred.

Engaging in this research required a comprehensive understanding of the principles underlying feminist intersectional research, particularly as I navigated various institutions that perceived my identity in diverse ways. The complexities associated with my positionality were compounded by several dynamics, including the tendency to select the research field and the ethical considerations that accompanied this choice. Gaining access to gatekeeping mechanisms within the institutions where I had worked involved navigating bureaucratic processes that were often time-consuming, necessitating persistent follow-ups to reassure the universities that the research posed no harm to students and would ultimately benefit the institutions by facilitating reflection on their transformation.

A significant advantage in the universities with which I had been affiliated was the access to potential collaborators. As noted by Berger (2015), the researcher's positionality can influence their access to the field, as respondents may be more inclined to share their experiences with a researcher they perceive as empathetic to their circumstances. During discussions with students

at RU, where I am currently based as both a student and staff member, students often expressed sentiments such as, “I am sure you are aware” or “I am not sure if you also experience this here,” suggesting a sense of relatability and an acknowledgement of my familiarity with their situations. This dynamic fostered a greater openness and comfort among the students at RU.

Moreover, my choice of research field was facilitated by my involvement as an activist and student who had been engaged in political activities at NMU. This involvement enabled me to disseminate my call for participation through networks I had established, encouraging them to share the invitation with other students at the universities where I conducted research. However, this process was not without challenges, as students often lacked a direct relationship with me and may have only encountered acquaintances who relayed the invitation. Consequently, I still had to navigate the formalities associated with the study and the invitation process. Throughout the research process, I focused on cultivating a sense of community, trust and openness, a phenomenon emphasised by Merriam (2001).

Despite the support of networks in disseminating the invitation to participate, the recruitment process proved to be more challenging than anticipated. I ultimately resorted to using social media to attract additional collaborators and solicited suggestions from interviewed participants to publicise the invitation further. This difficulty resulted in an uneven distribution of collaborators across the various institutions involved in the study.

Another problem I faced was that of evoking emotions in students who had to dig deep and reflect on experiences they had encountered at university. Some of these experiences were triggering to them and me; in those moments, I constantly reminded myself that I was not a researcher doing research but a human being doing research and I had to deal with those emotions as they came. For example, I remember that for one collaborator, I did not even ask them if the recording could be stopped when they started crying, I stopped it and engaged with their emotions which I believed the research that I was conducting triggered. Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p. 419) note that “situating ourselves socially and emotionally in relation to respondents is an important element of reflexivity”. I was always present when having conversations with my collaborators. While the experience of cutting interviews and restarting them when appropriate affected the time frame for data gathering, it protected my relationship with the collaborator who later came back to be part of the study again. I related deeply with

the experiences shared by many of my collaborators and that heightened my sensitivity to the data gathered.

Gender identity, in particular, can significantly influence research accessibility and the hierarchical structures that often arise, which can be emotionally charged. During my interviews with male participants, I encountered individuals who held strong opinions about gender roles and their application in university life. Those who chose to participate often exhibited a sense of assurance and authority during the interviews. These discussions, while at times emotionally taxing, provided valuable opportunities to illuminate prevailing gender norms as part of the data collection process. However, my research also faced limitations concerning the voluntary participation of male individuals as I had challenges getting male participants (as I discuss in the methodology chapter, Chapter Four). Perhaps potential male participants perceived discussions about “gender” as predominantly relevant to “women”; the extent to which ‘gender’ is often perceived as a ‘women’s issue’ is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

In addition, I collaborated with a male student who insisted on referring specifically to me when discussing women in general, while simultaneously emphasising the need to respect masculinity, which he argued many women have lost respect for within university settings. Despite the discomfort of these conversations, I maintained my role as a researcher, ensuring that I did not take the discussions personally. However, it was essential for me to debrief with my supervisors after these encounters to ensure that I never lost sight of my research. Numerous studies have documented the challenges faced by female researchers when male participants assert dominance during interviews, either verbally or physically (for example, back in 1997, Arendall discusses this at some length). I encountered such obstacles, as some male participants seemed to seek support from me for statements they made regarding female students in the university context, statements which I considered problematic. As a Black female researcher affiliated with a historically White institution<sup>1</sup>, I recognised that my positionality had numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Historically white institutions are the institutions where only white students attended during the apartheid system. Black students were only allowed in historically Black institutions (Ilorah, 2006). A more in-depth discussion on this is found in Chapter Two.

potential effects. The contexts of the institutions where I collected data also came into play in my own and my collaborators' positionalities.

#### **1.4 Geomorphology of the Eastern cape universities**

The universities of the Eastern Cape have long reflected the academic strength in researching about issues affecting the province, the country and geographies. This has led to the universities housing many national leaders, with research that positioned them as leaders in understanding the region's landscapes and their implications for development. Geomorphology as explained by (Holmes, 2008) is the study of landforms, their processes, and the ways in which they evolve which has played a critical role in shaping knowledge of soil systems, river dynamics, coastal change, and mountain environments in the province. While one can view geomorphology as science of the environment it has played a political part in the Eastern Cape universities' looking at the colonial infrastructure movements and displacements of people in the history of different locations these universities exists in. Collectively, these strengths demonstrate how the academic tradition of geomorphology has been multi-disciplinary integral to the Eastern Cape's broader economic, political, and social progress.

This study involved collaborators from the four public universities in the Eastern Cape: NMU, the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and RU. A comprehensive analysis of the distinctions among these institutions is presented in Chapter Two. The choice of these universities was driven by the pressing need for research on higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Eastern Cape, a region grappling with numerous developmental challenges. These challenges can be traced back to various concerns associated with colonialism, including the shift of land ownership from Black individuals primarily through land dispossession (Ntsebeza, 2013), the rural-urban divide in development that compelled individuals to migrate to larger provinces in search of employment (Mzileni, 2021), and the exclusion of most of the provincial population from both basic and higher education (Bunting, 2006). Not only do these characteristics of the poorest province in the country provide a particular set of circumstances for the four universities included in this study, but it is also noted that most research on South African higher education emerges from and is focused on just a few urban, well-resourced institutions – 81% of research on higher education is

undertaken in traditional universities in urban settings (McKenna et al., 2018). This study thus brings a set of much-needed voices to our understandings of the student experience.

Between 2002 and 2005, South African higher education underwent a process of consolidation aimed at unsettling the racial categorisation of the apartheid era, resulting in the merging of 36 universities and technikons into 26 institutions categorised into three types: Traditional Universities (that primarily offer formative and professional qualifications), Comprehensive Universities (that are intended to provide a mix of formative, professional and vocational qualifications), and Universities of Technology (that are intended to primarily offer vocational qualifications) (Department of Education, 2004). A brief historical overview of each university is provided in the subsequent section.

#### **1.4.1 Brief history of the four universities**

The focus of this study was confined to the four public universities in the Eastern Cape, which are part of the broader higher post-school landscape that includes various colleges, private institutions and public universities throughout the country. It is important to note that other institutions may have encountered different experiences compared to those of students at the Eastern Cape universities. The study aimed to uncover additional interconnected challenges faced by students within the higher education framework by conducting a detailed examination of the Eastern Cape universities, with the intention that the insights and narratives derived from this analysis may resonate with students at other institutions. Below is a brief history of each university that is part of the study.

##### ***1.4.1.1 Walter Sisulu University***

As the South African higher education sector went through a transition of mergers, WSU was formed in 2005. It was named in honour of an icon of the South African liberation struggle, the late Walter Max Ulyate Sisulu, and was established as a comprehensive university on 1 July 2005 (Silwane, 2009). This outcome was the result of the consolidation of the former University of Transkei with the Border and Eastern Cape Technikons and many of the satellite campuses of Vista College. Walter Sisulu University (WSU) has four campuses within 13 delivery sites in Butterworth, Mthatha, Buffalo City (East London) and Queenstown, all in the Eastern Cape, though spread across hundreds of kilometres (Matiwane, 2017). The WSU has

most of its study sites in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape. When it was formed, it was indicated to have a particular focus on the South African transformation agenda of rural development. The university had 30 000 in 2024 (CHE, 2024).

#### ***1.4.1.2 University of Fort Hare***

Established in the small rural town of Alice, South Africa, UFH originated as the South African Native College in 1916 and has played a crucial role in providing higher education for black Africans to the present day (Stolten, 2005). Initially created to cultivate a new African elite, UFH has been instrumental in nurturing key figures in liberation movements across the African continent, including Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Robert Sobukwe, Oliver Tambo, Robert Mugabe and others. Following a directive from the Ministry of Education, in January 2004, the university incorporated a new campus in East London (now Buffalo City), which was previously part of RU (Thakrar, 2018). The university had 17 000 students in 2024 (CHE, 2024).

#### ***1.4.1.3 Nelson Mandela University***

Nelson Mandela University (NMU) was an integral component of the transformation agenda initiated in the early 2000s, during which various institutional mergers occurred. Formerly known as Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, it was established in the coastal city of Port Elizabeth, now known as Gqeberha. The university was formed through the amalgamation of three institutions in January 2005; however, its origins can be traced back to 1882 with the establishment of the Port Elizabeth Art School (Mzileni, 2021). The university functions as a comprehensive institution, providing both professional and vocational training. It comprises six campuses, five of which are in Gqeberha and one in George. The official name change from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University to Nelson Mandela University took place on 20 July 2017 (Ramotsho, 2017). The university is situated in the largest city within the Eastern Cape Province. The university had 32 000 students in 2024 (CHE, 2024)

#### ***1.4.1.4 Rhodes University***

Rhodes University (RU) is in the rural town of Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), 120 kilometres from NMU in the city of Gqeberha. Established in 1904, RU is the province's oldest university, and it is the sixth oldest South African university in continuous operation (Maylam,

2017). The university was named after the imperial master, Cecil John Rhodes. It was initially a constituent college of the University of South Africa before becoming an independent university in 1951 (Maylam, 2017). While RU is the oldest in this study, it is also the smallest with 8000 students in 2024 (CHE, 2024).

### **1.5 Critical roots of the study and problem statement**

After the apartheid regime in South Africa, inequality was viewed through an egalitarian lens. The establishment of laws and a constitution during democratisation promoted equality to ultimately enable previously disadvantaged individuals to perceive themselves as full citizens or liberal public subjects (Albertyn, 2019). However, this democratisation perspective was met with challenges in various sectors creating a difficulty for the government to address the complex layers of oppression experienced by South Africans. One of the sectors affected was the higher education sector. This research is in the field of higher education looking at matters of social justice and equality in that sector through the focus on Eastern Cape universities.

To comprehend the dynamics of higher education and gender in South Africa, it is essential to consider the historical context of inequality, particularly during the apartheid era. Inequality is characterised by the disparity between the affluent and the impoverished, often referred to as the “haves” and the “have nots” (Lehohla & Shabalala, 2014). The formalisation of inequality in South Africa was institutionalised through policies enacted by the apartheid government. The historical backdrop of exclusion and inequality is crucial for understanding HEIs, which are products of the socioeconomic and political dynamics that have shaped society over time. Universities did not emerge solely from social interactions; rather, they developed at the intersection of various mechanisms. The history of the four Eastern Cape universities clearly shows how distinct these universities are with their distinct purpose and differing degrees of government influence. The form of inequality imposed on South Africans during apartheid was multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, systematic and structural dimensions controlled by the State.

Redistributive changes significantly impacted the welfare of many South Africans, particularly concerning education, access to public services and wage restrictions. The apartheid redistribution regime of the 1950s and 1960s was characterised by large-scale racial repression and social engineering aimed at consolidating power through a White supremacist ideology

(Seekings & Natrass, 2005). Following the 1948 elections, which resulted in the National Party assuming control of the country, racist divisions were further enabled. Seekings and Natrass (2005) elucidate that in 1953, the expansion of State funding for schools serving African children was contingent upon African taxation, which was accompanied by limited wages, while State support for White children increased so that 80% of education funding went to the White minority population. Education served as a pivotal mechanism of apartheid, reinforced by the implementation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which centralised the education of black South Africans under the Department of Bantu Education (Unterhalter, 1990) – the aim was to provide an education deemed “appropriate” for the subjugated status of Black individuals within apartheid society. Black people were only allowed to gain employment in unskilled or physical labour or, that minority who were more educated and able to find employment as nurses, doctors, administrators, police and so on, had to do so within the so-called ‘homelands’<sup>2</sup>. This form of inequality manifested as segregation in education and the workplace through severe limitations on what could be studied and where – marginalising the voices of Black students and inciting widespread resistance.

Gender also played a significant role in the oppressive State, albeit in often more insidious ways. While numerous occupations were exclusively designated for White individuals, many employment opportunities were also restricted to men. The gender divide between men and women was integral to the religious ideologies that underpinned apartheid legislation.

The matters raised above continue to affect South African universities. Concerns about slow gender transformation and ongoing inequalities were recently exposed during the #MustFall movements in 2015/2016 and again during the COVID-19 era, both of which are discussed extensively in Chapter Two. This study considered the waves of transformation leading to and from the #MustFall movement and students’ experiences during the COVID-19 era. The #Mustfall movements and higher education’s responses to COVID-19 were used in the

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<sup>2</sup> Dugard (2020) defined the Homelands as the areas that were also known as the Bantustans, which were a central feature of South Africa’s apartheid system, which lasted from 1948 to 1994 and segregated people in different geographical areas based on racial categorisation.

research as just two of many possible contextual matters in which gender transformation and equality are viewed as part of the ‘decolonising the university’ project. The reason for using these two contexts was to navigate the understanding of students’ experiences during a time when inequalities came to the fore. As such, the two contexts represented moments where gender concerns were heightened.

## **1.6 Rationale of the study**

This research investigated the gendered experiences of students as they intersect with different identities in higher education through the lens of feminist intersectional theory. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, where efforts towards more inclusive academic practices in teaching and research have emerged, the problem of unequal learning experiences among diverse student populations has not been addressed with sufficient radicalism (Boughey & Niven, 2012; Majoko & Phasha, 2018). Despite the implementation of gender quotas and equality policies in universities, students continue to be constrained by prevailing masculine, socially unjust and unequal norms within higher education (Davids, 2021). Patterns of hierarchical segregation based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status remain evident in South African HEIs (Shober, 2014).

Social inequalities within higher education have persisted, as evidenced by the fervent expressions of student discontent in 2015. Notably, the #RhodesMustFall movement, which gained prominence at the University of Cape Town (UCT), called for institutional transformation, beginning with the removal of the statue of the imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (Godsell & Chikane, 2016). This protest, amplified through social media, contributed to a broader national discourse on radical change among students calling for decolonisation.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 further complicated the landscape of equity and equality within universities, revealing the intersecting oppressions students face. Many students experienced a lack of access to resources due to campus closures, heightened stress and anxiety and home environments that were not conducive to academic engagement.

Moreover, the pandemic placed additional burdens on female students, who were often expected to assume caregiving roles while managing online learning (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Mtshweni, 2022). The global crisis often exacerbated existing gender inequalities,

disproportionately impacting marginalised students amid the socioeconomic challenges intensified by COVID-19 (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Fortier, 2020). There is a pressing need for more research examining the impact of COVID-19 on gender inequality within the higher education sector, particularly in South Africa. This research in part reflects on the responses of universities to these challenges.

Following the establishment of democracy in 1994, higher education was tasked with the mandate to transform and address power imbalances (Osman & Maringe, 2016); however, the structural resistance to change within society and academic institutions remains significant. Thus, this study employed an intersectional framework to analyse the complexities of equality and social inclusion in higher education, as reflected in students' experiences, attempting to answer: "Who is the includer and who is the included?" Ultimately, the significance of this research lies in its focus on the dynamics of power in intersecting systems of oppression or privilege within higher education, which persist despite the existence of policies advocating equality and the increasing representation of marginalised students across the sector. There is arguably a strong focus on restorative egalitarianism in many policy initiatives which act to homogenise people's conditions and circumstances (Segalo, 2015). Such approaches underpin much research aimed at social justice even in higher education. This study therefore looked at the concerns raised during the call to decolonise the university during the #MustFall movements and how these also reflect the realities of communities in South Africa.

The study was not a comparative analysis but rather a more expanded approach allowing for a detailed understanding across four Eastern Cape universities. Research in higher education has traditionally focused on historically White institutions with very little looking at historically Black universities (Allen et al., 2007). There has also not been much focus given to a regional understanding and the influence and dynamics of location. Using all four of the Eastern Cape universities as the focus of this research allowed a closer look at the province's state of higher education opportunities, particularly given its particular economic context as one of the poorest provinces in the country (Twalo & Twalo, 2021).

Importantly, the use of an intersectional framework also enabled an examination of patterns of educational attainment and safe spaces by considering historical relations of power that shape students' experiences.

### **1.7 Research question**

How does gender as it intersects with other identities (understood intersectionally) shape students' experiences in higher education, particularly post the #MustFall movements and during the COVID-19 era?

### **1.8 Research aim**

This research focused on the intersectional gendered experiences of students in higher education following the #MustFall movements and during/after the COVID-19 pandemic at four universities in the Eastern Cape. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study sought to understand the dynamics of power and privilege as conceptualised within the framework of intersectionality. This was achieved by gathering narratives from a diverse array of students across the four institutions. The students showed how their gendered experiences interconnect with other different identities. The research aimed to explore the nuanced and intersectional gendered experiences within higher education, highlighting how these experiences shape the degree of social inclusion among the diverse students who were collaborators in the research. By examining the shifts in university experiences over time, the study also aimed to look at the extent of transformation in HEIs regarding gender equity and inclusivity. Furthermore, the research touched on how marginalised groups experience the university by evaluating the effectiveness of policies and practices aimed at fostering inclusive academic spaces.

### **1.9 Research objectives**

In order to achieve my research aims, I needed to address each of the below objectives:

- To understand gendered student experiences as they intersect with other identities in higher education, emphasising the interconnected problems faced by students.
- To contribute to the contextualisation of the history of gender construction and resistance within South Africa's higher education system.
- To highlight the significance of historical resistance in understanding the ongoing inequalities in higher education.

- To examine the #MustFall movements, which called for the decolonisation of universities and the rejection of tuition fees and to look at the intersection of gender concerns during and after the #MustFall protests.
- To consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on existing inequalities in higher education, suggesting a need for further research on students' experiences during this time.

### **1.10 Outline of the study**

The thesis has eight chapters. Chapter One served to introduce the study by situating my personal experiences within higher education, which fuelled my motivation for undertaking this project. It showed how I navigated my positionality through the practice of reflexivity as a Black female researcher. This chapter also provided an overview of the study context, specifically the universities in the Eastern Cape and their historical background. In addition, it briefly presented the central phenomenon under investigation by introducing the transition in higher education following South Africa's democracy in 1994 and the subsequent shifts within two specific contexts: the #MustFall movements and the COVID-19 pandemic. The concluding sections of this chapter delineated the rationale for the study, the research question and the interrelationship between the research aim and the study's objectives.

Chapter Two comprises a review of the literature on the context of higher education in South Africa during and after colonialism, looking at the interconnectedness of gender, class, race and geographical locations leading to today's neoliberal context. Chapter Two also locates the meanings of the term "gender" and reflects on the literature discussing how gender has been experienced as a social phenomenon in higher education.

Chapter Three introduces intersectionality as the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the data gathered. This chapter outlines the developments of intersectionality as a theory for decolonial thinking. The chapter focuses on the dynamics of an 'intersectional walk' rather than the focus of any single-axis framework which only considers one matter at a time. The chapter also outlines the three dimensions of intersectionality as articulated by Kimberley Crenshaw: structural, political and representational intersectionality.

Chapter Four outlines the methodology used in the study, narrative photovoice, which was used to tell stories about students' experiences. This chapter also outlines the research site and introduces the research collaborators. Lastly, it focuses on the research ethics navigated throughout the study and the data analysis process.

Chapter Five is the first of three chapters that explore the findings from the study. It explores the intersectionality of student experiences by examining the interplay of various identities and systems of power and privilege. The chapter presents the findings related to the experiences of students as they navigate the complexities of their sexuality, socioeconomic background, mental health and racialised and gendered identities. It highlights how these intersecting factors shaped their experiences within higher education, often hindering the larger processes of transformation and decolonisation. The chapter critically analyses how these layered identities both challenge and complicate efforts to create inclusive, equitable and transformative spaces in higher education.

Chapter Six shifts the focus to the university as both a physical and social space and explores how students navigate these environments. Centring on the lived experiences of students, the chapter delves into their feelings of unsafety and the trauma they endure as a result of GBV, both within and outside the university context. The chapter examines the findings through the lens of the expression "Siphefumla ngenxeba," meaning "Breathing through the wound," which encapsulates the intersectionality of race, class and gender in the experiences of GBV faced by students in Eastern Cape universities. This metaphor highlights the compounded nature of violence and its impact on students' sense of safety and belonging, offering a nuanced understanding of how these intersecting identities shape the GBV experiences in higher education.

Chapter Seven examines the intersectional narratives surrounding curriculum-related concerns in universities, with a particular focus on how these are intertwined with gender. Key topics explored include the digital divide, the language of instruction and the tension between access and success in higher education. The findings in this chapter reveal the interconnectedness of race, class and gender, particularly as these concerns were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online learning highlighted and intensified existing inequalities, exposing how these intersecting factors further influenced students' ability to access and succeed in higher education.

Chapter Eight provides the conclusion of this research project, offering a reflexive analysis of the research process. It includes a reflection on the key findings, a summary of the research outline, and an evaluation of the study's contributions to existing knowledge. In addition, this chapter discusses the limitations of the research, offering insights into areas for future exploration and improvement.

## **Chapter Two: The Context of Higher Education and the Meanings of Gender**

When the whole of Sharpeville was covered by a Black cloud. Students walking all over the streets of Soweto, Marching and striking against the language policy in schools. Striking against use of Afrikaans language in all subjects. During the era of apartheid government. (16 June 1976 Soweto uprising; poem by Mpho Godfrey Ramashaba, 2007, verse 2)

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Sharpeville Massacre, during which Black students expressed their discontent with the discriminatory practices of the apartheid regime, represents a significant moment in the educational landscape of South Africa. As indicated in the aforementioned poem, this event was a protest against the language policy imposed by the apartheid government. It marked a poignant point in the struggle for the right to equality and social justice in education. Although this study primarily concentrated on higher education, it is essential to acknowledge that the historical legacies impacting basic education in South Africa have also affected higher education, which was similarly characterised by exclusivity during the colonial period and subsequent settler colonialism of apartheid. This chapter therefore examines the existing literature concerning the social context of South Africa more generally, before moving the conversation to literature on the social context in universities. This chapter also focuses on the historical development of higher education in South Africa, particularly emphasising the racialisation of educational institutions during the apartheid era and the intricate relationships among race, class and gender. In addition, this section addresses the transition to neoliberal university models that have occurred alongside the government's shift to a democratic framework, highlighting the persistent interplay between neoliberalism and colonialism, which has engendered numerous challenges within university systems. This relationship contributed to the emergence of the #MustFall movement. Lastly, the chapter discusses critical gender-related matters within the context of higher education such as the pertinent problem of GBV.

## 2.2 Social context of South Africa

Universities are a mirror of society and societal experiences and problems. It is therefore important to understand the context of South Africa in order to understand the history of higher education. South Africa is diverse – linguistically (with 11 official languages), ethnically, racially and culturally (embracing many cultures and customs) (McKinney & Soudien, 2010; Berg, 2012). The cultural diversity of post-apartheid South Africa therefore prompted a move towards multiculturalism (Berry, 2005). However, I argue that as much as the movement to a ‘rainbow nation’ with the goal of non-racialism enshrined in the constitution was important, the inequalities of the past could not be undone by merely referring to the country as multicultural. South Africa’s history of colonialism and apartheid affected the social context of disadvantaged Black people who are the majority of the population.

Racial and gendered segregation was the apartheid government’s strategy to safeguard and protect White people’s political, economic and social interests by othering all other races. By the mid-1950s, South Africa had enacted critical apartheid legislation, such as the Immorality Act, Population Registration Act and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act. These laws were rigorously implemented by the White minority government, leading to considerable social and economic disadvantages for the marginalised majority population (Chimere-Dan, 1992). The legislation enacted during the apartheid era in South Africa served to institutionalise racism. Failure to comply with these laws by the marginalised majority comprising African, Coloured, and Indian individuals<sup>3</sup> resulted in systematic repression and, in some instances, extreme violence, culminating in fatalities or incarceration (Zunes, 1999). The apartheid system in South Africa was a project of hate; an authoritarian rule by control.

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<sup>3</sup> South Africa uses four racial classifications – African, White, Coloured and Indian. These were the four categories used by the apartheid government and which continue to be used by South Africa’s Department of Labour and other organisations for reporting and affirmative action purposes. “Coloured” refers to any person of “mixed race” and includes children from Black-White, Black-Asian, White-Asian, and Black-Coloured unions and their descendants (Brown, 2000). “Indian” refers to people of Indian descent, most of whom are descendants of indentured labourers brought from India between 1860 and 1910.

Owing to apartheid practices, Black identity was flooded with negative connotations that contributed to the inferiority of Black people while being a White person was promoted as being the ideal identity and skin colour of hierarchical importance (Barroso, 2015). This created a hierarchical racialised dominance and privilege in South African societies. This dominance showed and still shows itself in forms of social standing, the economy, education and cultural capital. The period of apartheid shaped South African society, and it has been a difficult task to undo that legacy in the democratic state. The legacy has imbued institutions, like those in higher education, with a history of exclusion based on power and privilege.

### **2.3 History of higher education in South Africa**

The history of higher education in South Africa dates to the period of colonialism when this form of formal education was introduced. The term “higher education” typically refers to the sector of education that follows secondary education and which encompasses a broad range of institutional types, including universities, polytechnics or technikons (as they were known in South Africa), and various forms of colleges (Raju, 2006). This study focused on the university sector of higher education. I argue that a university is supposed to be an independent entity that is structured by diversity, history and geographical contexts. A university plays a crucial role in creating, investigating, assessing and disseminating knowledge through its research and educational endeavours independent of politics (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2016). However, in South Africa, as in many other countries, historical and contemporary evidence demonstrates that universities are significantly influenced by political and economic factors. I argue that while political and economic factors were at the core of justice in South African fight for equal education, the location of issues of gender, issues of queer politics were othered.

#### **2.3.1 Racial categorisation in historically Black and historically White institutions**

To understand racial categorisations in South Africa it is important to first define what race is. Joubert (2014) posits that the concept of race was initially employed as a means of biological classification; however, with the proliferation of European colonialism, it subsequently evolved into a tool for social categorisation. The socio-biological conceptualisation of race proposes that skin colour and other physical attributes are used as broad indicators of an individual's racial identity. This form of racial identity categorisation was used in South Africa as a tool for segregation and separation during colonialism and through apartheid. As indicated

by Hlatshwayo (2020, p. 169), “South African higher education is profoundly and structurally shaped by the very logic of racialised apartheid and colonialism”. The establishment of universities in South Africa was not a neutral process but rather a direct extension of colonial and apartheid ideologies. These systems defined formal education in alignment with the colonial market's priorities, privileging specific knowledge systems while marginalising others.

The introduction of the University Act of South Africa (Act 12 of 1916), which established a framework for university education within the Union of South Africa, marked the beginning of the creation of universities, culminating in the formation of 10 universities designated for the White population by the mid-1980s (Beale, 1998; Behr, 1984; Thaver, 2006). The colonial administration in South Africa was fundamentally driven by racial motivations, with White supremacy permeating institutions, policies, societal structures and the economy. The objective of higher education during the apartheid era was based on the epistemological, social, economic and cultural perpetuation of the regime's racially discriminatory standards (Hlatshwayo, 2020). Consequently, higher education was similarly structured to reflect the distinctive system of racial segregation.

South Africa's history of segregation was visible in the schooling sector as far back as 1676 (Geber & Newman, 1980). This comprised segregation where Black children were segregated from White children in schools, which were usually coordinated by the local church council. Moving forward, with the growth of the White population and the arrival of industrialisation, Black people were forbidden from competing for the same jobs as White people who were regarded as the masters (Dubow, 2015). Ultimately, with the National Party in power, the Bantu Education Act of 1954 was introduced at the schooling level to officially segregate different racial groups into different schools. Later, the Extension of the University Education Act (Act 45 of 1959) was passed which facilitated that universities were specifically for designated racial groups, including universities for African people, Coloured people, and Indian people in South Africa (Behr, 1984; Davis, 1996; Du Pisani, 2023; Horrell, 1968). These universities were thus based on the racial categorisation which began during the British colonisation in South Africa, and which were later formalised in 1948 when the National Party came into power with White Afrikaner rule through an election in which only White people could participate, without any representation for Black people or people of mixed race.

The two previously mentioned Acts conferred upon the apartheid regime authority over various aspects of higher education, including the appointment of staff, student admissions, course offerings and the overall curriculum (Illorah, 2006). Notable institutions affected by this legislation included the UFH in Alice, the University of Zululand in KwaDlangezwa, and the University of the North in Turfloop, which were all designated to serve Black students of various ethnic groupings; the University of the Western Cape, which catered to Coloured students; and the University of Durban-Westville, which primarily served students of Indian descent (Horrell, 1968). Subsequently, additional historically Black universities were founded to cater to various geographical regions. During the apartheid era, the pursuit of intellectual excellence was hindered by systemic limitations imposed by the apartheid government, particularly through the Bantu Education system, which established a ceiling that Black, Coloured and Indian individuals were unable to surpass. One way this was done was through government financing of these institutions. Horrell explains this as follows (1968, p. 4):

In 1949, barely a year in power by the apartheid government, it appointed a commission (the Eiselen Commission on Native Education) whose terms of reference included, among others, the following: (a) The formulation of the principles and aims of education for Africans (Black South Africans) as an independent (separate) race. Africans were considered by the regime to have distinctive characteristics. (b) The modification of the Africans' school system in respect of the content and form of the syllabi that should prepare them effectively for their future occupations. (c) The bases for financing African education.

Historically White universities were better funded, and they were prohibited by law from accepting Black students, as clearly stipulated in the Extension of the University Education Act in 1959. The only exception to this was where individuals could apply to the minister for special dispensation to attend a 'White' university and such applications were regularly denied. The legislation represented a continuation of apartheid policies that systematically marginalised individuals based on their racial identity resulting in a dominant White culture (Collins & Millard, 2013; Cutten, 1987; Hook, 2004). The marginalisation, orchestrated by the government, was developed in accordance with its perspective regarding the status of public HEIs. The apartheid government asserted that any public higher education institution was fundamentally a legal entity, meaning that it was essentially regarded as a "creature of the state" (Bunting, 2006). White universities were divided into two distinct sub-groups: one comprising institutions where Afrikaans served as the primary medium of communication and instruction and the other consisting of institutions where English was the predominant medium of communication and instruction.

However, the primary factor contributing to the division was not the language problem. The critical distinction between the two sub-groupings focused on the fact that certain universities within the two groups endorsed the National Party government and its apartheid policies regarding higher education, while others did not. According to Bunting (2006, pp. 41–42):

The first sub-group comprised six universities, five of which used Afrikaans as the official medium of communication and instruction: the University of the Orange Free State, Potchefstroom University, the University of Pretoria, the Rand Afrikaans University and the University of Stellenbosch. ... The second sub-group consists of the four historically White English-medium universities: the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal, Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand.

The six historically White Afrikaans-medium universities mentioned above were administered by executives and councils that provided substantial support to the apartheid regime (Cloete, 2006). These institutions embraced the apartheid government's ideology, perceiving universities as extensions of governmental authority. The significant backing these universities offered to the government profoundly influenced their academic and governance cultures to serve the apartheid government and industrialisation needs (Bunting, 2006; Maylam, 2024). The research undertaken in these universities was often directed at justifying apartheid. For example, R. W. Wilcocks, a professor at Stellenbosch University, worked hard to develop an IQ test that demonstrated the genetic inability of Black people to engage in complex intellectual pursuits. A building named after him at the university only had its name changed following a fire in 2010 that required much of it to be rebuilt. The book entitled *Educability of the South African Native* (1939) by another Stellenbosch University academic, M. L. Fick, was greatly relied upon to justify the low level of education provided for the Black population.

Historically, White English universities were perceived as liberal institutions, partly by their rejecting the apartheid government's characterisation of universities as mere extensions of the State (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). While the role of White English universities during apartheid was notable, I argue that they were also still simultaneously perpetuating racial segregation through their student demographics.

Moreover, the English-language universities functioned within the framework of Anglophile liberalism, which primarily aligned with and responded to its institutional manifestations, such as English schools, cultural organisations and notably, large corporations (Bunting, 2004). Consequently, they were often viewed as more radical leftist entities (Gerwel, 1987), however,

it is important to note that these institutions were not genuinely radical left, as they also exhibited exclusionary practices, with their governance structures and intellectual agendas having a stronghold of White social privilege during the apartheid era (Maylam, 2017). Historically White English-medium universities did not serve as significant catalysts for social and political transformation in South Africa, despite their anti-apartheid rhetoric, as they demonstrated a lack of social accountability to the wider South African community during the tumultuous period of colonialism (Mamdani, 1998). Racial segregation persisted in all categories of historically White universities.

In solidifying its policies for various racial groups, the government regarded universities in South Africa as legal entities whose characteristics and functions were determined by legislation (Chetty, 2022). This meant that the autonomy of the university was limited, and powers were constrained by the policies of the State. As such, universities in South Africa were governed by discrimination and shaped by the government's economic, political and social needs.

By the early 1990s, the higher education system comprised 21 universities, 15 technikons and numerous colleges, which included institutions for teacher training, agriculture, and nursing (Gultig, 2000). Each institution was allocated to serve a specific racial and ethnic group. The institutional differentiation and inequality that characterised the apartheid era had profound effects on the contemporary structural framework of higher education in South Africa (Hlatshwayo, 2020). These disparities continue to influence the current landscape of higher education in South Africa. Historically White universities, which were better resourced, stand in stark contrast to historically Black universities, which were under-resourced with their academic project severely restricted by the apartheid regime. Alongside this racial division of institutional type was the binary divide between university and technikon. Technikons were institutions that offered vocational diplomas which were nationally approved by the State in what was known as a convenorship system, where the syllabus and even the textbooks had to be approved by the government. As with universities, technikons were designated for particular racial and ethnic groups.

### **2.3.2 Educational background and social class**

As outlined above, South Africa's education system has been shaped by inequalities from the apartheid era and these interconnected inequalities continue to impact the democratic era. Primary, secondary and tertiary education in South Africa is shaped by issues of inequity and social injustice. The three levels of education in South Africa are important to note as they are interrelated, as students entering universities originate from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and are thus exposed to varying levels of inequalities throughout the schooling levels. Socioeconomic diversity frequently influences the quality of the schools that students attend and determines their access to both private and public educational institutions. Although the democratic government in 1994 made efforts to address the disparities in education resulting from the presence of private and public educational institutions through its redress agenda, inequalities related to social class remain apparent. After 1994, South Africa had to build a democracy, develop the economy and regulate society in line with the values of human dignity, equality and justice (Guerrero, 2005); balancing these sometimes-competing demands led to several compromises.

Owing to the historical foundations of apartheid segregation, many primary and secondary schools in South Africa still lack infrastructure, resources and adequately trained staff. To address such racial and social class inequalities, Christie (2008) argues that the government needed to build more schools and classrooms and improve the resources in the poorest and most disadvantaged schools. However, in contemporary South Africa, basic education remains a stark mirror of social class disparities, with the poorest communities continuing to face significant structural and systemic challenges. Despite progressive legislation aimed at educational equality, significant gaps persist between schools serving affluent areas and those in disadvantaged regions. For instance, Spaul (2013) highlights that learners in under-resourced schools are often subjected to overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers and insufficient access to learning materials. Added to these challenges is also the fact that many rural public schools still have pit toilets and there have been repeated news reports of young Black children falling into and drowning in them (Al Jazeera, 2023; Fihlani, 2018). Other learners in rural areas are expected to cross rivers with no bridges in order to get to school with reports of students drowning when the rivers are full as they are unable to swim (Enoch, 2016; Ngcukana, 2019, Ramothwala, 2021).

Fiske and Ladd (2004) argue that post-apartheid reforms, while ambitious, have struggled to dismantle the legacy of apartheid, which continues to define disparities in educational outcomes along socioeconomic and racial lines. Some of the problems with redressing the gross injustices of apartheid are made even more challenging by the high levels of corruption in post-apartheid South Africa. Many have argued that corruption in postcolonial countries needs to be historically understood: “The postcolonial leader has used the same tactics used by colonialism to maintain control, force, tyranny and oppression” (Mlambo et al., 2023, p. 185).

Understanding primary and secondary education provides a foundation for analysing how democratic South Africa's access reform initiative faced challenges, particularly in terms of information accessibility and funding. These challenges ultimately raise equity concerns, even though education is acknowledged as a fundamental right for all. Often, students originating from the public education system face significant barriers to university admission, stemming from difficulties associated with language, technology, financial resources and access to information. Despite having legislation that is designed to enhance the right to education in South Africa, systemic inequalities persist. For example, the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 stipulates that no child in school shall experience any form of oppression, whether it be in the form of racism, sexism, religious oppression, heterosexism, classism, ageism, ableism and language or any inequality and segregation. This Act further stipulates:

This country [South Africa] requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in education provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and other economic wellbeing of society, protect and advance our diverse culture and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators and promote their acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the State.

However, the system of discrimination, gendered exclusion and economic inequality is still evident in the schooling system in South Africa. For example, Gorski (2005) contends that discrimination based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, language and other differences persists within educational institutions. Glance et al. (2014) suggest that classism represents a prevalent form of oppression in schools that is increasingly attracting scholarly attention. As these concerns persist in a democratic South Africa, they profoundly impact access to higher education, particularly for students who come from disadvantaged communities.

The concept of classism within societies influences university attendance in South Africa, where institutions are categorised as ‘historically White’ or ‘historically Black’. Bulk (2009) characterises classism as a discriminatory process that targets individuals based on their social status, asserting that individuals are treated with varying degrees of respect or disdain depending on their social class position. Glence et al. (2014) conceptualise classism as an amalgamation of stereotypes (beliefs) and prejudice (attitudes) that culminate in discriminatory behaviours, such as the neglect or exclusion of a group solely based on their perceived social class. This exclusion affected access and success at all levels of the education system in South Africa.

To address historical exclusions along racial lines, the democratic government introduced the National Student Financial Aid Scheme Act (NSFAS) of 1999 to facilitate and promote representation and equitable access for individuals who had been historically marginalised in their pursuit of higher education (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1999). This Act resulted in enhanced access to education, which subsequently contributed to the emergence of a growing Black middle class. The challenges related to funding have increasingly become associated with the interconnectedness of socioeconomic class and race.

Correspondingly, these challenges reflect a legacy of systemic inequality. Historically, the apartheid regime entrenched disparities in educational access and quality, which continue to affect funding opportunities for students from marginalised backgrounds (Moleleki, 2019). Research indicates that students from lower socioeconomic classes, comprising predominantly those of Black and Coloured populations, face significant barriers in securing financial aid, leading to higher dropout rates and limited access to higher education (Bhorat et al., 2018).

While NSFAS has enabled higher education access to hundreds of thousands of students who would otherwise have been unable to enter, it is replete with problems. One of the problems with the funding system of NSFAS is that students often enter university without any money and wait for months for the approval of funding. Furthermore, NSFAS has been criticised for its inability to adequately address the needs of these students, as the funding provided often falls short of covering the full cost of education or even the costs at the beginning of their studies (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Soudien, 2012). The picture of universities at the beginning of the year reflects a cycle of poverty and educational disadvantage where students go to classes without books and often without any food, highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms that

consider the intersectionality of race and class in funding mechanisms. Addressing these challenges is crucial for promoting equity and inclusivity in South African higher education and redefining what the right to education actually entails.

Higher education in South Africa comprises both private and public institutions, though most students are enrolled in public institutions. Access to institutional type is often determined by socioeconomic class as the government's NSFAS scheme only supports access to public institutions. While NSFAS plays an instrumental role in providing financial support to Black students seeking access to higher education, a significant challenge arose regarding the selection of universities available to them, as the financial support was influenced by both affordability and the financial limitations imposed by NSFAS. Historically Black universities have lower fees and so are more affordable within the limited NSFAS funding (De Villiers, 2022). The fact that more NSFAS-funded students attend HBUs is more indicative of (1) the lower fees at HBUs which made them more accessible and (2) the lower entrance requirements for most courses at HBUs which means that applicants from under-resourced schooling systems are more likely to be admitted in HBUs than in HWUs.

### **2.3.3 Access and success in higher education**

The transformation agenda initiated after 1994 resulted in a significant increase in student enrolment within South African HEIs, reflecting a growing diversity of previously exclusionary students. In 1994, there were 470 000 students in the higher education system, in 2022 there were 1.1 million (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2024) – notably, 81% of this 1.2 million is now Black African and 9% of the student body is White, which demonstrates that the student demographics of the public sector now represent those of the country<sup>4</sup>. Women, who comprised 40% of the student population in 1994, now account for 62% of the student body.

Nevertheless, access to higher education continues to be influenced by financial resources, as many families face challenges in affording tuition fees. In light of frameworks and policies

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that more White students now attend private higher education than public, an indication of a phenomenon known as 'White flight'.

aimed at enhancing access to higher education, concerns have emerged regarding the funding of students, particularly in the context of the historically restrictive and segregated education laws of the apartheid era (Habib, 2020). During apartheid, Black communities in rural areas and townships were severely under-resourced, characterised by inadequately funded schools, which necessitated a restructured funding approach to provide broader opportunities for students from these communities. The democratic government has made notable strides in this regard, offering funding opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as described above and improving access to information about higher education opportunities. However, disparities in access to quality education persist, disproportionately impacting disadvantaged communities residing in rural and township areas (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Erendse, 2019). The problem of access to higher education further exacerbates the existing social and economic divide in South Africa.

Students who are unable to address unmet financial needs often experience adverse impacts on their academic performance, including dropping out of higher education, which leads to increased student debt, exacerbates mental and emotional stress, limits employment opportunities, and restricts access to desirable educational pathways (Pascoe et al., 2020). The challenges regarding access and success in South African higher education have historically revolved around financial stability and tuition fees. However, numerous interconnected concerns contribute to the systematic exclusion of students and negatively influence their academic outcomes. Scholars such as Prinsloo (2009) and Manik (2015) have emphasised the necessity of addressing problems of student success and access within the context specific to each institution, particularly considering the high dropout rates. Each university in South Africa possesses a distinct historical context regarding access, influenced by the historical segregation between institutions designated as historically White and those classified as historically Black.

Therefore, it is important to understand that access to higher education transcends financial considerations; it encompasses a variety of factors that universities often struggle to address. According to Chiramba and Ndofirepi (2023), drawing on Morrow (2009), access and success in higher education can be examined from two distinct perspectives: physical and epistemological dimensions, both of which are crucial for ensuring equitable opportunities for all students. The physical dimension includes the right to education, eligibility for university admission, the application process and funding mechanisms. This dimension includes

challenges, such as limited access to information for students in rural South African areas and application fees imposed by certain institutions. The government has sought to mitigate these problems by introducing subsidies and implementing a zero-fee policy for applications. Before then, some universities used to charge an administration fee for the prospective student's application to be reviewed. Such is the level of financial constraints for many people, that even this initial administrative fee meant that access to higher education became impossible for those who could not afford it.

Concurrently, the epistemological aspect of access pertains to students' capacity to engage with disciplinary knowledge and methodologies pertinent to their selected field (Morrow, 2009). This means that students entering the university must be able to access the knowledge that the university produces and the means through which it is produced; however, as argued by Kqatla (2018, p. 147) "the colonisation of the Black mind still persists". Odora-Hoppers and Richards (2011) assert that first-generation colonialism involved the domination of both the physical territories and the individuals of the colonised populations, while second-generation colonialism pertained to the colonisation of the intellect, facilitated through various disciplines including education, science, economics and law. I argue that in relation to epistemic access, it is then important to ask: "Who shapes the knowledge that is valued in the academy?" Due to the history of knowledge production in South Africa and the development of curricula in South African institutions, knowledge is still Eurocentric.

Access to higher education is often analysed through these two dimensions; however, in South African universities, there appears to be a disconnect between these dimensions – even as NSFAS has had successes in addressing physical access, the high and racially differentiated dropout rate suggests that epistemological access remains inaccessible for many (CHE, 2024). Manik (2015) asserts that the higher education system continues to reflect the enduring legacy of apartheid, particularly concerning participation rates among different racial groups and socioeconomic statuses as well as the timely completion of degrees and academic performance among these students. The impact of apartheid's legacy on student success is evident through two critical aspects: academic and epistemic success. Academic success encompasses a broad spectrum of achievements, including academic performance, active engagement in educational activities, satisfaction with the learning experience, acquisition of essential knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence in pursuing educational objectives, attainment of desired

educational outcomes, and favourable post-higher education performance (Alyahyan & Düştögör, 2020; Kelderman, 2021; Kuh et al., 2006; Saidi, 2020). Although the mentioned spectrum of achievements measures academic success, challenges remain for students coming from disadvantaged communities.

A notable gap in the discussion of academic access is the consideration of collaborative methods and student engagement. For students to effectively participate in the sharing of academic knowledge, it is imperative that they are actively involved in the development of the curriculum. There has to be a strong emphasis placed on student engagement and interaction in the classroom (Innocent et al., 2023). As such, epistemic success is associated with cognitive achievements, including the cultivation of knowledge and profound understanding, all of which contribute to a holistic educational experience and a lifelong learning trajectory (Chiramba, 2024; Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022). The physical and epistemological aspects of access are intricately connected to the concepts of academic and epistemic success, necessitating an educational framework that is inclusive, equitable and transformative. This concern is particularly salient in universities, which frequently develop policies that address concerns from a singular perspective, thereby perpetuating the marginalisation of historically underrepresented students within the higher education system in South Africa.

#### **2.4 Transitioning to neoliberal hegemonies in South African universities**

By 1994, there was significant opposition to the apartheid regime within both historically Black and certain historically White institutions. The opposition caused the South African government to start promoting racial equality in the State education system prior to the official ending of apartheid (Fiske & Lass, 2006). The transformation towards racial equality has facilitated access to HEIs to a large degree. The transformation agenda of the democratic government has resulted in a significant divergence in the racial composition of student enrolments during the apartheid era.

However, to achieve true racial equality in higher education, a more equitable approach is necessary to prevent the democratic state from establishing a racially blind educational system. The practical application of non-racialism does not equate to ignoring race altogether, instead, it must recognise the deep-seated racial inequalities inherited from apartheid and seek to redress these through proactive measures. This principle is also reflected in the Higher

Education Act (RSA, 1997), which underscores the importance of transforming higher education to be more inclusive and equitable. In the case of universities, addressing non-racialism should not be misconstrued as an argument for racial blindness but rather as a call for equity-driven policies that address the root causes of racial inequality. A democratic state committed to social justice must prioritise equity in higher education and ensure equal access. This approach should prioritise democratisation, responsiveness and efficiency. Meier and Hartell (2009) argue that a racially blind educational system overlooks the diversity of students in terms of their cultural backgrounds, thereby expecting learners to conform to existing structures and systems.

The focus of the government post-apartheid initially shifted to reforming education to be a structure for the public good (RSA, 1997), having served as a critical during apartheid (Bunting, 2004). Higher education is increasingly framed as crucial for the wellbeing of individuals and the progress of nation states. It is seen to be closely associated with the development of human resources, the promotion of human rights and democratic values as well as social, economic, and political advancement (Badat, 2011; Naidoo, 2010; Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 1993). The democratic government of South Africa post-1994 aimed to adopt a more inclusive approach while still exerting some control over educational institutions. This duality has led to challenges in fostering an image of serving the public good. Nevertheless, higher education is fundamentally regarded as a public good in national policies, with the potential to benefit society and advance the developmental objectives of individual nations (Bozalek & Leibowitz, 2018; Naidoo, 2010; Vally, 2007).

Since the 1990s, however, the neoliberal emphasis on market-oriented objectives and solutions within the context of South African higher education has been reflected in various policy documents, legislative frameworks and the overarching vision of the democratic government. At a national level, this shift can be seen in that the Reconstruction Development Plan, the country's economic policy which focused primarily on equity and redress, was only in place from 1994 to 1996, when it was replaced by the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy and then the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) in 2006. Both GEAR and ASGISA were focused far more extensively on economic growth by reducing fiscal deficits, lowering inflation, maintaining exchange rate stability, decreasing barriers to trade and liberalising capital flows. The National Development Plan

(RSA, 2011) continues this economic policy trajectory with a focus on economic growth over social equity.

Despite the establishment of transformation policies aimed at reshaping the South African education system following the end of apartheid, the more recent influence of neoliberal policies continues to shape the fundamental ontological and epistemological orientations of higher education. One example is the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (hereafter referred to as White Paper 3 of 1997) which delineated the complexities involved in the government's efforts to reconcile the necessity for comprehensive reforms or reconfiguration within the higher education sector with the imperative of producing skills and qualifications that would contribute positively to the struggling economy of early democratic transition (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023). The White Paper 3 (RSA, 1997) suggests that there is a mismatch between the needed skills for economic growth and the outputs of the university, highlighting the tension of understanding the university as a mechanism for expanding the economy with silence on its role of fostering social justice.

To comprehend the implications of neoliberalism in higher education, it is essential to first define the concept itself. Neoliberalism is an economic theory that advocates individualism and private ownership of resources, while simultaneously undermining the notion of a collective societal good (Giroux, 2010; Jones, 2012; Raimondi, 2012). Consequently, neoliberalism emphasises economic ideologies that prioritise individual interests and material possessions, supporting a reduced governmental role in economic affairs, with diminished attention to the needs of marginalised populations and the enhancement of public welfare. Early signs of a neoliberal logic to higher education were evident in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997. This legislative framework sought to “restructure and transform programmes and institutions to more effectively address the human resource, economic, and developmental requirements of the government of South Africa” (Hlatshwayo, 2022, p. 6). The focus of this framework was therefore on the upskilling of students for the market value chain in order to meet the requirements of economic development.

Social justice concerns pertaining to equity, access, knowledge and the sustainability of higher education for historically disadvantaged groups have not been adequately addressed. This is evident in how the primary emphasis of learning is often placed on the introduction of “learning

outcomes” or “learning competencies,” which delineate the requirements for learners to attain a qualification for the workforce (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, p. 42). While it may be important to set up learning outcomes in teaching, the purpose of knowledge should not only be to serve the market but for the public good as well. The focus on universities providing skills for the market has also resulted in a lot of demand for certain degrees that have high access requirements resulting in only a select few being accepted.

Correspondingly, this in turn has led to a disconnect with regard to the purpose of knowledge with a curriculum designed to serve economic interests rather than fostering students' understanding and co-creation. Indeed, the adoption of neoliberal economic principles across the globe has had a marked impact on institutions of higher learning. Neoliberalism perceives public institutions, including those in the sectors of health, housing and education, as lacking incentives, exhibiting unproductive behaviours and demonstrating a tendency towards wastefulness (Rhoades et al., 2004; Slaughter et al., 2004; Ward, 2012). Higher education, for example, is often characterised by a neoliberal ideology as an entity that absorbs substantial public funding with minimal economic returns. Positioning higher education in a neoliberal framework often entails seeing it entirely as a private good that the consumer should pay for, making public subsidisation seem wasteful.

The idea of economic returns as the primary purpose for public institutions designed to ensure democratic transformation for marginalised people is arguably another form of colonialism. I argue that neoliberalism permeates academic institutions in South Africa – it has become entrenched within the colonial framework that influences market dynamics across these institutions. Neoliberalism, as it affects higher education, has led to a commodification of higher education and corporatisation of the university. As articulated by Hlatshwayo (2022, p. 2), “There is an existing relationship between neoliberalism, market fundamentalism and coloniality.” This interrelationship was institutionalised during the era of apartheid; however, the democratic government of South Africa has continued to embrace this relationship while facing ongoing challenges in dismantling the colonial matrix.

The role of democracy in higher education was to dismantle the institutionalised and deeply entrenched nature of coloniality within power structures, knowledge systems, ontological frameworks and legalised authority, which continue to endure long after the formal cessation of colonisation (Mignolo, 2007). The presence of this colonial matrix has significantly

influenced knowledge production, bureaucratic practices and the physical environment of universities. This colonial matrix is also discussed by Grande (2016), who clearly articulates that the adoption of neoliberal politics in South Africa has resulted in public universities becoming state-aided rather than state-funded. As such, education is not seen as a national priority, and the State increasingly requires universities to stand on their own financially. The reliance on student fees to bridge funding gaps has also fuelled an affordability crisis among students from lower and middle-class families.

Universities have been forced to increase student fees at abnormal rates in an attempt to maintain and grow the quality of higher education and innovation, including research, as governmental funding has not kept on par. However, this cycle of shifting costs to students has become an unsustainable practice and South Africa urgently requires a viable student fee regulatory framework. (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 128)

The increase in fees as the government fails to adequately fund universities has led to a loss of income as universities in South Africa are battling a high number of unpaid student debts. By the year 2015, the annual tuition fees ranged between R25 710 and R64 500, averaging R45 105, excluding the costs of accommodation and other student costs (Businessstech, 2015). These fees are among the dire effects of economic growth concerns in South Africa, which leaves many families without food on their tables and a pile of student debt. In 2015, universities were planning to increase annual tuition fees by 9% while the affordability of higher education remained a challenge due to declining state funding in real terms (reducing by 1.1 per cent from 2000 to 2012) and the low portion of GDP going to higher education (around 0.9%) (Langa et al., 2016, South African Institute of Race Relations, 2016). The number of students is growing each year, leading to an increased demand for universities to fund their sustainability through student fees. However, many students end up dropping out and are unable to graduate or obtain the necessary proof of completion for job applications because they owe university fees, resulting in many universities withholding graduation until payment is made.

When considering neoliberalism within the framework of coloniality, a pertinent concept for this study is the term 'coloniality of knowledge' which is argued to have been developed by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in 1992 (Chambers, 2020). This term refers to the ongoing intellectual and epistemological colonisation experienced by the Global South, which may invoke several means of resisting Euro-American modernity and its associated imperial,

military, and corporate structures (Chambers, 2020; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Quijano, 2000). The establishment of formal education was strategically designed within the colonial agenda of the Global North to exert control over the Global South, functioning as a corporate initiative that influenced university management and, consequently, the treatment of students as marginalised entities (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The shift towards neoliberalism has significantly transformed the activities, organisational structures, and stakeholder dynamics within the higher education sector to be more hierarchical (Mandviwalla et al., 2021; Velayutham, 2021). For example, the rise of managerialism in universities, driven by neoliberal principles, has had profound implications for student administration, influencing access to HEIs. Students are increasingly perceived as consumers, leading to persistent efforts to secure resources that are becoming progressively challenging to obtain. In South Africa, HEIs are now compelled to prioritise the generation of third-stream income, while prestigious universities strive to enhance student enrolment and improve their standings in global rankings (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). However, as articulated by McKenna (2022), university rankings represent an unscientific and socially detrimental multi-billion-dollar enterprise that contributes neoliberal ideologies. In addition, she also argues that “rankings can be seen to have emerged within the enabling conditions of neoliberalism” (McKenna, 2024, p. 3). The ranking of universities has implications for students who have studied in historically Black universities, which typically have lower tuition fees and less stringent admission criteria. These institutions are often perceived as lacking academic rigour, a stereotype that can adversely impact students. The neoliberal paradigm emphasises participation in the global university ranking system, often at the expense of addressing social justice concerns pertinent to the distinct historical contexts of South African universities. I argue that just like colonialism, neoliberalism has influenced knowledge production centred on control of the economy, knowledge production and thereby even control along lines of race and gender.

Alongside dealing with the colonality embedded in universities, the movement towards decolonising universities must critically engage with the neoliberal characteristics inherent in these institutions, which significantly affect both faculty and students. The neoliberal paradigm is so deeply embedded that it functions as a market mechanism, reducing students to mere

numerical representations and financial targets, thus contributing to the continuous rise in tuition fees. Even university leaders and administrators have shifted their focus towards creating corporate-like enterprises, prioritising the commodification of knowledge and financial profitability over educational values (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024). This phenomenon arises from the allocation of State funding to areas that promise the highest return on investment and economic benefit, leading to a reduction in financial support for universities and, consequently, an increase in tuition costs. Contemporary universities increasingly resemble corporate entities (Klocker & Drozdowski, 2012; Seale, 2018). As these institutions become more driven by economic imperatives, they tend to prioritise financial considerations over educational values, mirroring the colonial framework characterised by a 'master and servant' accountability relationship. This situation disproportionately affects students from historically marginalised backgrounds, who often incur significant student debt.

The influence of neoliberalism is evident in the universities in the Eastern Cape that are explored in this study: RU, WSU, UFH and NMU. These institutions, each with their distinct historical contexts (as introduced in Chapter One), are not immune to the colonial legacies that have shaped both historically White and historically Black universities. The recent implementation of neoliberal practices within these universities has significantly contributed to the division among students and the demographic disparities regarding access to these institutions, both physically and epistemologically.

Neoliberalism can be seen, in part, in the extent to which post-apartheid South African universities are charged primarily with the responsibility of producing graduates equipped with the skills necessary to integrate the country into the global economy, aligning with a preference for certain viable enterprises (Akala, 2021). Despite such efforts to position themselves as credentialling for industry, university graduate unemployment is a feature in South Africa. Employers exacerbate exclusionary practices by favouring graduates from universities that are historically White, and which hold higher status within the academic hierarchy. The recent report on graduate unemployment prepared by MacGinty (2024) indicates that historically marginalised institutions are linked to considerably poorer employment outcomes.

## **2.5 Key transitional moments in South African higher education**

While the above discusses the historical and post-democracy shifts in higher education, it is also vital to discuss the context of higher education in South Africa from 2015 to the pandemic in 2020. The context of #MustFall in 2015 leading to the pandemic and then the pandemic in 2020 exposed even more explicitly the social inequalities which are embedded in higher education as also reflected in South African communities.

### **2.5.1 #MustFallMovements: Responses to a neoliberal university**

The emergence of the #MustFall movements within South African universities posed a substantial challenge to the neoliberal paradigm governing higher education. The movement originated at UCT, where students called for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, a symbol of the persistence of colonial institutional culture and racism on UCT campuses and the historical dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land (Evans, 2018; Martinerie, 2021). The anti-racism initiative known as #RhodesMustFall emerged in response to the inadequacy of transformational policies aimed at addressing the needs of Black students within the university. The students partly succeeded in their transformative efforts, leading to the removal of the statue, which marked the inception of a new movement advocating decolonisation within South African universities.

Following the removal of the statue, the #RhodesMustFall movement gave birth to the #FeesMustFall movement in October 2015. This movement was sparked by the announcement by various universities of a proposed fee increase. Specifically, the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) planned a 10% tuition hike for 2016, which incited widespread student mobilisation across the nation's universities (Cini, 2019). Within a matter of days, the protests – commonly referred to as #FeesMustFall, named after the prominent Twitter hashtag associated with the initiative – successfully led to the suspension of the proposed fee increase. In December 2017, former President Zuma proclaimed the implementation of fee-free education – this despite the conclusions drawn by the Heher Commission's report<sup>5</sup>, which

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<sup>5</sup>The Heher Commission investigated the Feasibility of Fee-Free Higher Education and Training in South Africa following the #FeesMustFall movement (Tshabalala, 2017).

suggested that the State did not possess the capacity to provide fee-free tertiary education to all students across the country (Griffiths, 2019; Moolman, 2018; Van Der Merwe, 2017). However, President Zuma asserted that the government would allocate subsidies for tertiary education. This announcement came with no proper feasibility plan or consultation with the higher education sector but served as a short-term solution to quiet the movement.

While the #MustFall movements originated at Wits and UCT as a reaction to the class struggles faced by students, it is important to note that the concerns raised by the students in these two universities were not new: many of the same matters had been long experienced by students in historically Black universities and smaller universities in the Eastern Cape. According to Lukman et al. (2019, p. 126):

In 2011, the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) constituency lost complete confidence in the university leadership, eventually calling for the dissolution of the WSU Council. The institution was riddled with conflict, mistrust and disaffection. There were constant conflicts and battles between employees and management, as well as between students and management, resulting in frequent strikes by workers and class boycotts by students.

Student protests aimed at systemic reform have centred on advocating radical change, and in collaboration with students, workers and academics, the protests have aimed to transform the hegemonic discourses on university campuses and to promote access for Black students. The protests by South African students supporting tuition-free education did not originate with the #FeesMustFall movement; rather, they are part of a longstanding struggle that has been undertaken by multiple generations of students for the same objective (Mzileni, 2020). Newspaper reports corroborate Mzileni's (2020) assertion, indicating that students from historically Black universities such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the UFH and the Tshwane University of Technology have consistently engaged in protests against tuition fee increases since the attainment of independence in South Africa (Mail & Guardian, 2016). Other prominent instances of historically Black universities experiencing persistent student protests include the University of Limpopo in the years 2009, 2011 and 2012; Tshwane University of Technology in 2012; Vaal University of Technology in 2014; and WSU located in the Eastern Cape Province, where a student fatality was reported in a 2012 protest against

NSFAS (Mokoena, 2014; SAPA, 2012). While these violent protests took place in similar or closely related years, they were isolated to individual university campuses and tended to focus on the key matters stemming from the different histories and systems of each university.

It is thus essential to acknowledge that the #FeesMustFall movement was not the first occurrence of student movements within South African higher education. In the two decades following the establishment of democracy in 1994, there had been a notable rise in student protests across various universities in South Africa, particularly at historically Black institutions (Alimba, 2005; Hardy, 2016). Students have advocated a range of equality-related concerns, including the demand for improved quality of accommodation, affordable housing, enhanced teaching and learning facilities, effective administration of NSFAS, campus security concerns and the reduction of tuition fees. However, Everett (2016) characterises the significant revolt of 2015 as a moment of standing on the shoulders of giants. This statement serves as a reflection on the historical context of youth activism, highlighting the consistent role of young people in leading movements for social change. The 2015 #FeesMustFall was an inter-university and campus movement and included both lower and middle-class income students who were focused on a national response to the fee increase crisis.

The significant distinction between the protests of 2015 and earlier access-related demonstrations is that the 2015 protests were characterised by notable ideological solidarity among various political and non-political student organisations across different universities (Godsell & Chikane, 2016). The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements awakened the conversation about radical change within the higher education sector drawing attention to the triggers of the neoliberal university. For example, in 1994, the government covered 70% of the University of the Witwatersrand expenses through subsidies, yet by 2013, this had been reduced to approximately 30% (Griffiths, 2019). The reduction in government subsidies was subsequently compensated for by raising university tuition fees. These fee increases increasingly took on a political dimension, as they effectively marginalised middle-class students who were paying privately, while NSFAS, which paid for working-class students' fees, also fell short of covering certain expenses. The government's lack of focus on investment in education hindered the democratisation of access as argued by Mbembe (2016, p. 30):

The doors of higher learning should be widely opened. For this to happen, South Africa must invest in its universities. For the time being, it spends 0.6% of its Gross Domestic Product on higher education. This is an embarrassment.

During the democratic transition, there was a notable increase in demographic diversity; however, the challenges related to access extended beyond numerical representation to encompass the capacity to feel a sense of belonging and comfort within HEIs. The problem of feeling comfortable in a university is a complex one. Some have argued that because higher education should entail confronting new and intellectually challenging ideas, it should not feel entirely comfortable, but there is general agreement that the university should not be a place of financial misery and identity alienation either (Vice, 2015). While universities cannot function as homes due to their inherent purposes as educational institutions, the burdens imposed by these institutions can significantly undermine the sense of belonging among students. The cycle of fee increases came to symbolise a tangible manifestation of the failure of post-apartheid South Africa which promised a nation which was supposed to be free, equal and democratic.

Central to the #FeesMustFall campaign were two pivotal concerns: the class struggle and the pursuit of social justice (Greeff et al., 2021; Ntombana et al., 2023; Shai & Molapo, 2017). The class structure in South Africa has been a significant factor contributing to the challenges and oppressions experienced by university students. Although students were theoretically entitled to access the education system by exercising their rights, the system itself remains unjust and inequitable for those lacking the financial means to pay their tuition fees. South Africa possesses the most extensive student fee grant system globally; however, the neoliberal ideology advocating the privatisation of education has posed a significant challenge for the democratic government, which has committed itself to enhancing access to education. This was exposed by the #FeesMustFall movement which may have begun as a reaction against fees but quickly became a movement against the colonial matrix of neoliberal universities which are centred on epistemic oppressions and socioeconomic access.

While the #FeesMustFall movement was prominent in 2015, it subsequently gave rise to additional movements aimed at addressing the broader systemic problems within higher education in South Africa. The 2015 protests were set within the rapidly changing context of race, gender, class and various intersectional relations in universities. The intersectionality of the #FeesMustFall movement can be attributed to several factors, including the financial constraints faced by students that hinder their access to higher education, the substantial revenue generated for university administrators, the government's reductions in funding higher education, and issues related to gender and racism (Bozzoli, 2015; Ranjeni, 2015). The

movements singled out education as a site of intersectional struggle, highlighting how the transformation project of the democratic government was in fact failing the previously disadvantaged.

Despite the #FeesMustFall movement being characterised by an apolitical stance with regards to political parties and a commitment to engage with diverse perspectives, problems and ideas, some problems gained more attention than others. While the focus differed across university contexts, gender, sexuality and sexual violence were often marginalised concerns. As a result, distinct yet interconnected movements emerged, such as the ‘End Rape Culture’ protests, #GBVMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall movements as well as a trans collective that established a separate enclave within the #RhodesMustFall movement to address the trans antagonism present in higher education (Ndelu, 2020). Many of these protests raised awareness of university policies and processes (or lack thereof) regarding rape and sexual assault cases on campus, giving voice to students' frustration with the way university management dealt with sexual assault cases, which students perceived as reinforcing victim-blaming and supporting perpetrators of sexual assault (Gouws, 2018; Wazar, 2016). When the campaign started at RU, most of the organisers were Black African women, taking protests to the streets, often bare-breasted or in underwear to say that ‘enough is enough’ and ‘My body is my safe space’.

While several women and queer individuals chose to be part of separate interconnected movements, such as the #EndRape protests in universities, they continued to form part of the #FeesMustFall movements despite sometimes feeling unsafe in these spaces. Female students expressed apprehensions regarding their safety during the protests, primarily due to the prevailing influence of patriarchy in the space with male students who frequently marginalised their contributions in discussions and undermined their leadership roles during #FeesMustFall (Dlakavu, 2017). There exists a historical precedent for sidelining discussions of gender and sexuality in favour of other struggle objectives (Davids & Matebeni, 2017).

Initially, there had been a sense of optimism regarding the consideration of gender and sexuality within the #FeesMustFall movements. However, the predominance of heteronormative frameworks ultimately marginalised these topics and at times subjected individuals to further violations. Sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia surfaced as detrimental traits within the #FeesMustFall movements, albeit inconsistently across different institutions, with divisions between the students who identified as Black, queer, and

transgender feminists and segments of the movement that aligned more closely with patriarchal ideologies (Ndelu et al., 2017). These concerns still persist in universities post #MustFall movements, with notable divisions between key important matters and a lack of intersectional consideration of social justice.

One of the primary drivers of the #FeesMustFall movement, as already explained, was access to higher education and the conflict around fee increases. A second important driver, however, was students' resistance to the colonial legacy and neoliberal discourses of institutions. As such, a significant aspect of the #FeesMustFall movements pertained to pedagogy, particularly calling for decolonising the curriculum. This discourse arose from the recognition that Eurocentric knowledge has fostered a sense of comfort for White, privileged students and faculty, who perceive the campus culture of historically White universities as the norm. In contrast, Black and other marginalised students and faculty often find this culture to be discomfoting, alienating, disempowering, and exclusionary (Badat, 2016; Biscombe et al., 2017). The discussions regarding the decolonisation of university culture and curriculum emerged in the wake of the nationwide #FeesMustFall movement advocating the removal of colonial statues, aimed at facilitating meaningful change in addressing the pervasive yet often unacknowledged racism present within universities.

It is imperative to examine the subtle dynamics of colonialism, as these dynamics shape compulsory learning and establish colonial perspectives as legitimate forms of knowledge, research, data, and findings that justify and perpetuate the inequitable social structures established through colonisation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Numerous scholars have investigated the decolonisation of the curriculum in the context of the #MustFall movements. Researchers such as Lockett (2016), Mashiyi et al. (2020), and Du Plessis (2021) have characterised the decolonisation process as a critical deconstruction of the historical evolution of academic disciplines, advocating the integration of African knowledge into the existing curriculum. At the height of anti-apartheid student movements, such as the 1976 Soweto uprising, there was a significant emphasis on the need to decolonise the curriculum.

During the #FeesMustFall movements of 2015 and 2016, universities remained centres of political contention, addressing concerns of racial superiority and injustices that were frequently reflected in the academic curriculum. The significance of the universities' positions before and during the #MustFall movements has been characterised by Mbembe (2015, p. 2)

as a “negative moment”, a phenomenon that accompanies significant societal transformations. Mbembe’s argument was based on the persistent requirements for change, the need for transformation and the multiple concerns raised by students. The 2015 protests were a defining moment for the work to start in imagining a different curriculum through decolonisation.

The discourse on the decolonisation of the curriculum is intrinsically linked to the structural inequalities and class struggles prevalent within HEIs. Scholars such as Chilisa (2012), characterise decolonisation as a multifaceted process involving rediscovery, recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment and action. The student protests of 2015/2016 exemplified this notion, as they served as a clarion call for action aimed at rediscovering and committing to decolonising the curriculum. Grande (2016) posits that decolonisation is a necessary response to both first and second-generation colonialism, neo-colonialism and the recent upsurge of neoliberal ideologies. This response necessitates a pedagogical shift regarding the roles of the knower as the ‘recipient’ of knowledge. Consequently, the decolonisation of the curriculum should be viewed as an ongoing commitment rather than a singular event.

The #MustFall movements elicited significant responses from the government, including adjustments to fees. Nevertheless, a critical concern that persists is the need to identify and incorporate student perspectives on their experiences related to the practical implementation of decolonisation. This is essential for universities to reassess their policies critically and develop actionable resolutions. This study attempts to offer insights into such student perspectives.

### **2.5.2 COVID-19: How the pandemic created shifts in higher education**

As universities endeavoured to address the concept of decolonisation, the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 introduced an additional layer of complexity. The pandemic altered lifestyles, access to education and social justice dynamics in South Africa. On 5 March 2020, South Africa documented its initial case of the novel coronavirus (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). Subsequently, there was a significant amount of apprehension and ambiguity expressed by numerous institutions and communities. In response to the pandemic, the South African government implemented some of the most stringent lockdown measures globally, as of 23 March 2020, which included the intermittent closure of universities (Mestry, 2023; Mtshweni, 2022). The closure of institutions affected all operations of institutions, including teaching and learning. Mtshweni (2022) notes that the unprecedented closure of these institutions revealed

significant gaps in transformation and systemic weaknesses within South African HEIs. Institutions had to develop emergency measures to save the 2020 academic year and there was significant confusion as to how the virus should be treated in relation to contact classes, even when total shutdown measures were intermittently lifted.

To facilitate the continuation of academic programmes, institutions adopted emergency online learning as a substitute for traditional face-to-face interactions. As noted by Mgqwashu (2017), this was a difficult task for many universities because the higher education system in South Africa had historically relied predominantly on in-person instruction. Extensive research has demonstrated that distance learning significantly impacts HEIs, presenting challenges for various stakeholders, including students, educators, administrators, and policymakers (Barrot, 2021; Mestry, 2023). It is therefore essential to explore the interconnections between distance learning and social justice within the context of higher education. In the aftermath of the #MustFall movements, numerous universities had engaged in discussions regarding the decolonisation of higher education and were endeavouring to confront the extent to which coloniality intersected with epistemic access. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated various social justice inequalities, influenced by multiple factors such as that most students had no access to laptops or internet data, and many lived in places with no Wi-Fi available. Furthermore, during the many lockdowns, many students had to return to places which were not conducive working environments.

The COVID-19 public health crisis has garnered significant attention from researchers in the field of higher education. Existing studies have focused on the challenges faced by university management during the transition to online education (Akramy, 2022; Attallah, 2020; Chen, 2021; Treve, 2021). These studies are pertinent but there is still room for more research addressing the difficulties encountered by students and academics in this shift. Research pertaining to the response of South African universities to COVID-19 must consider the pre-existing unfavourable conditions that these institutions faced at the onset of the pandemic. Longstanding challenges within the sector included a deficient funding model for universities, a reduction in State funding for higher education, disputes over tuition fee increases, racial disparities in student success and faculty recruitment, limited access to educational institutions, and the sluggish pace of transformation (Mtshweni, 2022; Proches & Singh, 2023; Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe, 2020). These matters remained relevant even after universities reached various

agreements aimed at decolonising their structures, suggesting that the process of decolonisation is ongoing.

Universities struggled to support students and staff members in adapting to online learning. While some universities already had an online presence for most courses and the lockdowns entailed a transition to only using such a platform, in many historically Black universities most courses had no online presence and some institutions did not have a functioning learning management system up and running at the time the pandemic started (Ngcobo, 2022). Several universities faced difficulties in mobilising resources, such as laptops and mobile data, to support students who depended on financial aid while also struggling to equip staff members with the necessary resources to perform their responsibilities remotely (Anciano et al., 2020; Amnesty International, 2021; Cloete, 2020; Hedding et al., 2020). These challenges posed significant obstacles, particularly for students reliant on the campus resources, including computers and access to university Wi-Fi. Nationwide, students from wealthy communities, who had access to computers and the internet, were able to sustain their education through remote learning (Knowles, 2023). In contrast, students from working-class backgrounds faced significant challenges calling for the first focus to be on resource allocation for students in need.

While universities concentrated on allocating resources to students, factors such as students' geographical locations and their potential impact on online learning experiences were also pertinent. Many university students migrate from rural areas to pursue their studies, and upon returning home, they encounter difficulties related to network connectivity and electricity, which are prevalent problems in South Africa. There is a paucity of research examining how external social inequality influenced students' experiences during online learning, extending beyond mere access to laptops and data. Students lacked a conducive place to study in crowded homes, some were prevented from learning because of household chores and family responsibilities (Anciano, et al., 2020; Knowles, 2023; Pillay, et al., 2021). The intersectional matters of class, race, educational background and geographical area conditioned the severity of the digital divide during the online learning period. Through the Department of Higher Education, university management worked with the government to ensure that students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds were not left behind. The focus was on sending laptops

and data to students around the country and negotiating with various network companies to enable free access to educational sites.

Scholars such as Motala and Menon (2020) note that the leadership at their university, the University of Johannesburg, demonstrated flexibility and innovation in response to the crises induced by COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown. However, such initiatives often overlooked the broader context of social justice and the digital divide within HEIs. In addition, the need for psychological support for both staff and students navigating these rapid changes remained largely unaddressed. The inequalities present within and among universities, which have their roots in colonialism and apartheid, were exacerbated by the pandemic, with both the government and universities failing to sufficiently acknowledge and support the challenges faced by most economically disadvantaged individuals, resulting in severe consequences (Knowles, 2023).

There is then indeed a need for more research in the areas of how the pandemic as well as the political and economic landscape of universities affected students. The existing research on student experiences of gender in higher education in South Africa provides valuable insights but remains open to more work, particularly in how contexts like #MustFall movements and the COVID-19 pandemic prompted conversations about practical decolonisation and transformation to take place. While studies have examined gender disparities in access, representation and outcomes, there is a notable lack of focus on the lived experiences of students, especially those from marginalised gender identities. This absence is also notable in studies that consider students' engagements within movements themselves.

The intersectionality of gender with race, class and sexuality has been explored to some extent, but non-binary and gender-fluid identities remain underrepresented. Moreover, the #FeesMustFall movement highlighted both the potential for feminist activism and the persistence of gender-based exclusions, yet research on the gendered dynamics of protest participation, leadership and violence during the movement is scarce. Similarly, the pandemic revealed the gendered vulnerabilities in education, from digital inequalities to mental health disparities, but these impacts are not fully understood across diverse student demographics. To address these gaps, research is needed that prioritises intersectional, qualitative and participatory approaches that amplify student voices and experiences, offering a more

comprehensive understanding of the complexities of gender in higher education during and beyond these transformative periods. This study aimed to contribute towards reducing this gap.

## **2.6 Conceptualising gender in higher education: Overview and definitions**

Extensive research on gender has been conducted worldwide, examining various dimensions of gender. However, the fundamental question remains: What is gender? In many instances, gender is incorporated into research and analysis without a thorough exploration of its significance, often treated merely as a variable or demographic characteristic. Numerous scholars have emphasised the necessity of including demographic inquiries regarding gender in research (see, for example, Ansara & Hegarty, 2014; Broussard et al., 2018; Fraser, 2018; Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2016; Hyde et al., 2019; Magliozzi et al., 2016; Reisner et al., 2015; Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). While the inclusion of gender as a demographic category might be crucial, it is important to comprehend the diverse definitions of gender.

The complexity of defining gender is particularly significant in gender studies such as this one. Scholars like Chrisler and Lamer (2016) articulate that gender is a term, derived from grammar, used to describe individuals' social identities (woman/girl, man/boy) and their personality or behavioural inclinations (e.g. masculine, feminine, androgynous, transgender). Other scholars have defined gender as a non-essential category which instead is repeatedly performed based on societal norms (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). The contemporary understanding of gender, as defined within the social sciences, represents a relatively recent development in human history. Historically, ancient societies did not have a conceptual framework for understanding gender as it is viewed. The term 'gender' was mainly associated with grammatical classification until the mid-20th century, particularly during the 1950s onwards, when gender began to be acknowledged as a fluid cultural construct, often in distinction to any biological notion of 'sex' (Brooke, 2012). Indeed, before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, 'gender' was used much less frequently than the term 'sex' in research and society generally. By the 1970s, many feminist scholars were using the term 'gender' to delineate the socially constructed elements of gender from the biologically determined characteristics associated with sex (Haig, 2004).

In more recent years, the concept of gender has emerged as a predominant focus in research aimed at differentiating the ‘socially constructed’ dimensions of male-female differences. The question arises as to whether one's sex serves as a determinant of masculine and feminine traits. In Western discourse, gender is frequently equated with sex, being characterised as the personal and social status assigned to individuals as either physically female or male (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2003). This Western conceptualisation of gender, which is largely based on observable external characteristics, remains dominant within many societal frameworks. This Westernised interpretation of gender has contributed to the establishment of hierarchies that reflect a sexist societal structure. According to Mulaudzi (2023, p. 4):

The Westernised approach to gender defined humanity as male and amplified the superior position of men in the gender hierarchy. Think of the underlying history of gendered language and the assumptions created by gendered language. Think of the historic use of ‘chairman’ and ‘congressman’ which created the assumption that only men can hold leadership positions or the exclusive use of ‘freshman’ or ‘policeman,’ which created the assumption that an officer of the law or a university student is and can only be a man.

Thus, as researchers like Kabeer (2003) explain, gender, in Westernised society, is the socially and culturally constructed aspect of the distinction between the sexes of men and women and boys and girls, which results in unequal valuation, opportunities and life chances.

The concept of gender, as defined above, permeated African societies during the period of colonialism, leading to the establishment of community structures that adhered to these norms. The discourse on gender, influenced by Western ideologies, became intertwined more with patriarchal systems, which in turn established power dynamics within societies, institutions and policies. While there were words and definitions introduced by Western ideologies regarding gender, it is important to also note that this does not suggest that gendered dynamics in pre-colonial African societies did not exist. Many African societies were gendered in ways that many people today would find unacceptable, with taboos in some ethnic groups around access to certain areas or foods for particular groups along lines of sex which were gendered. However, there is evidence that there was a fluidity around gender and sexuality in some pre-colonial African communities that was suppressed through colonisation (Agbaje, 2021; Msibi, 2011).

The Westernised understanding of gender also extended into the higher education sector in South Africa, where, during the colonial era, educational access was predominantly restricted to White students and Black males. Notably, education for girls was not compulsory until after 1994 (Martineau, 1997). Prior to this year, the curriculum in the South African education system was differentiated based on gender and race, with distinct educational paths for boys and girls and White and Black students. As Gaitskell (1988, p. 158) notes, education for girls was characterised as “vocational, domestic, and subservient,” which was deemed appropriate for women, and other subordinate classes during the apartheid era. Consequently, those Black girls who were permitted to pursue education were often prepared for roles as wives, mothers and domestic workers. The Western colonial definition of gender thus established a hierarchy of gender roles, which significantly constrained the educational choices available to many girls.

From the perspective of South African higher education during the colonial era, it is evident that gender cannot be understood as a social construct that exists independently of race and class. Spelman (1988) argues that it is a common misconception to regard gender as a construct that is separate from race, class, ethnicity and nationality. If gender were indeed disconnected from these social categories, it would imply that all individuals regardless of gender identity would uniformly experience their sense of self. Furthermore, the notion that gender is solely interchangeable with biological sex is fundamentally flawed and neglects consideration of those with gender-nonconforming identities (Koriah, 2010; Roxburgh, 2022). In response to this process of Othering, activists, artists and scholars across Africa have engaged in collaborative efforts to document queer African histories, redefine the concept of gender and decolonise gender studies (Abbas & Ekine, 2013; Matebeni, 2014; Tamale, 2011). Studies such as these have highlighted the major problems that are ongoing and central to social justice debates in South African higher education.

### **2.6.1 Agency: Gender and its role in higher education**

The matter of gender inequality during the transition to democracy emerged as a significant concern for the democratic government in South Africa. Consequently, it became imperative to implement measures and reforms aimed at bridging the gaps related to gender, class and race within the education system. Higher education policies were particularly focused on redress and social justice, exemplified by the introduction of the White Paper of 1997. The White Paper's initiatives were aligned with the objectives of the Commission for Gender Equality,

established under Section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, which aimed to promote gender equality and its development (Mdleleni et al., 2021).

Despite notable progress towards achieving gender equality, evidenced by the increased representation of women in higher education, significant gender disparities persist. It is imperative to go beyond merely acknowledging the surplus of female student enrolments and to critically examine the complexities of gender and gender dynamics in this context. I argue that the lack of a counter-narrative risks perpetuating a misleading overarching narrative regarding gender, gendering and gender differentiation in South African higher education. The matter of gender and gender differentiation may obscure the objectives of transformation in higher education (Akala, 2016; CHE, 2009, 2013; Department of Education and Training, 2012). In South African universities, there exists gender parity in representation; however, there are certain contexts where a notable concern regarding insufficient male representation has emerged. This apprehension regarding male representation is not unique to South Africa, as it is a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, the privileging of masculinity persists, despite demographic changes, just like the ongoing relevance of 'whiteness' in historically privileged institutions, even when the proportion of White students is now very low.

Furthermore, research and national policies typically conceptualise gender through a Westernised binary framework of male and female, neglecting the complex interrelations between gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality. Extensive research has been conducted on gender equality within higher education and the representation of women in leadership roles (Mdleleni et al., 2021; Moodley, 2021; Schreiber & Zinn, 2023; Strachan et al., 2010). While this body of work is significant, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the exploration of gender inequality among students. In particular, research is needed that looks beyond aspects of access and gender quotas, to rather interrogate heteronormativity and patriarchy. Specifically, there is a need for further investigation into critical gender concerns that students encounter, such as GBV.

Looking at gender concerns in higher education also means looking at the problem of GBV. GBV is characterised as violence directed towards an individual or group based on their gender (Cruz & Klinger, 2011). GBV constitutes a significant public health, social and economic problem that is systemic and deeply rooted in institutional, cultural, and traditional frameworks (Decker et al., 2015). In the context of South Africa, GBV is further compounded by the

historical legacy of apartheid, which was particularly violent towards systemically marginalised populations.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is not solely a concern within the realm of higher education; rather, it represents a pervasive global and national crisis with a historical context of oppression that has exerted various pressures on individuals. As Gqola (2007) articulates, much oppression occurs along complex gendered lines. This form of violence can encompass all individuals, including men, women, boys, girls, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and those who do not adhere to conventional gender definitions. While GBV impacts all individuals in South Africa, the most prevalent form of violence is that which is perpetrated by men against women. Ratele (2006) emphasises that discussions about GBV must avoid displacing responsibility. He argues that even though there is a need to understand the conditions that make GBV more likely, it is crucial to acknowledge the reality of violence and assert that men in South Africa are indeed most typically the perpetrators.

The rising incidence of GBV in South Africa has prompted urgent calls for decisive action to combat this problem within communities. According to the recent Report by the Commission of Gender Equality in South Africa (2024) between April 2022 and March 2023 alone, a staggering 53 498 sexual offences were reported to the South African Police Service, with rape accounting for 42 780 of these cases. This empirical evidence has indicated that the nation has been grappling with a disturbing trend of violent acts, including homicides, assaults, rapes, and various forms of abuse, predominantly affecting women who are subjected to brutal attacks and murders perpetrated by men (Lamb, 2016). This troubling situation has significantly impacted the landscape of higher education in South Africa. Institutions of higher learning are not immune to the pervasive problem of GBV, resulting in numerous protests across the country, many of which have focused on incidents of sexual violence occurring on campuses (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019; Phipps et al., 2018).

A critical concern in South Africa is the prevalence of unreported cases, which can be attributed to victim-blaming, inadequate reporting mechanisms, insufficient support systems and a justice framework that often fails to support victims. Jewkes and Abrahams (2002) use the metaphor of an iceberg to elucidate the phenomenon of underreported cases of GBV where they assert that the prevailing tendency following a sexual assault is to refrain from disclosing the incident, primarily due to feelings of shame and the stigma and blame that often accompany such

experiences. The other problem in South Africa is that among the GBV cases that are reported to law enforcement, most do not culminate in justice. Victims frequently withdraw their cases, and there are various challenges within police departments, including inadequate victim-friendly facilities, a lack of expertise in the use of rape kits, delays in DNA analysis, and a high incidence of acquittals in GBV cases (Masson, 2022). These matters affect GBV reporting and justice within HEIs as well, contributing to the normalisation of gender-based violence.

Correspondingly, in higher education, matters of GBV are referred to the South African Police Services. During this process, however, institutions also need to offer support to both the complainant and the accused. One of the biggest challenges universities face, however, is a lack of information on reporting measures and support during the process. Adams et al. (2013) support this perspective, noting that victims frequently lack clarity regarding reporting procedures and the necessary steps to take. It is imperative for universities to implement robust awareness programmes regarding GBV, to establish effective reporting structures that safeguard the integrity of the process, and to provide support for both the victims and the accused.

The #MustFall movement highlighted the pressing matter of GBV and campus safety within HEIs. A significant concern is that despite a growing awareness at certain universities, the absence of nationally representative research and the under-reporting of incidents, particularly those involving sexual violence, obscure the true prevalence of GBV in these settings (Hewett et al., 2023; Mutinta, 2022). GBV in South African higher education encompasses various forms, including domestic violence, intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and homophobic bullying.

A study conducted in the Eastern Cape revealed that 57.8% of female students at public universities experienced some form of GBV during their two to three years on campus (Mutinta, 2022). While these findings underscore the high incidence of GBV, they may not fully capture the experiences of individuals who remain silent due to a lack of confidence in the justice system's ability to support them.

Surveys conducted at RU indicated gender disparities in perceptions of safety, with a significantly higher percentage of female students reporting feelings of insecurity on campus, especially at nighttime (Senne, 2023). Although institutions such as RU have implemented

safety measures, such as establishing a harassment office to report cases, GBV continues to be a pervasive concern, necessitating collaborative solutions from stakeholders both within and outside the university.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter traced the historical and systemic exclusion of students in South African higher education based on race, gender, and social class, from colonial times to the COVID-19 pandemic. It critically analysed significant reform initiatives introduced by the democratic government to address and eliminate entrenched inequalities. Despite these reforms, the chapter revealed the persistence of interconnected problems rooted in colonialism and reinforced by the neoliberal orientation of universities, which continues to exacerbate disparities. These disparities were magnified by the #MustFall movements and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting ongoing challenges in achieving equitable access and representation for all students. Furthermore, the chapter delved into the conceptualisation of gender and its multifaceted manifestations within HEIs, as reflected in policy frameworks, curricula and institutional interactions.

Building on these insights, the next chapter introduces the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which provides a critical lens for analysing the intertwined dynamics of race, gender, class and other social identities. By grounding this study in intersectionality, the upcoming chapter will establish a foundation for understanding the complexities of student experiences in higher education and inform the analysis of how these intersecting identities shape and are shaped by institutional structures and practices.

## Chapter Three: An Intersectional Walk as Decolonial Thinking

These hands  
have pressed buttons,  
knobs and switches,  
they have turned screws  
and wound clocks,  
steered wheels  
and dug holes,  
held instruments,  
implements and ligaments,  
moulded monuments,  
created crafts,  
healed hearts.  
(Xaba, 2005: 37)

### 3.1 Introduction

The discussion of the theory of intersectionality is appropriately introduced with a poem by Mama (mother) Makhosazana Xaba, a prominent figure in the South African struggle for freedom. The poem addresses the intersectional walk of a woman enduring the challenges of violence and racism in post-independence South Africa. Mama Xaba's work is notable for its incorporation of specific temporal and geographical references and its fusion of personal and political elements to depict the history of Black women in South Africa. She contemplates the multifaceted responsibilities faced by Black women, from menial labour, “these hands have dug holes”, to emotional healing, “these hands have healed hearts”, highlighting the interconnected responsibilities and inequalities that women navigate. Such inequalities emerge from systems which encompass political, economic, spiritual and social life in ways that cannot be fully accounted for if considered from any single axis.

The theory of intersectionality briefly discussed in Chapter One and elaborated here has been further developed through intersectional activism and has shifted through a range of political movements over time. In this study, I contribute to the theory by taking us on an intersectional walk with my collaborators. Before moving to the collaborators though, I need to engage with the question: What is intersectionality? This is an important question that many scholars have asked; this chapter will explore the historical developments of the theory of intersectionality from a grassroots movement to a theoretical framework. This includes a discussion of Kimberlé Crenshaw's three dimensions of intersectionality.

### **3.2 The definitional dilemma of intersectionality**

The theoretical framework I offer in this chapter functions as the foundational lens for the study, offering guidance and support as well as establishing the philosophical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical approach (Eisenhart, 1991) that I adopted in the study. This research endeavour aimed to explore the intersecting experiences of students in higher education by drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality, which originally focused on the experiences of Black women in the United States. Black women have been actively engaged in addressing and leading efforts to combat intersecting forms of oppression, including racism, heterosexism and homophobia. Black women have been doing the intersectional walk, as will be discussed later in the chapter. They have also played a pivotal role in collective resistance against settler colonialism and the project of supremacist patriarchy; see, for example, Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Davis (1981), hooks (1984, 1992, 2000), Anzaldúa (1990, 2001), and Collins (1990), and, a bit closer to home, Mama (1996), Oyewumi (1997) and Gqola (2001, 2007). Such scholars' works have focused on Black women's movements and their concerns for the interconnected inequalities faced by Black individuals and the similar struggles experienced globally in relation to race, gender and class.

Scholars such as Xaba (2005) and Gqola (2007) have undertaken a rigorous examination of the interconnected narratives about Black bodies in South Africa during both colonial and postcolonial periods, drawing on intersectionality alongside the use of diverse African feminist theories. These theories have evolved and gained prominence, particularly within the realm of higher education studies.

Moreover, these academics have made significant contributions to elucidating the interrelatedness by which Black women experience both privilege and oppression. The conceptualisation of intersectional work traced back to Mama Xaba's contributions through poetry draws parallels to the historical context of Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?" at the 1851 Women's Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio, USA. Sojourner Truth's speech advocated civil rights for all in the nineteenth century and the abolishment of slavery (Michals, 2015). In her activism work, she confronts the interconnected nature of slavery and challenges prevailing notions of racial and gender inferiority. She humorously characterises the dilemma faced by White men caught between conflicting demands for equality from both White women and African Americans (Phillips-Anderson, 2012). Sojourner Truth adeptly critiques not just sexism and racism, but also the racial biases within the feminist movement, thereby establishing her speech as a seminal contribution to American feminism and an early illustration of intersectionality, predating the term.

The efforts of those such as Sojourner Truth in the 1700s were accompanied by many others through the ages. Across the African continent, similar struggles against colonialism and patriarchy emerged. Wambui Otieno (1936–2011), a prominent Mau Mau rebel and activist in Kenya, fought against British colonial rule in the 20th century. As a member of the Mau Mau movement, Otieno challenged both colonial and patriarchal systems, later becoming a supporter of land rights and women's emancipation in post-independence Kenya (Presley, 1992). South African activists like Charlotte Maxeke (1871–1939), a pioneering educator and the first Black South African woman to graduate from university, played a critical role in mobilising women against racial oppression. She founded the Bantu Women's League, a precursor to the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League (Gasa, 2007). Lilian Ngoyi (1911–1980), often referred to as "Mama Africa," was another trailblazer. As the first woman elected to the ANC executive committee, she led the 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings, a seminal event protesting apartheid pass laws (Walker, 1991). Albertina Sisulu (1918–2011), a nurse and anti-apartheid activist, worked alongside her husband, Walter Sisulu, but carved out her own legacy as a leader of the United Democratic Front. Sisulu's work was instrumental in uniting women across racial and class lines in the fight against apartheid (Meer, 1998). In West Africa, Margaret Ekpo (1914–2006), a Nigerian feminist and politician, fought for women's enfranchisement and independence from British colonial rule, becoming one of the first women to hold political office in Nigeria (Otu, 2011). Similarly,

Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti (1900–1978), often referred to as the “Lioness of Lisabi,” was a Nigerian nationalist and the mother of Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti. She championed women's rights and economic justice, notably leading protests against oppressive taxation of women under British colonial authority (Mba, 1982).

All the above-mentioned figures, united by their struggles against colonialism and patriarchy, embody intersectional imaginaries. They illuminate how overlapping systems of oppression require interconnected forms of resistance, providing a rich history of women's leadership in the fight for justice. Their interconnected experiences of marginalisation are also evidence of how interconnected struggles and systems have been present for a significant period before the coining of the term ‘intersectionality’. Rooted in Black feminism and critical race theory, intersectionality is a method and a disposition, a heuristic and an analytic tool (Carbado et al., 2013).

As a concept and method, the term is said to be coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw who used it to address the marginalisation of Black women within not only anti-discrimination laws but also in feminist and anti-racist theory and politics. Crenshaw developed the theory of intersectionality in response to what she termed a ‘single-axis analysis’ that distorted the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences. Crenshaw was informed by her legal expertise as she examined legal testimonies and case studies. Through these analyses, she unveiled complex forms of oppression, highlighting the limitations of both feminist theory and critical race theory.

Crenshaw contends that examining the facts and strengths of different cases solely through the lens of racial bias, without considering gender, class and ability, is inadequate. She similarly argues that the focus of feminist lenses failed to reveal the workings of race and class. She argued that a narrow focus on any one aspect was flawed, highlighting the significance of applying an intersectional approach.

### **3.2.1 Single-axis framework**

The term ‘single-axis framework’ is used to describe any conceptual framework that isolates and examines the challenges and oppressions experienced by those with specific demographic characteristics in a community. It involves a concentrated and distinct analysis of dynamics such as race, gender or social class as if these work in isolation. Such frameworks inevitably

emphasise the advantaged group as the norm while disregarding the experiences of those who face marginalisation from multiple systems of repression (Cooper, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

In the case of this study, the implication is that researching student experiences with a focus on race and social class as separate from gender is thus to disregard the experiences of the marginalised people who are facing multidimensional systems. Crenshaw's work aimed to challenge the limited attention given to a single aspect of oppression in the American context, specifically the tendency to address matters of race and sexism separately in policy, media, law and politics. While there had been a rising concern for social justice in all of these domains, the lenses used would largely be feminist to look at gender, critical race theory to look at race, and Marxism to look at class.

Since its inception, the concept of “intersectionality” as a theoretical framework, practice, methodology and analytical instrument has yielded diverse and occasionally conflicting interpretations of its essence. Collins and Bilge (2020, p. 2) offer a functional definition of the theory, stating :

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity and age-among others - as interrelated. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people and in human experience.

The above working definition fits this study of intersectional experiences of students at Eastern Cape universities. Students attending any of the four very different universities in the Eastern Cape outlined in Chapter Two originate from diverse backgrounds rooted in South Africa's colonial history. The concept of intersectionality is valuable in uncovering aspects of experience that remain unnoticed when gender and race and other identity categories are considered as if distinct (Gouws, 2017; Lugones, 2007). The challenges of exclusion or alienation that students encounter cannot be adequately understood or addressed through a single-issue focus. A student's experiences of gender inequality, racism and sexism are not separate but rather qualitatively interconnected and it is necessary to fully understand this if we are to reveal and address the vulnerabilities that students face in higher education.

Crenshaw (1991) elaborated on the framework in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” where she employed intersectionality to highlight the ways in which social movement organisations and support for ending violence against women elided the vulnerabilities of Black women, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities. These vulnerabilities are evident in higher education as students have formed various movements such as the #MustFall movements of 2015/2016 as discussed in Chapter Two, but these too suffered at times from an inability to engage with the intersectional nature of social injustices.

### **3.3 Threefold definition of intersectionality: Crenshaw’s framework**

The concept of intersectionality demonstrates the manifestation of how systems of oppression and privilege are revealed through the differences and similarities of our group or individual lived experiences. This framework provides an opportunity to examine the experiences of students at the intersections of their identities, such as their social standing, their skin colour, their ethnic grouping, their gender and sexuality, which lead to processes of oppression or privilege, through the imposition of institutional policies and practices and those of the communities that make up the university.

The theory of intersectionality is born from the understanding of how institutions silence Black women’s experiences even while considering the patriarchal nature of various governing systems. The framework focuses on how individuals occupy multiple intersecting identities, and it seeks to understand how their experiences within specific identity groups are shaped by the intersections of their identities (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991). According to Carbado et al. (2013, p. 2):

Crenshaw staged a two-pronged intervention. She exposed and sought to dismantle the instantiations of marginalisation that operated within institutionalized discourses that legitimized existing power relations (e.g., law); and at the same time, she placed into sharp relief how discourses of resistance (e.g., feminism and anti-racism) could themselves function as sites that produced and legitimized marginalisation.

Crenshaw thus sought to not only show how marginalisation operates at an institutional level but also how those who attempt to resist such marginalisation can unintentionally reproduce it. Those who have to some extent noticed marginalisation happening but only engage with the forms of marginalisation that serve to oppress them personally can reinforce other forms of

marginalisation. In 1989, Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality as a metaphor in her work “Demarginalizing,” and further developed it as a 'provisional concept' in 1991 to illustrate different categories of intersectionality.

Crenshaw (1991) examines three dimensions of intersectionality: structural, political and representational. These dimensions offer a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the singular categorisation of marginalisation or privilege. In higher education, these dimensions are valuable for informing institutional strategies that prioritise the diverse needs of students as a whole.

### **3.3.1 Structural intersectionality**

Instead of discussing structural racism and structural sexism or structural classism etc. as separate oppressions, Crenshaw expands on the idea of intersectionality by introducing the concept of structural intersectionality. This entails an understanding that systems of marginalisation or privilege are structured into society in our legal, educational, religious and other organisations. While Crenshaw calls for an understanding of individual experiences, she stresses that this was in order to reveal deep structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality. The focus on the individual experience was thus to illuminate the structural.

It is important to note that social environments are influenced by varying manifestations of racism, sexism and classism across time and place. The development of the intersectional theory was predicated on the understanding that environments are not static, implying that the experiences of women in the United States, as articulated by Crenshaw, may differ from or resemble those of women in South Africa (McDowell, 1991). Student experiences even in one structural racial group vary according to time and place. In this study, “time” refers to the duration of students' enrolment in university and the prevailing circumstances such as the #MustFall movements or the COVID-19 era, as discussed in Chapter Two. But even within this bounded ‘time’, there are millions of moments of shifting manifestations of racism, sexism, classism and so on. The concept of “place” in this study pertains to the four Eastern Cape universities. However, this geographic boundary is not a monolithic space because, as discussed in Chapter Two, the histories and geographic settings significantly influence the intersectional experiences of students.

Such diversity provides an opportunity to explore the intersectionality of oppressive systems and their impact on student experiences (Homan et al., 2021). Hence, structural approaches enable the consideration of the intricate impact of various factors on individuals and groups. In the context of this study, structural intersectionality is useful in examining the variations and interconnections of systems of oppression for each student in each university, considering the distinct population groups defined by combinations of individual-level statuses such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and others. of Black men).

### **3.3.2 Political intersectionality**

While structural intersectionality concerns the intersection of unequal social groups, political intersectionality concerns the intersection of political agendas and projects (Walby et al., 2012). Political intersectionality highlights the tensions that arise when political movements, legislation and political gatherings address different forms of oppression separately, which arguably fails to represent those who stand at the crossroads of multiple inequalities. For example Black women may find themselves marginalized within both feminist movements (which sometimes prioritize the experiences of middle-class white women) and antiracist movements (which often prioritize the experiences Political intersectionality focuses on the idea that the personal is political. The concept that “the personal is political” had a significant impact on second-wave feminism, influencing the evolution of social analyses and theories, fostering novel forms of activism, and broadening the range of concerns that could be categorised as feminist issues (Hanisch, 1969; Shodwen, 2009; Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 1995). The idea of “the personal is political” as originated from Carol Hanisch represented a significant shift, demonstrating the interconnectedness of personal and political matters, and the reciprocal influence they have on each other. Political here relates to power and how power is distributed in society.

Correspondingly, the “personal is political” suggests that large social structures of power including such matters as land ownership, legal rights, and hierarchical power in the workplace need to be understood at the personal level because that is where they are experienced. The idea of what constitutes the political comes from political ideology defined as “a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2003, p. 64). Such an understanding of ‘political’ as the normalised and powerful organising of society

means that any dismantling would require engagement with how individuals experienced political arrangements in their day-to-day lives.

Moreover, the combination of elitism and power dynamics gives rise to a range of oppressions that contribute to matters of social justice and inequality extending beyond Crenshaw's concept of triple oppression experienced by Black women (i.e. race, class and gender). In the context of higher education, students from diverse backgrounds and social structures encounter various intersecting inequalities related to factors such as age, sexuality, disability and ethnicity which is further discussed in the section on the intersectionality walk.

Intersectionality thus reflects the significance of identity-based politics while also addressing the limitations of solely focusing on identity politics. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242) notes that “the embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice.” In higher education, there are intra-group differences that, when examined closely, contribute to social justice by shedding light on the diverse yet interconnected marginalisations experienced within identity groups, rather than solely focusing on the identity politics of the entire group. For instance, while it is accurate to assert that Black students are structurally positioned at lower levels of the social structure, within this categorisation exist variations in backgrounds, schooling, gender, sexuality and disability among others. This also applies to other social groups, as they may possess privileges in certain aspects or contexts while experiencing oppression in others.

In South African history, as outlined in Chapter Two, the order of society was built through a system of segregation expanding to all government departments and systems. But this structural system of oppression was echoed by matters of political power. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252) thus outlines the need for political intersectionality as a response to

...the failure of feminism to interrogate race, meaning that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of anti-racism to interrogate patriarchy meaning that anti-racism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. ... Women of color can be erased by the strategic silences of anti-racism and feminism.

These shared omissions pose a complex political challenge for Black women. Political intersectionality is therefore a response to the denial of the subordination of individuals in a political discourse. There are political strategies in higher education which suppress the

intersectional needs of students, particularly Black female students. Crenshaw's framework of political intersectionality examines the involvement of social movements such as those addressing specific forms of racism while also acknowledging the compounding marginalisation experienced by women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991). Political intersectionality is thus concerned with the intersection of political agendas and projects, drawing attention to how even well-intentioned initiatives can overlook those situated at multiple points of disadvantage. Political intersectionality shows the importance of critically looking at how different struggles may unintentionally silence the experiences of the marginalised as has been seen in higher education movements. So representational politics and projects are key and that is where there is the importance of understanding representational intersectionality

### **3.3.3 Representational intersectionality**

Representational intersectionality refers to a theoretical and analytical framework that examines the creation of discriminatory cultural depictions of Black women based on race, gender, and sexuality in both discourse and visual representations (Crenshaw, 1991). Race, gender and class serve as significant organising principles in the formation of cultural ideology in the world. While cultures may construct perspectives on race, gender and class in varying ways, there is consistently a social construction surrounding these three areas of distinct differences or similarities (Belkhir & Barnett, 2001). Crenshaw's discussion highlights the power and privilege perpetuated through hierarchies of social locations within structures and spaces. These constructions are not neutral, they are embedded in systems of meaning that reinforce particular forms of inequality and privilege. As intersectionality argues, race, gender, and class do not operate independently but instead intersect to produce specific advantages for some groups and marginalisation for others.

Moreover, the microaggressions discussed in Crenshaw's representational discourse are a widespread occurrence. Racial microaggressions, for example, are comments, actions and treatment that are racially motivated, but which are often dismissed as being misinterpreted or unproblematic. In South Africa specifically, Black women have been marginalised as incomplete citizens since the colonial era. As Baderoon (2011, p. 213) states, "The colonial period is the primal scene for understanding images of Black bodies in South Africa". The colonial endeavour enabled the objectification of Black bodies, particularly those of women, as part of a racial strategy aimed at dehumanisation.

In her discussion of representational intersectionality, Crenshaw delves into the hypervisibility and simultaneous invisibility of Black bodies. Ironically, even though Black women are seen to hold little value and to not be worth attention and recognition, at the same time this invisibility is accompanied by the representation of Black female bodies by patterns of “hypervisibility”. By being represented as ‘not the norm’, Black female bodies are seen to be exotic or perverse and subject to increased levels of scrutiny. Sadly, such scrutiny obscures the systemic violence they have endured in order to focus only on how such bodies are fascinating objects open to a critical gaze (Gqola, 2006). The emergence of democracy brought about the recognition of the need for improved representation for Black women, not only in the political sphere but also in their ongoing struggle to navigate matters of belonging and community. For example, the integration of all people into higher education as part of the transformation initiative aimed to redefine the perception of who should have access to education.

### **3.4 Intersectional movements**

Understanding Crenshaw’s three discourses of intersectionality as discussed above, allows us to reflect on how intersectionality drives activism and social movements for change. The theory is constantly evolving through both revolutionary works on the ground and through research (Carbado et al., 2013). There has been a longstanding emphasis on the need for intersectional organising by Black feminists, and in recent years, this approach has been adopted by a diverse range of activists involved in various social movements.

Although social protests around the world may seem specific to certain concerns, often lacking coordination and generally confined to local areas, it is argued that they share a goal of addressing the increasing economic, social and political inequality driven by the rise of neoliberalism (Collins & Bilge, 2020). This then means the full scope of intersectional dynamics and challenges present in society cannot be fully captured by any single application of intersectionality.

The evolving comprehension of intersectionality implies the need for continuous efforts to explore and expand its application to previously uncharted territories (Carbado et al., 2013). Intersectionality has evolved to analyse power dynamics and privilege within various social spaces, and this concept is essential for the purposes of the current study. Intersectionality is used as an analytical frame, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but is a theory that

is linked to power relations focusing on elitist regimes and oppression like the regime of apartheid and its aftermath in South Africa (Archer & Francis, 2006).

Although the end of apartheid in South Africa marked the cessation of the power dynamics associated with apartheid legislation, its underlying principles continued to perpetuate division among individuals, particularly within higher education settings. Despite visible efforts to challenge the marginalisation of Black individuals and problematise whiteness, the persistence of race as a marker of inequality and its reciprocal impacts at the intersections of various axes of difference remains a significant problem that cannot be examined in isolation from other intersecting factors (Van der Westhuizen, 2016). In echoing Crenshaw's concerns about single-axis approaches, I argue that many attempts to analyse the ongoing effects of apartheid focus on race and leave matters of gender, class, sexuality and so on in the shadows. The end of apartheid, as discussed in Chapter Two, would have benefitted from an intersectional approach to restructure the democratic project. Focusing specifically on higher education, I argue that this approach would have contributed to dismantling the systemic moral hierarchy of apartheid that still sustains disparities in higher education.

This notion of oppression coexisting with privilege is also evident in South Africa, where the lack of economic purchasing power, limited access to resources and social structuring contribute to the co-existence of oppression and privilege within communities. This often leads to the rise of social movements geared to close the inequality gap. South Africa has become the protest capital of the world (Odendaal, 2016; Rodrigues, 2010), it is easy to assume that the many protests in South Africa each attend to the specifically articulated concern on the protestors' banners. But whether these are 'service delivery protests' or protests by grassroots organisations such as 'Abahlali baseMjondolo', they have in common resistance to the inequalities that persist 30 years after the end of apartheid. Ultimately, this study employed intersectionality as a framework to examine the dichotomies, diverse identities, overlapping oppressions and privileges stemming from power dynamics within the realm of higher education. It is understood that while these are lived in everyday experiences, 'the personal is political', they often manifest most explicitly through protest movements.

Focusing solely on intersecting individual identities within the South African context may impede the efficacy of intersectionality as a tool for scrutinising systemic inequality to promote social justice. As noted by Jakimow (2021) such oversights can hinder the theory's capacity to

interrogate power and privilege. When using the theory to examine the unique challenges faced by South Africans in higher education, it is crucial to acknowledge that, despite sharing similar experiences with Black men and White women, Black women may encounter discrimination and oppression specific to their gender and race. Or, to take another example, someone living with a disability may encounter discrimination and oppression in ways not experienced by others who may share their racial, gender and class identities. The collective experiences of students in Eastern Cape universities, encompassing various HEIs, academic disciplines, academic years, racial groups, socioeconomic backgrounds and genders, shed light on the intersections that students encounter in South Africa.

### **3.5 Intersectionality Walk: Locating student experiences in Eastern Cape universities**

The intersectionality walk discussed in this chapter is regarded as a metaphor of the process of listening to the collaborator's stories, thereby walking their path with them. This metaphor allows for one to put aside assumptions about others and listen to what the person says their own gendered experiences are, and how they claim their own identities and navigate these identities in the world. This intersectionality walk allowed me to understand some of the infinity existences of intersectionality and the limitations of some of the definitions with which I have engaged. To fully appreciate the vastness of student experiences, universities need to embrace intersectionality in a way that looks at systemic, structural and policy processes through an intersectionality walk. Enacting the lens of intersectionality required me to take a metaphorical intersectionality walk to understand the individual and group experiences of students in the South African context and to appreciate how these emerged from the structural, political and representational dimensions at play.

An intersectionality walk is an activity that can take many forms, any of which aim to demonstrate how characteristics and life experiences collectively serve to marginalise and privilege. It is an activity aimed at raising awareness of how anyone's individual experiences are conditioned by the social structuring of society to reward or punish based on relatively arbitrary personal characteristics. An intersectionality walk as originating from research by Thomas et al. (2021, p. 2) is the following:

Action-based experience into how intersectionality affects engagement at work, and how including diverse perspectives can help organisations reduce and remove structural, systemic and

cultural barriers and thus improve outcomes for individuals and organisations. This process is a process of educating others about their privileges, access and marginalisation

The students who are collaborators in this study brought varied identities with different evolving experiences of how they navigated and continue to navigate the university space. An intersectionality walk as a metaphorical thought demonstrates the compounding effect of multiple factors of identity that cause the students in this study to suffer disadvantages and advantages in different ways. The Gates Foundation developed a graphic of an intersectionality walk that shows these multiple factors, included below in Figure 3.1.

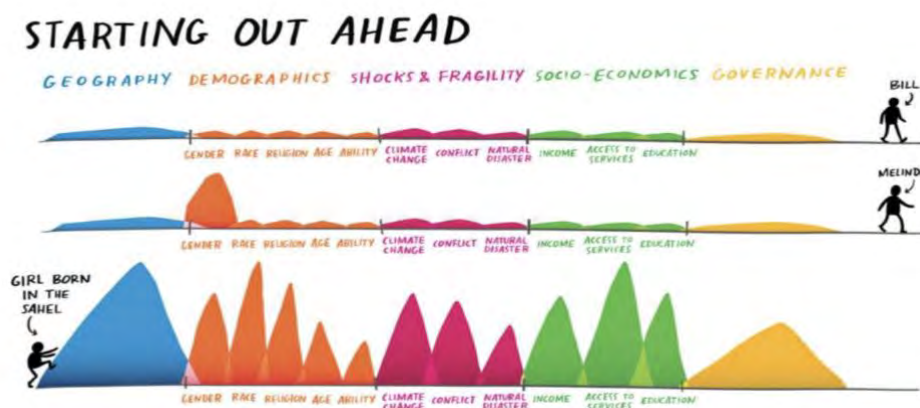
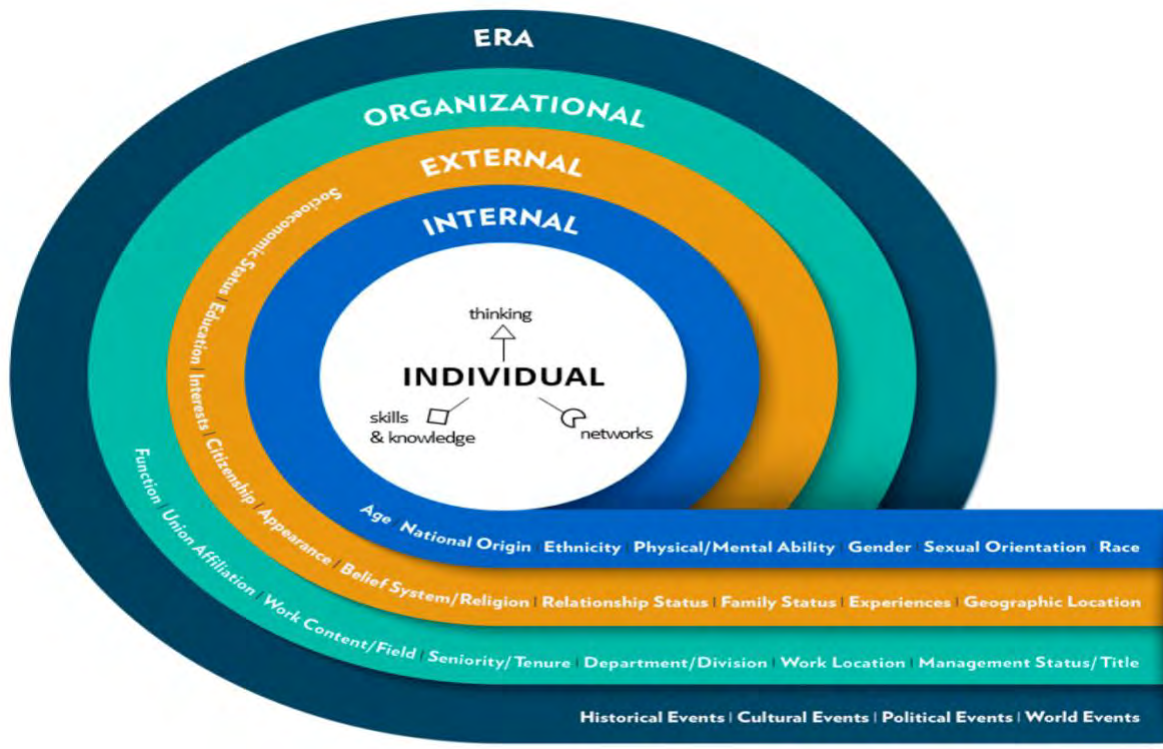


Figure 3.1: [#ExaminingInequality](#)

<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2019-report/>

Figure 3.1 shows the inequalities that are found in an intersectionality walk from how one starts in life. Using the geography of Bill and Melinda as examples, the diagram shows how being White and sharing a range of other privileges started them off on a flat walk, while the geography of “girl born in the SAHEL [Sahelian acacia savanna]” had to climb from the beginning of the walk. The graphic above illustrates how some people start out ahead is the same experience that we see in universities, where some students start out from low, easy-to-walk roads while others start climbing intersectional difficulties from the beginning.

In Figure 3.2 below, Thomas et al. (2021) illustrate an intersectionality walk that includes the impact of organisational arrangements and the historical era in how each individual navigates the world, alongside the more typical strata of individual and external characteristics.



**Figure 3.2: Individual's talent framework for intersectionality**

(Thomas et al., 2021, p.2)

The application of intersectionality requires critical reflection of how oppression and privilege is experienced by individuals as they learn how to navigate and fight or accept the system. Understanding how these systems play out in individual experiences, as such intersectionality walk graphics and activities seek to do, does not do anything to address injustices; however, it does enable people to better understand their individual privileges and oppressions. When an individual steps into someone else's shoes, they have the opportunity to view social systems from a different perspective than that afforded only from their own lived experience.

The emergence of intersectionality was in response to the legal erasure of Black women's subjectivity in anti-discrimination law as discussed, but it arguably does not address the intersectional marginalisation of Black men within the criminal justice system (Carbado et al., 2013) or of Latin or gay or trans people. This is why Crenshaw (1989) refers to her intervention as "provisional" and presents it as just "one way" to approach the matter of intersectionality. The intersectionality walk allows diverse students to share their experiences in order to understand how the system of education in South Africa affects individuals and groups.

Looking at just Crenshaw's historic intersectional approaches would mean that the research is necessarily specific and therefore provisional and incomplete. The intersectionality walk provides an ongoing attempt to develop an intersectional analysis or framework. A crucial aspect of understanding intersectionality involves its practical application. Intersectionality in this study was employed to comprehend the multifaceted nature of students' gendered experiences within the university environment holistically through their stories, as they identified the intersections they experience.

This study took the idea of an intersectionality walk, including the types of intersectionality, to understand the interconnected experiences students face and examine the discourses of power and privilege as they are relevant to students' experiences of gender within the context of higher education. The intersectionality walk was used to explore the ways in which intersecting power dynamics impact social relations across diverse societies and individual experiences in everyday life (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Luna, 2017).

Intersectionality more broadly served this study as a framework for understanding the points at which power dynamics intersect and collide and where they intertwine. Collins and Bilge (2020) argue that as an analytical tool, intersectionality necessitates the identification and comprehension of how categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity and age, among others, mutually shape one another. This understanding builds on the idea that intersectionality moves with time, place, power and oppression.

In the South African higher education context, constructions of power and privilege were exposed by the 2016 #MustFall movements and the COVID-19 pandemic as discussed in Chapter Two. These two events acted as pointers in time and space for this study. If we understand the intersectionality walk as an individual's navigation through the injustices of society, then we can understand that, as per Thomas et al.'s framework, they do so within large structures and events. The #MustFall movements have left a dynamic and thought-provoking narrative marked by adaptation, redirection and contestation. Understanding these contestations is particularly crucial for comprehending the shifts in belonging, visibility, and power within the academic sphere following the #MustFall movements. The post #MustFall generation encompasses individuals who had to navigate multiple forms of oppression during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required them to engage in online learning to leave university campuses and study from home. Online learning added another intersectional layer shaping what Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244) calls "the multiple intersecting dimensions experience".

### **3.6 Intersectionality and critical education**

Intersectionality has often been invoked alongside the concept of critical education. Both intersectionality and critical education are integral to the pursuit of social justice (Kelly et al., 2021) and are underpinned by activism. Intersectionality operates in conjunction with the belief that education can serve as a tool for either empowerment or suppression of individuals. This is also evident in Paulo Freire's seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," published in 1970, which examines how education can either marginalise or empower individuals (Suzena, 2020; Underhill, 2021). Freire's writings connect the various forms of oppression experienced by people and their resistance through the educational system as a call for social justice within diverse social contexts. These diverse contexts change as students acquire more social status, funding, resources, levels of study and places of accommodation different from the ones they were introduced to. These diverse contexts change as students learn more about the education system and how they can navigate this system which was not created with them in mind.

The university system is socially constructed, and as such, it has consistently compelled students to accept and perpetuate their assigned positions within the social hierarchy (Freire, 1970). South Africa's HEIs were established in a manner that perpetuated racial, gender-based and marginalising disadvantages, which has proven to be a challenging legacy of apartheid to

undo. Within this study, student experiences encompassed matters of accessibility, visibility, participation, sense of belonging and gendered norms, among others.

The understanding of intersectionality as connected to critical educational praxis was crucial in this study, given its educational context. If higher education is to be empowering, rather than a contributor to social stratification, then it needs to be premised on intersectional understandings. For higher education to serve as a tool for empowerment rather than perpetuating social stratification, it must be grounded in intersectional understandings that recognise and address the diverse experiences and challenges faced by marginalised groups (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994). By integrating intersectionality into educational frameworks, institutions can foster inclusive environments that promote equity and social justice, ultimately transforming higher education into a space that uplifts all students rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students to engage critically with the complexities of social concerns in their future endeavours.

The complex and interconnected challenges that students encounter are not something they can select to avoid but rather are deeply ingrained in the higher education system. This means that as students take their own intersectionality walk through the university, they do not have the privilege of choice. During protests many students explicitly engage in sharing their experiences of their own intersectionality walks as the basis for drafting memorandums of demands. Focusing solely on one aspect of inequality during protests has often limited students' ability to address the increasing interconnected inequalities and social marginalisation caused by neoliberalism (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Embracing intersectionality as a practice thus served as both the theoretical framework for comprehending power dynamics and the impact of neoliberalism in higher education as well as the analytical tool for understanding students' experiences.

### **3.7 Criticisms of intersectionality**

The preceding discussion highlighted the challenges of intersectionality in the context of student experiences. It is crucial to reflect upon the persistent resistance, misinterpretation and misapplication of intersectionality. One major criticism revolves around the meta-theoretical debates regarding whether intersectionality should be conceptualised as a theory, a framework,

a theory of marginalisation, a theory of identity, a nodal point, a perspective or a method, leading to theoretical confusion (Tomlinson, 2013). Despite the complexities of intersectionality, it is essential to recognise the fundamental rationale behind its inception, which was to acknowledge the lived experiences of Black women. McCall (2005) points out that while intersectionality has become a prominent research paradigm in women's studies and other fields, there has been limited exploration of the methodologies involved in studying intersectionality. One key struggle of methodology is the understanding of what axes exist and how to navigate these axes in the analysis of the data. The implications of this struggle for my study are tackled in the next chapter where I describe my application of intersectionality to my data collection and analysis.

Correspondingly, it can be argued that there is methodological ambiguity surrounding intersectionality by raising questions regarding the appropriate approach to identifying and addressing intersecting points. Critics have inquired about the number of intersections to consider and question the suitability of the intersection analogy (Chang & Culp, 2002). Engaging with individuals' lived experiences enables them to identify the intersections they encounter and define these intersections based on their own experiences. This approach addresses the inquiry of the number of intersections present, as elucidated through the narratives shared by students in the universities under study.

Arguably, the implications of the experiences captured in this and other intersectional studies would have been apparent even without explicitly approaching them from an intersectional theory, framework or a discussion of different identities standpoint. The idea that intersectionality is simply a collection of characteristics limits the concept to a purely academic exercise without empirical grounding that neglects to address interconnected forms of oppression as a matter of social justice (Bilge, 2013; Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 2011; De los Reyes et al., 2003; Moi, 2017). To address this in this study, the focus was not merely on theory only but on the stories to practically show the intersectionality walk that students take. The intersectionality walk then becomes the examination of the manifestations of inequality experienced by the collaborators, as revealed and frequently perpetuated by institutional frameworks, policies and social constructs.

Another critique of intersectionality is that it focuses on specifically Black women's intersectional narratives while many intersectional inequalities affect other groups (Collins, 2021; Smith, 2016). While this study entailed the involvement of students from different races, social classes, genders, sexualities etc. it is important to note that the theory is intended always to be applied to show both the co-existence of privileges and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Though earlier work often focused on Black women in particular, given the blind spots of both feminism and critical race theory, intersectional theorists have always recognised that some oppressions can be experienced by others as privileges depending on the context – and that much depends on the context of time and place. Intersectionality involves conceptualising social reality as having multiple dimensions, interconnected lived identities and intertwined systems of oppression that are mutually influential (Nash, 2019). The argument that it is one-sided is based on the rise of the term being misused. Alexander-Floyd (2012, p. 2) warns:

Barely a decade into the new millennium, a new wave of raced-gendered occultic commodification is afoot, one focusing not on Black female subjectivity per se, but on the concept of intersectionality

In considering Alexander-Floyd's argument, it becomes evident that there exists a significant correlation between commodification and colonisation, both of which serve as rhetorical tactics employed to evoke defensiveness. Bilge (2013, p. 5) argues that “[i]ntersectionality, originally focused on transformative and counter-hegemonic knowledge production and radical politics of social justice, has been commodified and colonized for neoliberal regimes”. This is why it is important to use intersectionality from both points of oppression *and privilege* in order to realise how the different systems operate. Indeed, intersectionality without women of colour would be narrow and this is why most collaborators are Black female students in the study. As I discuss in the next chapter, this did not happen deliberately, but Black female students volunteered because of their desire to tell their stories of oppression and privilege by the system of higher education.

There is still a marginalised representation of Black female students in certain academic courses even with the existence of high numbers of female students registered in South African universities. This is because as discussed in Chapter Two, during apartheid, certain courses were designed for Blacks, women and White men. This idea of marginalisation shows the idea of being out of place as Puwar (2004, p. 51) articulates:

Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific spaces...Some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined politically, historically, and conceptually circumscribed as being 'out of place'. Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders

Puwar (2004) illustrates above an important concern about the marginalisation of people within a social space in which some are considered legitimate members, while others are considered less legitimate and do not have an equal footing or belonging. This also applies in the university space where social exclusion extends even to courses that students study dominated by certain "legitimate members" while access has been opened. This is the problem of silencing and power that marginalised students have from the opportunity of access versus the opportunity of outcome and experience. In the context of South African universities, Black students continue to experience what Segalo (2015) terms "crooked rooms" under the democratic framework. These "crooked rooms" symbolise spaces where Black students feel invisible and disconnected. These students then decide to either continue navigating and accepting the exclusionary university environment or ultimately drop out of the institution. In the context of higher education, the portrayal of Black bodies often emphasises their endurance and resilience in the face of historical challenges, while also highlighting their continued vulnerability to systemic pressures. Although HEIs have become more accessible to Black women, they continue to face systemic obstacles, including institutional racism and gender-related challenges, which hinder their successful engagement (Mirza, 2006; Maguire & Hoskins, 2011; Mokhele, 2013; Portonoi, 2009; Wright et al., 2007).

More so, Black women's visibility is also apparent in the hierarchical composition of university leadership in South Africa which was one of the key memoranda demands from many universities during the #MustFall movements. This is even though there is a perception of a reversal in gender stereotypes within universities, attributed in part to the growing presence of women in leadership roles such as vice-chancellors, deans and department heads. The shift in gender stereotypes was a key aspect of early democratic gender dynamics in South Africa, aligning with the transformation of government institutions. In South Africa, there are 26 public HEIs, but only six are headed by female vice-chancellors (Tau, 2023). I argue that the high visibility of Black female leaders in South African universities presents various forms of representation, often requiring them to perform caregiving duties associated with their

femininity while also being subjected to scrutiny for their leadership decisions in spaces not originally designed for them. Universities need to address their institutional cultures by embracing representational intersectionality to create a new narrative for Black women. The visibility of Black women in leadership roles reflects the visibility of Black female students in higher education, often imposed by the system. Black female leaders in these institutions are frequently put under pressure and are expected to address systemic problems by virtue of their femininity which is a high expectation and unpaid emotional labour.

Another criticism of Crenshaw's particular approach to intersectionality is that her focus on the personal, especially at the level of individual experience, suggests a focus on agency that can come at the cost of a focus on structural inequalities. Her focus on how individual Black women were marginalised by the US legal system by judges, attorneys, police and investigators might seem to suggest that the actions of any of these people, including the Black women themselves, could remedy the problems. Walby et al. (2012, p. 226) state that "in this focus on the agency of these two disadvantaged groups her analysis curiously loses sight of the actions of the powerful and the racist structures". However, I suggest that if the three-dimensional approach of structural, political and representational intersectionality is applied, this tension between structure and agency is addressed. Understanding that the 'personal is political' should not prevent interrogation of the larger structures that shape personal experiences.

The above criticisms are a reminder that the theory of intersectionality grew out of the lived realities of marginalised people. This is why in this study, the focus was on the intersectionality walk in order to understand all collaborators' experiences. The use of intersectionality to examine the experiences of students in universities in the Eastern Cape entailed its application to all students, revealing their oppressions and privileges, and thereby shedding light on the marginalisation of particular groupings of students within the social framework of higher education. Therefore, a decolonial feminist and intersectional theoretical orientation, accompanied by an integration of understanding the complexities of intersectionality, enabled a deeper understanding of the research collaborators' journeys in higher education.

It is acknowledged that criticisms such as those by Collins (2019) and Bilge (2013) that intersectionality is an evolving theory and concept which requires more research work to be done hold merit on the significant contribution it has to understanding social identities and power dynamics. The theory remains underdeveloped and one that necessitates further

exploration and refinement. Collins (2019) emphasises the need for intersectionality to expand beyond its initial focus on race and gender to include a broader range of social categories and contexts. In this study, this was met by ensuring that the call for collaborators was open to all students who would like to take part without having a race or gender boundary. Similarly, Bilge (2013) highlights the challenges of operationalising intersectionality in empirical research, suggesting that more rigorous methodological approaches are required to fully realise its potential. These critiques underscore the importance of ongoing research and dialogue to advance intersectionality as a comprehensive theoretical framework. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate its core value in highlighting how systems of marginalisation and privilege work. It is hoped that this study offers some small part in developing the usefulness of the theory of intersectionality.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

Intersectionality has served as a valuable analytical framework for examining the experiences of students in higher education by recognising the presence of intersecting inequalities through an intersectionality walk. As Mama Xaba's poem set out at the beginning of the chapter, an intersectionality walk often means navigating both oppressions and privileges, acknowledging that individuals from diverse groups do not navigate systems in the same manner, nor are the privileging and oppressive effects of identities experienced in the same way. This chapter focused on Crenshaw's scholarship including her three dimensions of intersectionality: political, representational and structural. In the following chapter, I set out the research design.

## Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

*It is clear that the heart loves to suppress and cover well  
This way it wants to avoid wasting precious tears  
Oh, how they flow, unstoppable, when the heart breaks into pieces  
As it sees the ugliness on the face  
Of the multi-headed beast  
Head raised up high, threatening, opening  
The worst and deepest wounds  
Prompting us to earnestly say  
Indeed, history is a heavy matter*

From a poem titled “History is a Heavy Matter” by Gcina Mhlophe (2010, para 3)

### 4.1 Introduction

The above poem is authored by a South African storyteller, poet, performer and playwright Gcina Mhlophe, who employs poetry and narrative to both preserve her cultural heritage and support social transformation, justice and empowerment. This study investigated the role of storytelling as a mechanism for collecting narratives and envisioning social change and justice within university settings. This chapter elucidates the research methodology employed in this study. It delineates the methods and methodologies used to address the research question and fulfil the study's objectives.

As articulated in Chapter One, the primary inquiry of this thesis was: To what extent does gender, understood through an intersectional lens, influence students' experiences in higher education, particularly in the aftermath of the #MustFall movements and during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? To address this question, this chapter outlines the research design framework, and the qualitative methods employed to gain insights into students' experiences, perceptions, thoughts, emotions and choices. The methodology and methods were formulated in response to the research problem and the central research question. Notably, as the poem suggests, “history is a heavy matter”. This statement underscores the significance of the collaborators selected for the study and the emotional nature of the research process. For many, recounting their past experiences elicited “the flow, unstoppable tears with their hearts breaking into pieces again” (Mhlophe, 2010, p. 3).

To analyse and articulate how students perceived and navigated the higher education landscape, a narrative-photovoice design was implemented, facilitating an understanding of the meanings embedded in their experiences, as conveyed through their stories. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology, specifically detailing the narrative-photovoice conversations, observational field notes and a workshop conducted as part of the study.

#### **4.2 Introduction to research collaborators**

This research would not have been feasible without the collaboration of students from the four universities in the Eastern Cape. The narratives they provided during various stages of this study were instrumental in its development. Consequently, I refer to them as collaborators, as their contributions significantly influenced the research from its inception to its completion. Engaging with these students effectively advanced the objectives of my research. The collaborators are introduced below in no specific order, along with their respective backgrounds. The summaries were derived from the preliminary discussions with them, resulting in concise descriptions that encompass only fundamental details for certain individuals, particularly those aspects that the collaborators themselves emphasised as integral to their identities.

<b>Nelson Mandela University</b>	
Collaborator's Pseudonym	Brief Introduction and Background
Inga (He/His)	Inga is from the rural areas of Komani/Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. He finished his matric in 2018 and in 2019 he went to Cape Town since he did not apply for university in the previous year and so could not at that stage be admitted to a university. In Cape Town, he started mechanical engineering at a community college. He then applied to university since he wanted to go to a university, not a college; he applied and got accepted at many universities but chose a university closer to home. In 2022 he was doing 3 <sup>rd</sup> year in electrical engineering at NMU.
Luyanda (She/Her)	Luyanda was originally from Tsolo in the Eastern Cape. In 2022 she was doing her 4 <sup>th</sup> year in Bachelor of Law at NMU. She started her degree in 2019. She stated that initially, she did not want to come to the university as it was not one of the universities that are usually advertised. She envisioned going to UCT or Wits but she was only accepted at NMU.
Olwam (He/His)	Olwam was born in Mthatha and was raised in Mount Frere where he studied in a community school. In 2022 he was doing his 2 <sup>nd</sup> year in Bachelor of Commerce (Law) at NMU. When he came to NMU things felt very different to him. As someone who grew up in a small town, being in Gqeberha came with a lot of expectations he had not anticipated.
Siphokazi (She/Her)	Siphokazi was originally from King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape where she grew up and studied. She was raised by a single mother and she is an only child, however, she grew up with her cousins from her uncle's side. She attended a Model C school <sup>6</sup> where she had to apply for a fee exemption when her mother lost her job while she was doing grade 10. She then applied to RU after matric and was accepted and that is where she studied her undergraduate studies in media and communications. In 2022, she was doing her Master's in Communications at NMU.
<b>University of Fort Hare</b>	
Collaborator's Pseudonym	Brief Introduction and Background
Mihle (She/Her)	Mihle was born in King Williams Town but grew up in East London. Mihle stated that she comes from a marginalised background. In 2022, she was doing her 2 <sup>nd</sup> year in Bachelor of Commerce (general extended studies) which is a course done by those who did not fully qualify with their marks to join the mainstream Bachelor of Commerce course at the UFH.
Abongile (They/Them)	Abongile is originally from Queenstown doing their postgraduate studies (Honours in Psychology) at NMU. They come from a big family in Queenstown. Abongile is transgender non-binary and prefers to use the pronouns of "they/them". They shared their childhood memories of being

	excluded as they spoke about being in a Christian school where they had to wear dresses and act in a certain way that was deemed acceptable.
Viwe (She/Her)	Viwe was born in Mthatha but raised in East London. She was raised by a single mother and has two siblings. For Viwe, applying to university was not easy because there were a lot of issues with her application which led to her taking an unplanned gap year in 2021. During her gap year, she decided to improve her school mathematics results. In 2022, she was doing her 1 <sup>st</sup> year in Bachelors of Law at the UFH.
Yongama (He/His)	Yongama is from eHewu in the Eastern Cape. He started his higher education journey in 2018 at NMU but dropped out due to financial constraints in 2019. He then applied to the UFH where he started during COVID-19 in 2020 to do a teacher education degree. He was doing his 3 <sup>rd</sup> year in 2022.
<b>Rhodes University</b>	
Collaborator's Pseudonym	Brief Introduction and Background
Ashley (She/Her)	Ashley was born in Nelspruit in Mpumalanga. She shared that both her parents are Afrikaans. She was raised by a single mother who she believed played all roles in her life. In 2022, she was doing her honours in sociology at RU.
Nomonde (She/Her)	Nomonde is a Black woman from Molteno in the Eastern Cape. She is 23 years old. She shared that her identity has been shaped by many things; her family history being one of the issues. In 2022, she was doing her 3 <sup>rd</sup> year in Bachelor of Arts (Politics) at RU.
Riaan (He/His)	Riaan is from Namibia. He shared that he is a Christian and mixed race in terms of colour because both his parents are Coloured and their parents are Coloured. In 2022, he was doing his Master's in Psychology at RU.
Amandla (He/His)	Amandla is from Molteno, in the Eastern Cape and he comes from a very poor background. His mother raised him as a single parent. In 2022 he was doing his 2 <sup>nd</sup> year of a general Bachelor of Arts at RU.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1990, four years before democracy, the apartheid government restructured the schooling system and schools could opt to open their doors to children of all race groups. Initially, only a few previously White-only schools chose to open access to all. These were categorised as "Model C schools". By 1993, most previously White-only schools were open to all, though their high fees meant their learner body remained largely White. While the term "Model C" now has no official meaning, it remains the term used colloquially to describe schools previously designated for white learners, which generally charge higher fees but have better resources (Christie & McKinney, 2017).

Unam (She/Her)	Unam is from East London, specifically a township called Mdantsane which has a lot of social problems particularly affecting young people. She studied at NMU from 2015 to 2018 doing her degree with Honours in Psychology. She then took a break and worked in community service for about a year and a half doing counselling work while also working with UNISA as a data capturer. In 2022, Unam was doing her master's in psychology at RU.
Naledi (She/Her)	Naledi is from Cape Town where she grew up in a low-middle class Coloured area. She moved between homes due to her parent's divorce. She is the first person to attend university from her extended family. She began her studies at RU in 2011. In 2022, she was busy with her PhD at RU.
<b>Walter Sisulu University</b>	
Collaborator's Pseudonym	Brief Introduction and Background
Thando (He/His)	Thando is originally from Mthatha in the Eastern Cape. He comes from a family of four. He is the firstborn and finished secondary school in 2020 but stayed at home in 2021 as he was not accepted into the universities he initially applied to. After staying at home and realising how his family needed him, he then decided that he wanted to apply to a university that was closer to home. That is how he ended up applying and studying at WSU in 2021; in 2022, he was doing his 2 <sup>nd</sup> year in tourism management at WSU.
Linda (She/her)	Linda is from the Eastern Cape in Libode but lives in Bizana in the Eastern Cape with her aunt and her family. She is an only child, and her mother passed away. She has not met her father. In 2022, she was doing her 1 <sup>st</sup> year in human resources at WSU.
Caroline (She/Her)	Caroline was born and raised in Upington in the Northern Cape. She identifies as a Coloured female. In 2022, Caroline was doing her final year in public management at WSU. She only speaks English and Afrikaans. She moved to Queenstown because she was not accepted in other universities due to her school leaving marks.
Zinzi (She/Her)	Zinzi was born and raised in a very small town called Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape. She chose her university because she was exposed to many graduates from WSU, and it was closer to home. It was also not easy for her to get admitted to a university – she had struggled to apply and get accepted to one since 2014. In 2022, she was doing her 3 <sup>rd</sup> year in a diploma in public management at WSU.

## 4.2 Storying and re-storying

It is vital to move from the brief introductions to my collaborators above to understanding the importance of them sharing their stories. Making sense of one's life and experiences can be understood through the process of storytelling. Stories told with nuanced detail may resonate with the listener and may even validate the teller's own experiences, helping them make sense both retrospectively and prospectively of real-life events (McCall et al., 2021). Chapter One of this study opened with a reflection and story of the researcher, to establish a focus on stories: from the past, the present and the imagined future of higher education as my collaborators and I navigate it. Storytelling is a process of revelation that brings things to light, both known and unknown. Lugmayr et al. (2017) characterise storytelling as a narrative that unfolds through a series of high-quality patterns that are connected to a significant context, and which involves a deliberate cognitive process. Chapter One of this research centred *ibali lika* (the narrative of) Asiphe, which subsequently led to the collection of additional narratives from various students who navigated the university environment in diverse ways. Storytelling, as a narrative methodological approach within qualitative research, was employed to gain insights into these students' experiences, thoughts, perceptions and decisions within the context of higher education.

The narratives shared by collaborators were derived from their own vast reservoirs of experiences. As noted by Frank (2010), *stories* are characterised by their localised and specific nature, often pertaining to particular individuals and events. In contrast, *narratives* serve as more expansive cultural resources, referred to as *cultural narratives*, from which individuals derive inspiration to construct their stories. Stories of the students were thus a source of knowledge. There is a distinction between a story and the narrative where the narrative is a correlation between language and reality. Merging the story and the narrative created an understanding and meaning from past experiences related to a historical and social context (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1987; Mishler, 1995). Storytelling by the collaborators provided a framework through which we could contextualise the social and cultural environment (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In the context of this study, the terms "narratives" and "stories" are used interchangeably, indicating that they are considered synonymous throughout the research. The stories from the collaborators were a sensemaking

process with stories told in the present, but which had reflections from the past and the imagination of the future.

As individuals navigate through life, they engage in ongoing experiences and dialogic interactions with both their external environment and internal selves (Moen, 2006). To interpret the significance of these experiences, a narrative approach was employed. Storytelling, as a qualitative methodology, is particularly effective for gathering data that is attuned to the social context through the lens of narrated experiences. Individuals not only told their narratives to organise and make sense of their life experiences, but they also produced narratives that were influenced by the surrounding social environment (Moen, 2006). In the stories told, collaborators included reflections on others as they had experienced them in conversation, observation and through communication by the institution. Thus, a central focus of narrative research is critically examining the influence of the environment, society and systemic factors on individual lives.

### **4.3 Narrative-photovoice methodology**

Narrative-photovoice methodology represents an innovative approach that integrates elements of both photovoice and narrative inquiry, thereby fostering a greater sense of ownership over the narrative and promoting collaborative engagement. This synthesis of methodologies enhanced the participatory nature of the research process by facilitating a greater sense of collaboration between the students and me. As a result, the students in this research are referred to as “collaborators” rather than merely “participants”, a term that typically implies involvement in a pre-established project. In the case of this study, numerous research design decisions were collaboratively made. For example, initially, the research was grounded in narrative methodologies; however, through interactions in the generation of narratives, one collaborator proposed the submission of a photograph and poem to articulate their experiences within the university space. This suggestion catalysed the incorporation of photovoice as a complementary methodology.

Before combining these two approaches, it was essential to first understand the principles of narrative inquiry, the various forms it encompasses and the foundational aspects of photovoice. For this reason, Section 4.3.1 offers a more in-depth consideration of narrative inquiry, before

turning to a discussion on photovoice in Section 4.3.2. Following this, I explain how the two methodologies were brought together in the research.

#### **4.3.1 Narrative method of inquiry: Narrative semantics**

Narrative inquiry uses stories to understand social patterns through experiences told. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), the term ‘narrative’ refers to both phenomenon and method: the distinction is made between the phenomenon, which is the ‘story’, and the inquiry/method, which is the ‘narrative’. Stories from individuals are at the heart of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry focuses not only on individuals’ experiences but also on the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). How individuals perceive and engage with spaces is influenced by both internal and external factors associated with those environments, such as the privileges and oppressions present within a given context. In this study, this context took the form of various university settings.

There are different forms or categories of narrative inquiry. It is therefore important to understand the different categories in order to locate the approach adopted in this research. The categorisation in narrative inquiry was first applied to narrative social research by Mishler (1986), though it has precedents in psycho- and sociolinguistics. The first category is *narrative syntax* which focuses on structure and theory. According to Labov (1997, p. 395):

Within social research, this work contemporarily focuses on different levels of narrative: the structure of co-constructed stories in conversation; of stories about specific events that happened to the speaker; of extended biographical narratives with identifiable plotline; and of personal stories that reflect the structure of culturally current narrative genres, for instance

Narrative syntax’s focus is on the structure and events that take place as a form of sharing experience. This form of narrative inquiry is often used when doing social research that focuses on autobiography. Moreover, personal event narratives operate powerfully in people’s talk as revisiting of certain key moments (Denzin, 1989), in which cognitive and emotional reliving is communicatively performed. However, this type of narrative, which focuses on personal narratives as event-centred for structural analysis, tends to neglect an important element: there might be parts of the story which might not contribute to the event but speak to who the person is, and what they have been through. Owing to this limitation, narrative syntax was deemed inappropriate for the study’s focus on the holistic experience of students. Given the goal of the

study, which was to look at gendered experiences of higher education in an intersectional way, it was important to adopt an approach that could take into account who the collaborators were as people, and where they came from.

The second type of narrative inquiry is *narrative pragmatics* which focuses on small stories as context. Narrative pragmatics includes research focused on micro-levels of context and comprehension called ‘small’ stories against the so-called ‘big’ stories of more experiential, biographically oriented research (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Small stories can lead to narrow particularism about specific stories, focusing more on the person and not the experience and how that impacts transformation. The emphasis on small stories tends to prioritise *event* over experience, while also paying attention to the *social* in its most micro social versions (Squire, 2008). This methodology underscores the individual as a contributor to society, representing a significant avenue for engaging with narratives. It is crucial to focus on the content of the story itself rather than the way it is articulated, as an emphasis on the latter may result in the researcher exerting control over the narrative to achieve an idealised understanding. This means listening carefully and being present as one is having a conversation with a collaborator. Conversations can take different turns and may not be structured to “past, present and future”. Consequently, this narrative framework was unsuitable for this study, as it constrains the fluidity of dialogue and the diverse expressions of the story.

The third type of narrative inquiry is *narrative semantics*. This approach allowed the focus to be on the content told rather than on the telling of the story, enabling themes to emerge from the stories provided by the collaborators. According to Patterson (2008, p. 37):

This type of narrative focuses on the collection of narratives, semantics or meanings, of narratives by applying standard content-analytic techniques to material that one consider stories, or to material that one have explicitly collected as narratives, for example by asking story-eliciting questions.

The key to narrative semantics is the interaction between the teller and the listener or the researcher and the research collaborator. Conversation is important in a narrative interview; however, the researcher has to play the role of actively listening to the collaborator in order to understand their narrative. This type of narrative inquiry centres on an experience as a focus point. Given the goals of this research, narrative semantics was the most appropriate framework for this study.

The work of Patterson (2008) looks at experience-centred narrative research and explains narrative semantics as a hermeneutic approach to analysing stories, aiming at full interpretation and understanding rather than, as in Labov's case, structural analysis. Using narrative semantics as a method in this research enabled me to analyse stories that considered experience as sequential and meaningful and to display transformation or change. The experience-centred narrative approach became the tool to elicit student experiences with stories that were more flexible regarding time and personal experience. Experience-centred narrative semantics can also address a more general experience, such as the continued reliving of trauma and its consequences that Patterson's (2008) research investigated. This type of narrative approach assisted in outlining the synthesis or intersection of stories told from different places and times by diverse students from different universities.

Furthermore, using narrative semantics through an experience-centred approach contributed to representation and reconstruction. Experience-centred narratives can be conceptualised as texts that articulate personal stories through first-person oral accounts of past, present, future or hypothetical experiences, often characterised by fragmentation and contradiction (Patterson, 2008). Engaging in conversations with the collaborators' experience-centred narratives centred their voices and promoted their agency to articulate their own stories rather than being reduced to data points. Also, narratives frequently explore significant life transitions such as pivotal realisations regarding one's sexuality or the experience of parenthood (Denzin, 1989; Squire, 2008). This study aimed to capture the life transitions through narratives of the collaborators with their complexity and depth of human experience during periods of profound change. The collaborators' stories illuminated identity formation, revealed cultural and structural influences, provided insight into emotional and cognitive processes, and contributed to societal understanding and change within and outside the university.

This study adopted a collaborative research approach of jointly 'told' stories between writer and reader, speaker and hearer (Ricoeur, 1991). By involving both the speaker and hearer in the construction of narratives, the study aimed to uncover deeper layers of meaning in student experiences that might not have been received from using other traditional methodologies. I was able to ask clarifying questions, explore ambiguities and capture the complexity of collaborators' lived experiences. This made the process more inclusive, and it was an empathetic representation of their experiences. The shared stories were viewed as one of many

narratable ‘truths’ among students. As such, I approached the field with an understanding that ‘the truth’ is what is told by the collaborator: their ‘truth’ is their story to tell. To capture the social representation processes of students such as their feelings, images and time, the experience-centred narrative research approach was best suited as it offered the potential to address uncertainty. Social representations in this research are the collaborators’ collective ways in which they make sense of their world in higher education and beyond. For the collaborators, these processes included their subjective feelings, mental images and perceptions of time, which together shaped their understanding of social and cultural phenomena (e.g. gender, identity or belonging within higher education).

Furthermore, the approach allowed for the navigation of the intersectional ‘walk’ discussed in Chapter Three, providing flexibility to recognise the various factors that influenced each step taken at any given moment by the collaborators. The intersectional ‘walk’ included interactions with the collaborators as they shared their narratives after the two contexts of the #MustFall movements and during/after COVID-19. Narrative semantics provided the flexibility for collaborators to tell stories about their university experiences without undue direction from me. My primary role as the researcher in narrative semantics involved actively listening as collaborators shared their stories during a conversational process. This process will be elaborated on in Section 4.6 of this chapter.

Moreover, narrative semantics is positioned within a qualitative framework, underpinned by the epistemological premise that individuals interpret experiences as an imposed structure of understanding. People’s experiences tell a story of where they have been, what they have gone through and what lessons they have learnt. Open dialogues facilitate the continuation of a narrative, wherein the researcher attentively listens to explore significant inquiries such as, “What transpired subsequently? What emotions did that evoke? How are you coping with the situation, and what is your current status?” The narrative qualitative paradigm, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 33):

Assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (the knower and respondent co-create understandings), a naturalistic (in the natural world), set of methodological procedures.

This narrative project focused on co-creating knowledge through the sharing of experiences and realities that students found themselves in. People can often get comfortable with structured ways of knowing, often failing to understand their own experiences. Although recounting personal experiences may involve re-experiencing those moments, it also leads to a deeper understanding of how and why such experiences influence an individual's navigation of various contexts. According to Ricoeur (1991), the act of storytelling involves interpreting and reconfiguring past events to make sense of them in the present. This reflective process allowed collaborators to identify connections between their experiences and the broader contexts in which they occurred, in this case, the university space.

Furthermore, through the act of sharing, individuals can gain insights into the fairness or injustice of those experiences. When speaking with others, especially when encouraged to do so in more intimate ways, people, together, may explore nuances in their narratives (Rosenthal, 2003). To achieve subjective epistemology in the study the collaborators had freedom of ownership of their narratives as they made meaning of their life stories. Through the narrative method, their meanings, experiences and perceptions were then co-created. Located within a relativist ontology, narrative is perceived as a condition of social life, therefore, to be human is to be storied (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The university becomes a place where we continue shaping our lives and collecting experiences. Narrative semantics therefore was an advantageous methodology because of its contextual characteristics of meaning, relatedness and identity.

While narrative semantics comes with advantages, it also has limitations in social research. Narrative semantics involves working with people's consciously told stories, recognising that these rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware (Bell, 2002). As such, narrative semantics allows researchers to get information that people do not consciously know themselves. This is achieved through event narratives, where the storyteller recounts their experiences such as those in higher education by aligning a verbal sequence of clauses with the sequence of events that (it is inferred) actually took place (Labov, 1972, 2001). Life can be conceptualised as a sequence of events; thus, when collaborators recounted their narratives, they reflected on particular occurrences and memories associated with their transition to university.

Correspondingly, collaborators' university experiences are shaped by diverse elements of their backgrounds prior to entering higher education which they shared in their narratives speaking about social transformation. Stories by their nature privilege subjectivity which, in turn, can be translated into work on social transformation (Mumby, 1993; Nadar, 2014). To contribute to social transformation, the stories in this research have been presented holistically in all their complexity and richness, which is explained step by step later in the chapter. This was important, as research shows that in the process of "making sense" of peoples' experiences, the inequality and injustice of the education system can be exposed (Israel, 2019). The purpose of narratives was to communicate the shared gendered experiences, albeit in an intersectional way; in this research, the holistic understanding of the shifts in institutional experience for various collaborators represented another look at how much transformation has taken place in higher education. The narratives of collaborators were then fundamental to the understanding of the higher education institution by drawing from their feelings of belonging and marginalisation.

There are many layers within which a collaborator in a narrative inquiry may choose to approach their story or experiences, and many of these layers touch on deeper, untold stories. While some collaborators may share relatable stories, they may also exclude parts that undermine the identities that they are claiming. This means that as a researcher, one must create a comfortable space for the collaborators to understand that their stories matter. To deal with the limitation of how information was shared by the collaborators, there was a need to ensure that the research purpose was clear. First, establishing trust is crucial; this can be done by being transparent about the research purpose, processes, and how the data will be used (Liamputtong, 2007). I ensured that all my collaborators understood the purpose of the research and how much of their stories could be shared so they were aware as they shared their stories. There were conversations that I had with the collaborators that were not recorded as they did not want those conversations as part of the research. These conversations were conversations they wanted to have because I created a safe space for them to share freely and have someone to talk to.

Despite the affordance of narrative semantics, narratives may not be useful or appropriate for all inquiries. One of the limitations is the time commitment required for working with many collaborators (Bell, 2002). This was a challenge in the research, particularly as the study focused on four universities in different geographical areas: NMU (Gqeberha), RU

(Makhanda), WSU (Queenstown, Whittlesea, Mthatha, East London) and UFH (East London and Alice). The choice of the number of collaborators was thus vital as well as a proper planning of interview schedules and ethics administration.

The other key limitation of narrative semantics is that it does not lend itself to the representation of experience: in fact, narrative researchers are not concerned with representation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The significance of an individual narrative lies in its capacity to reflect multiple dimensions of experience, despite being articulated by a single person. This aspect is particularly relevant in the context of this study, which examined gendered experiences among students from diverse backgrounds, including various gender orientations, races, ages, academic years and university campuses.

The inclusion of a diverse collaborator sample in this study addressed potential limitations and facilitated a more intersectional perspective within the narrative research framework. Incorporating collaborators from various backgrounds such as different races, genders, socioeconomic statuses, levels of education, different universities and sexual orientations helped avoid the pitfalls of homogenised narratives that often overlook the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups (Collins, 2000). This diversity not only enriched the data gathered but also enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings, as it reflected the multifaceted nature of lived experiences in different institutions. However, it is crucial to emphasise that the primary focus of this research was to convey the depth and richness of experiences, rather than to achieve breadth or representational diversity.

#### **4.3.2 Photovoice methodology**

Photovoice was used as a complementary methodology in this research project. The idea to include photographs originated from one of the collaborators, who offered an image that encapsulated their university experience, accompanied by a poem as part of our conversation. In response to this great prompt, I therefore suggested it to other collaborators which led to me looking at photovoice as a methodological approach. Photovoice is a well-established method, initially developed by health promotion researchers (Wang & Burris, 1997). This approach allows collaborators to select and reflect upon photographs, facilitating an exploration of the motivations, emotions and experiences that inform their choices. Photovoice fosters collaboration between the researcher and collaborators, ensuring that the narratives of the

collaborators are authentically represented in their own voices. By engaging collaborators in the process of submitting images that reflect their experiences in higher education, I was able to create a platform for dialogue and shared understanding as the interpretation of the images came from them.

As a participatory methodological tool, photovoice integrates narrative and photography to investigate community matters, drawing upon a rich historical context that combines images and words to articulate needs, histories, cultures, challenges, and aspirations (Collier & Collier, 1986; Pink, 2001; Pink et al., 2004; Schwartz, 1989). This methodology afforded collaborators an opportunity to visualise their reality and reflect on that image when narrating their experiences of their journey in higher education.

Photovoice is seen to help open conversations between a researcher and collaborators who are guided by the particular method used. Typically, this methodology involves participants presenting photographs within a group context, facilitated by a guided discussion that focuses on (1) the significance of photographs chosen by individual members of the group and (2) strategies for conveying information to policymakers (Wang, 1999). Unlike many research settings where participants share their photographs in a group environment under the guidance of a facilitator, this study allowed collaborators the flexibility to collect or capture images independently and submit them, along with accompanying narratives to me, either in person or via email. The flexibility allowed collaborators to express their unique perspectives and experiences without the potential pressure or influence of group dynamics, which can sometimes stifle individual voices (Bourke, 2014). They did not feel the pressure of having to be creative as they could not see and compare what others were submitting; rather, they submitted images that spoke to their experiences, therefore enhancing authenticity.

As with any methodology, photovoice presents both advantages and disadvantages. One of the primary benefits of employing photovoice is its capacity to visually represent experiences and convey personal insights regarding specific matters that may be challenging to articulate verbally (Wang & Burris, 1997). This aspect is particularly significant when engaging with narratives, as some individuals, especially students who have encountered complex university experiences, may find it difficult to express their thoughts verbally. In such cases, a photograph can serve as a pivotal narrative anchor. For researchers, the incorporation of photographs can stimulate dialogue among participants regarding their perceptions of the matters at hand;

helping to yield insights that differ from those obtained through traditional interviews or focus groups (Darbyshire et al., 2005). In the context of this research, photovoice proved to be an effective tool for facilitating follow-up discussions after semi-structured narrative interviews (explained in detail in Section 4.6.5), allowing collaborators to elaborate on their narratives by recalling a photograph they had taken during their university experience or a significant moment they wished to capture for reflection.

In this study, it was important that there was collaboration, engagement and active participation with the collaborators. The reason for this is that typically, the participation of young people in research has been largely limited; therefore, collaboration was key. Rather than only observing collaborators and posing predetermined questions, it was essential to involve them through methodologies such as photovoice. Historically, the participation of young people in research has been largely limited to observational roles, which has led to significant gaps in the literature and often superficial understandings of their experiences (Krane et al., 2021). In this research, the young collaborators were able to convey their narratives in unique ways, frequently using photographs to encapsulate moments and memories. The photovoice approach empowered the collaborators to articulate the stories behind the images, positioning them as co-researchers rather than subjects of research.

While the use of this methodology presents certain advantages, it is crucial to acknowledge the methodological challenges associated with photovoice. Researchers employing photovoice must establish clear relationships prior to initiating the process to mitigate ethical dilemmas related to raising awareness and expectations of collaborators (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Although research can influence policy and contribute to community development, it is essential to communicate to participants that not all research possesses the capacity to effect such changes. This study aimed to enhance the understanding of intersectional gender experiences among students in higher education. It, therefore, has the potential to provide policy researchers and practitioners with insights into these experiences which could have practical implications – a primary objective of this study.

Moreover, critics have raised concerns regarding the methodological rigour of photovoice, particularly questioning its effectiveness in addressing power imbalances between researchers and collaborators (Castleden et al., 2008; Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Seitz & Orsini, 2022). In this study, the decision to participate through the submission of photographs was entirely at the

discretion of the collaborators: this method was not imposed on them. In addition, the invitation for photo submissions was intentionally vague, as I did not want to influence or dictate the kind of submissions that collaborators provided. As such, the invitation simply stated: “Kindly submit or take a picture that best describes your university experience and send a voice note or explain what the photo means to you”. This helped to mitigate the power imbalances between myself and the collaborators because it allowed them to express their unique narratives and interpretations of their university experiences without any imposed criteria, even one that had to do with picture quality, as it was not a priority.

### **4.3.3 Photovoice and narrative inquiry for gender-based intersectionality research**

Narrative methodology is characterised by its complexity and the diverse ways in which researchers may choose to implement it. This methodology allows for creative expression, which I complemented with photovoice to foster a sense of comfort and engagement among the collaborators involved in the project. In addition to the various forms of narrative research, several factors had to be considered when employing a narrative and photovoice approach. These factors include: the manner in which narratives shape identities (Czarniawska, 1997; Watson, 2007), and conceptualising identity as a dynamic and performative process wherein individuals use a range of resources to construct their self-conceptions. Combining two methodologies comes with its own limitations. In this section, I explain how I combined the two methodologies and how perceived limitations were addressed.

The limitations were identified and addressed in accordance with each method in this study, as they emerged both in the field and during the analysis of the gathered data. This was important, because as Evans (1999) explains, misinterpretation in results may arise from the subjective experiences of collaborators, which can be influenced by their personality or emotional state at the time of data generation or by the researcher. Individuals indeed draw upon various contexts, resources, temporalities and emotional states to construct their identities, all of which are pertinent in both the chosen methodologies. Consequently, my role as a researcher was to comprehend and validate the narratives provided by the collaborators as they were required to reflect and revisit past experiences during semi-structured interviews – a process that will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Furthermore, it is important to note that identities are constructed in the narratives we create and tell about our lives, including how we externalise ourselves to ourselves and others. As such, how one person views a photograph and recounts a narrative can differ from the next person who views it. To deal with this, I combined narrative and photovoice methodologies by asking the collaborators to analyse what was happening in the picture using their own voices. It was thus important that the study captured individual responses to individual photos that held meaning to the collaborator in the research. In doing so, understanding identity construction as a significant aspect of collaborator experiences, as told through their stories, was important for this study. This study accepts a degree of ontological relativism in that the truths of the collaborators are seen to have real effects in the world and thus to be real regardless of the possibility of them being partial and fallible.

The second factor to be considered is whether narrative, generated through interviews or explanations of photographs, can be used as a tool for knowledge gathering and knowledge sharing (Abma, 2000; Cox, 2001; Nadar, 2014). I argue that there is so much power in personal narratives, especially in the higher education space. Narratives can act as a tool to aid education by raising awareness of the different systems that many navigate – systems that are often neglected in other research – and contribute to the needed systematic changes through responses to a story.

The third factor that warrants consideration when understanding how narratives facilitate sensemaking through the integration of the two methodologies is the matter of competing with various forms of discourse, such as theories, clichés, statistics, and reports (Gabriel, 1998; Yiannis, 2007). I argue that the stories shared through conversations and photo narratives in this research made sense of the realities that were beyond statistics, reports and theories, particularly about systems in place. The stories of the collaborators in the higher education space post the #MustFall Movements and during the COVID-19 era shed light on the lived experiences of students as universities found themselves in different contexts, engagements and reforms. The combination of the two methods not only amplified the voices of students but also provided a visualised process of all the triumphs faced by collaborators, thereby fostering a deeper engagement with their realities (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The fourth factor considered in the integration of these methodologies was the significant role narratives play in fostering understanding, as they provide insights into both personal perspectives and societal perceptions. Narratives, whether through conversations or photovoice, serve as a powerful tool for individuals to articulate their experiences and viewpoints, allowing researchers to grasp the complexities of how people interpret their realities and how they are perceived by others (Cortazzi, 2001; Nadar, 2014). By employing narrative photovoice, the collaborators and I captured these stories visually and textually, enriching our comprehension of diverse lived experiences and promoting a deeper dialogue about identity and context.

The aforementioned factors related to the integration of narrative and photovoice methodologies are crucial when examined in conjunction with the concept of intersectionality. This examination is essential for comprehending the interplay between photovoice, narratives and intersectionality. The combination of the two methodologies in this research possessed the capacity to alter the power dynamics inherent in conventional research methodologies, thereby enabling collaborators to take an active role in shaping the narrative, outputs, and outcomes of the research (Jull et al., 2017). The opportunity for collaborators to express their experiences through both visual and verbal mediums aligned well with the traditional Indigenous practices of storytelling and artistic expression (Atkinson et al., 2021; Hammond et al., 2018; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). This aligned with the theory of intersectionality where the overlapping systems were viewed through an intersectional walk (discussed in Chapter Three) that was experienced by each collaborator.

To understand intersectional and overlapping systems, narrative photovoice assisted in revealing the realities that lay behind the collaborators' experiences. For intersectional researchers interested in tracing multiple modes of oppression and material-structural domination, it is potentially productive to conceptualise individual narratives as multidimensional, comprising multiple analytical layers in which the story told is an intra-action (Barad, 2007). Intersectionality challenges narrative modes of inquiry to find analytical ways of engaging with the experiences of individuals through their individual stories. Both narrative semantics and photovoice are methods that are used to investigate power structures in communities; for example, the collaborators in the study identified innovative solutions to problems not normally recognised by decision-makers through narrative photovoice.

Furthermore, photo stories may elicit intuitive reactions from decision-makers that can foster action on community matters that account for their constituencies' points of view (Wang & Burris, 1994). Narrative inquiry has the potential to situate stories within broader "master narratives" (Nelson, 2001), sociocultural discourses and everyday relations of power as embodied in the lives of individual selves (Mirza, 2013). Accordingly, narrative-photovoice intersectionality was a combination that could explore structural and material relations of power in higher education through the combination of verbal conversations and photographs. The enactment of intersectionality theory on narratives is discussed in more detail in Section 4.6.

Bringing narrative semantics, photovoice and intersectionality together was important in this study as the many systems of hierarchy that were historically created are still experienced and navigated by people living in South Africa and its institutions. It was therefore important to look at the experiences of such people as they navigate these intersecting systems. Narratives have thus been favoured by many intersectional researchers to explore the ways in which race, religion, class, ethnicity and gender were produced and lived at the level of embodied subjectivity mediated by and through the body (Cole, 2009; Ludvig, 2006; Mirza, 2013; Prins, 2006). Storytelling as a pillar of narrative inquiry focuses on the power of voice and experience of lived experiences and realities. It argues that narrative approaches potentially offer rich methodological tools for intersectional analyses, particularly in relation to their ability to grant epistemic privilege to marginalised voices (Mohanty, 2013). Therefore, narrative photovoice served as a useful approach for exploring the matter of gender.

To investigate the complexities of gender and its various intersections, the personal experiences shared by collaborators serve to contest and deconstruct the prevailing narratives that shape and influence policies, interactions and identities within the university space. This approach highlights how individual stories can reveal the limitations and biases inherent in dominant discourses, ultimately supporting a more inclusive understanding of gender that acknowledges the diverse realities of those within academic settings. Therefore, I argue that narrative photovoice is transformational and contributes to an understanding that challenges dominant discourses by hearing a story not yet told. In essence, drawing on intersectionality as a complex and developing feminist theory can help contribute to work that considers how narrative can illuminate often hidden complexities while seeking to avoid generalisations and essentialisms

(Cole, 2009). Narrative-photovoice storytelling is pertinent for critical work – work that requires interrogation and reflection of the social positions of both the researcher and the collaborators. Stories told in this research reflected different social identities that students navigate.

The study was therefore represented through a narrative-photovoice format as this tool best informed the inquiry of intersectional collaborators' experiences. Representing the collaborators' lives in storied ways allowed a focus on how the collaborators made meaning of their individual lives, particularly in the context of gender (Chase, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As this was a co-constructive and co-creative project, the stories were told in two contexts: that of the collaborator using direct quotations and that of the researcher through analysis.

#### **4.4 Research methods and techniques**

Research methods represent a series of processes and steps taken to carry out the research. In this section, I outline the methods and techniques that were chosen and implemented to generate and analyse data to ensure the credibility of the research findings and answer the research questions.

##### **4.4.1 Site selection**

The research sites for this study were the four universities located in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, namely NMU, UFH, WSU and RU. These sites were chosen to share perspectives and experiences of higher education through the lens of student narratives in a province that struggles with many socioeconomic developmental problems, as discussed in Chapter Two. The data, therefore, consisted of the narratives of 18 collaborators from the above-mentioned universities.

##### **4.4.2 Collaborators' recruitment and selection**

In the context of comprehending student experiences related to gender in higher education, there exists a wealth of insights to be gained from various stakeholders within the field. However, I opted to focus on obtaining perspectives directly from the students themselves. During data generation, it was important to understand that there was no way to include every

possible relevant stakeholder in the higher education space; however, identifying collaborators that were likely to have some similar perspectives and some likely to have different perspectives was the most important criterion (Daiute, 2014). To ensure a diverse group of student collaborators, I included students from various levels of study, departments, racial groups and gender groups. In total, 18 collaborators were included, representing the four universities. Creswell (2012) recommends including collaborators who are a good representation of the population. In this case, the diversity of students interviewed was the representation of the population, particularly with regard to categories that are explained in intersectionality such as class, race, gender, education, sexuality and age.

I first disseminated a call for collaborators through social media platforms of these universities to identify potential collaborators for this study. Some individuals were also identified through other research collaborators (i.e. through word-of-mouth ‘snowball sampling’). The sampling method employed was nonprobability sampling, which is particularly appropriate for qualitative research. This approach is justifiable as qualitative research does not focus on numerical data or the frequency of occurrences; rather, it aims to explore the underlying dynamics, relationships and implications associated with the topics, events, and individuals under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study was not about the number of students experiencing intersectionality as they navigate higher education but about the experiences of the collaborators. Including diverse students acknowledged that each individual may have distinct influences affecting their experiences; therefore, through this study, I captured the nuanced ways in which these identities interact.

Moreover, the nonprobability sampling techniques used included convenience and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2014). Among these, purposive and snowball sampling emerged as the most suitable strategy for this qualitative inquiry, predicated on the premise that the researcher sought to discover, understand and gain insights, necessitating the selection of a sample from which the maximum learning can be derived (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a result, I purposefully chose to examine universities located in the Eastern Cape, as they would yield significant insights relevant to my research question, rather than conducting a comprehensive study encompassing all universities in South Africa. While the issues identified in my research findings may reflect conditions present in other universities, my deliberate focus on Eastern

Cape institutions was intended to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences faced by South African university students as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality.

The significance of purposive sampling lies in its focus on obtaining a specific and in-depth understanding of the subject matter being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the selection of research collaborators was directly aligned with the objectives of the study. In this instance, the aim was to explore student experiences of gender within higher education at Eastern Cape universities, and only students enrolled in these institutions were invited to participate. It is noteworthy that the data collection process occurred in 2022, resulting in some collaborators having graduated and subsequently transitioned to the workforce or pursuing postgraduate studies at other institutions.

A fundamental aspect of nonprobability sampling in this research was the absence of a predetermined sample size, facilitating the inclusion of additional collaborators suggested by my collaborators. This approach is known as snowball or referral sampling, which is particularly useful when the target population is challenging to identify. Once an initial collaborator was located, they were asked to refer others who could also contribute to the study (Johnson, 2014). The identified collaborators disseminated a poster to their peers and provided my contact information, thereby expanding my network of collaborators.

The selection of meeting locations where the narrative interviews were conducted was a collaborative process between me and the collaborators. Research indicates that the environment in which interviews are conducted can significantly influence the quality of the data gathered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). By engaging collaborators in the selection process, I was able to identify locations for some; however, others communicated their safe environments for us to meet that held personal significance for the collaborators, thereby facilitating a more comfortable and engaging atmosphere for sharing their stories (Seidman, 2013). Ultimately, this approach not only enriched the data collection process but also reinforced the collaborative nature of the research endeavour.

It is worth noting that the universities in the Eastern Cape are geographically dispersed, with an average distance of approximately 250 kilometres from RU where I am based. In this study, a significant consideration was thus the time required to travel to meet each collaborator and to establish a rapport that would encourage them to share their narratives. Consequently, I

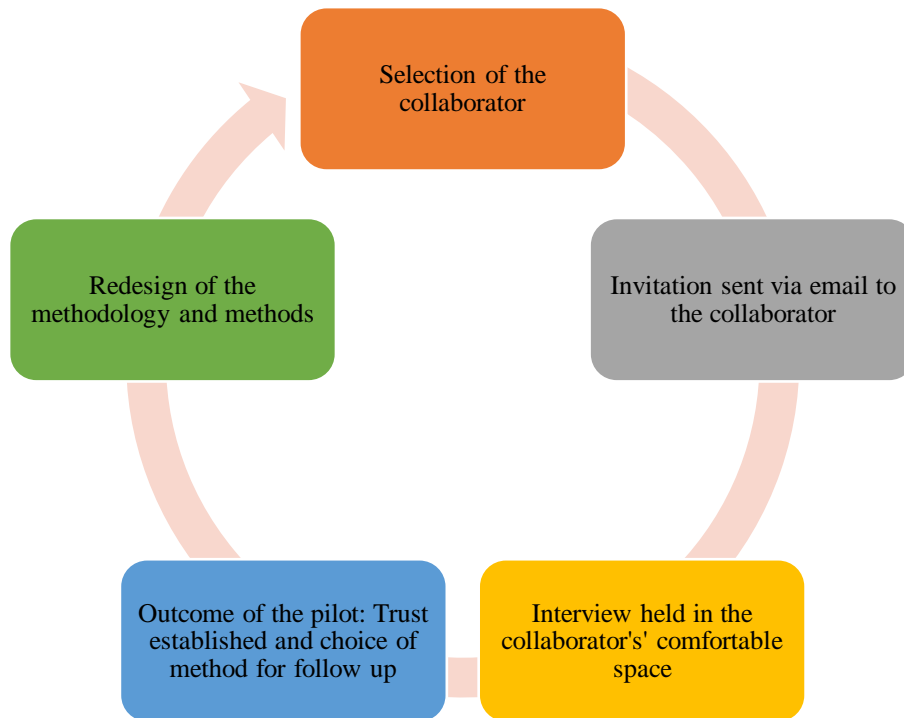
travelled to various universities, allowing collaborators to choose their preferred meeting spaces. Meetings occurred in diverse settings, including classrooms, restaurants and residence common rooms, particularly for those who requested a more private environment. Prior to my visits, I communicated with the universities to arrange private office spaces for collaborators who preferred me to choose our meeting location.

#### **4.5 Data generation procedures**

The data generation process happened in four stages during this research. Stage 1 included the trial run of the research data-gathering process, which was done through a pilot study. Stage 2 involved interviewing collaborators at the four universities. Stage 3 involved retelling the stories and stage 4 involved confirming and validating the stories through a workshop held with the collaborators. The flow and the purpose of the first phase were then to feed back to the methodology and research design of the research.

##### **4.5.1 Phase 1: Identifying the phenomena through a pilot study**

Generating data in the field can cause anxiety, especially not knowing what to expect when starting the conversations with the collaborators. As such, I began by having one test interview which was intended to be my pilot study for this research. A pilot study is a specific pre-testing of research instruments, including questionnaires or interview schedules (see Beck et al., 2002; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). The following Figure 4.1 is a diagrammatic representation of the research procedure of stage one of the study.



**Figure 4.1: Illustration of the first phase of data gathering**

The above process was important to ensure that the research process was collaborative rather than only having collaborators telling their stories without trusting the person to whom their stories were told. Through the pilot interview and subsequent follow-up conversations, I was able to get a sense of how to collaborate moving forward. The intended pilot interview was conducted after I had gained a clear understanding of the research questions and methodology. The pilot study was then a ‘try-out’ of the methodology to grasp how the conversation would go and assess the structure of the interviews to follow for the research. The above process shows how then the conversation contributed to the redesign of the methods to explore in this collaborative project and to some extent decolonising the methodology by letting the collaborators drive the conversation moving forward. Given the success of the interview, I decided to include the pilot interview in my data and proceeded to collect more narratives.

#### **4.5.2. Phase 2: Generating narratives (ukuncokola [conversations] & photovoice)**

Following the completion of the pilot study, I developed a clearer understanding of what to anticipate in the field during subsequent interviews. In addition, I discovered that engaging in conversations with collaborators without excessive pre-planning while also prioritising active

listening was more effective. The below screenshot (Figure 4.2) illustrates how important it was for me to do the pilot with feedback from the collaborator I engaged with:



**Figure 4.2: Screenshot of WhatsApp conversation from a collaborator**

The above is an example of the dialogue between a collaborator and myself, which served as a significant impetus for my perseverance with the project, despite the challenges encountered. This interview reflection marked the beginning of engaging with numerous individuals who shared their narratives with me, significantly reinforcing my dedication to the research methodology. As a result, this study also integrated photovoice, informed by the insights acquired during the preliminary phase of the research. The data-generating process started at RU. An advert (see Appendix A) was sent out to all universities' social media platforms on Facebook to ensure that all students had the opportunity to participate. The interviews adopted a narrative interview technique whereby collaborators were asked to share where they came from and how they ended up at the university. The conversation then moved to an open-ended question: "Tell me more about your university experience here, from the beginning of your studies up to now". As such, the interviews followed a loosely semi-structured format.

Phase 1 of the study provided more clarity on the interview process and what needed to be adapted before more fieldwork took place. In particular, it prompted further reading and research on what narrative interviewing entails and understanding the contextual dynamics of different universities. This also included the more comfortable ways in which stories are told and thus the idea of "ukuncokola" meaning conversational instead of interviewing.

#### ***4.5.2.1 Ukuncokola (conversations)***

Having conversations with the collaborators was very important as narrative conversation enabled them to express their experiences, perceptions, thoughts and viewpoints creatively. The narrative conversation structure was designed for both face-to-face conversations and online interviews, given that we had moved to a blended approach post-pandemic in 2022. This open-ended technique assisted in obtaining answers pertinent to the research questions. This type of ukuncokola also allowed me to do self-checking, ensuring that I did not impose meanings onto collaborators' experiences. Rather, I conducted a follow-up conversation to gain clarity on matters that had been raised. When one is in conversation with another person, some topics may be triggering. In instances of this nature, I opted to stop the recording in the conversation regarding data collection and instead prioritised the human interaction with the collaborator. This decision was significant for me, as I grappled with the ethical implications of extracting information solely for research purposes, without acknowledging the individual behind the data. Consequently, I felt it was essential to engage with the collaborators as fellow human beings rather than solely in my capacity as a researcher.

The use of narrative conversation proved to be particularly advantageous for this specific inquiry. As Durrance (1997, p. 26) articulates, "The story is our oldest, proven motivational tool that carries the shared culture, beliefs and history of a group". The narratives gathered from various universities revealed a continuum of both challenges and triumphs experienced by many individuals, while others, depending on their academic year, expressed anticipation for the journey that lay ahead. This dialogue naturally transitioned into a primary discussion regarding gender experiences within the university context, necessitating follow-up conversations to clarify meanings rather than relying on assumptions. The open-ended nature of these discussions, facilitated by the concept of ukuncokola, allowed some collaborators to elaborate on their home lives and friendships outside of the university, which occasionally left certain aspects pertinent to the study ambiguous. To address this, I found it necessary to conduct follow-up conversations with the collaborators, focusing on key matters that required further elucidation. The narrative conversation format was particularly beneficial as it enabled collaborators to share their experiences without interruption. Furthermore, the act of being predominantly listened to fostered a recognition among collaborators that their experiences

held significance. As Merriam (2002, p. 286) notes, “The story is a basic communicative and meaning-making device pervasive in human experience”.

Initially, the research design encompassed only semi-structured interviews; however, insights gained from the first phase prompted collaborators to suggest alternative methods of engagement. For instance, as already mentioned, one collaborator expressed a desire to submit a poem accompanied by an image that encapsulated their experience as a gender non-binary individual. Another collaborator requested to provide a photograph that, while not revealing her identity, conveyed the essence of being a woman within her institutional context. The contributions of these two collaborators served as significant inspiration for using visual narratives, facilitating a notable advancement for other collaborators, particularly those who were more reserved. As a result, several collaborators opted to share photographs and voice notes as their narratives, which provided them with a greater sense of comfort.

Furthermore, the collaborators were asked to use a language that they felt comfortable in and many switched codes from isiXhosa to English. Since the research was done in the Eastern Cape, isiXhosa was their dominant home language and many collaborators who were Black spoke isiXhosa. That conversation was then directly transcribed so as to avoid the loss of meaning through translation which could lead to the misinterpretation of narratives. This was a process of also acknowledging the importance of multilingualism within universities. It was also a negotiation of personal experiences based on language so that they would be comfortable freely sharing their experiences using both isiXhosa and English. I reciprocated the process of translanguaging (changing of languages) in an effort to lessen the dynamics regarding English as an elitist language. According to Mkhize and Ndzimande-Hlongwa (2014), the use of exoglossic languages fosters a sense of elitism, whereas Indigenous African languages are often perceived as inferior. The process of opening the space for multilingual contributions created comfort and freedom among collaborators.

Language is fundamental to effective communication, and as a researcher, it is essential to recognise and respect this principle. When I encountered a collaborator who spoke isiXhosa and expressed a desire to communicate in isiXhosa, I reciprocated by engaging with them in that language. Although I initially anticipated that the translation process would be straightforward due to my proficiency in the isiXhosa language, I encountered challenges related to the loss of meaning when trying to do direct translation. To address these concerns,

I explicitly communicated that the translations were intended to convey meaning rather than serve as direct translations. In addition, I sought confirmation from my collaborators to ensure that I accurately represented their perspectives as I translated for meaning. It was also crucial to foster an environment of comfort by reassuring collaborators of their humanity, allowing them the freedom to retract their statements or withdraw from the conversation if they so wished. There were instances when collaborators felt compelled to continue discussions despite experiencing heightened emotions. In such situations, I reminded myself of my own humanity, prioritising the wellbeing of the collaborators by pausing the recording and providing support, thereby ensuring they felt comfortable and understood in the context of the emotional dynamics at play.

#### ***4.5.2.2 Collection of photos***

One of the methodologies employed for data collection involved the gathering of photographs that encapsulated the experiences of collaborators within the university context. Although the consent form outlined the ethical considerations necessary to safeguard the privacy of the collaborators, it became evident that reiteration of these principles was essential. When engaging collaborators as co-researchers, it is crucial to recognise that individuals or communities may not inherently possess an understanding of the fundamental ethical standards associated with data collection, particularly concerning privacy concerns that arise for individuals depicted in the photographs collected during the research process (Hannes & Wang, 2020). This was important especially because some collaborators wanted to submit photos of themselves in an activist movement with other students who were not part of the research. In such cases, the ethical considerations for including such photographs had to be carefully negotiated.

The students involved were not explicitly trained in maintaining ethical integrity in visual research, but I informed them about potential best or poor practices. Consequently, I had to clarify that if the photographs included their faces or those of others, I would implement a method to obscure their identities. This presented a significant challenge, as it felt akin to silencing their voices, particularly since some collaborators expressed no objection to having their faces visible. To address this, I used a photo editing application to create portraits that preserved the collaborators' facial expressions while ensuring their anonymity.

The photographs were collected through a submission process, with some collaborators requesting that I capture images of them in settings such as the university or their residences. Following the collection of these images, we engaged in discussions regarding the significance of the photographs, and some collaborators subsequently sent voice notes elaborating on the moments captured, reflecting on their university experiences. It is essential to acknowledge that the collaborators voluntarily provided their photographs, which raised an ethical dilemma due to the fact that the inclusion and use of such artefacts had not been addressed in the initial ethics application. I then submitted an ethics application renewal to include the use of photographs. Consequently, I was required to revisit the necessary formalities and to inform my collaborators about the rationale and methods by which their submissions would be incorporated. I made a deliberate effort to maintain ongoing communication with those who contributed their photographs, ensuring they were aware of the changes made to the consent form and that their images would remain anonymous.

#### **4.5.3 Phase 3: Retelling narratives**

The initial task of analysing data generated from four distinct institutions presented a considerable challenge. The extensive collection of field notes, reflective journals, supplementary data from collaborators via WhatsApp, and transcriptions resulted in a substantial and rich dataset, which, while advantageous, was also daunting.

During the subsequent individual conversations, I recognised the importance of prioritising the voices of the collaborators over my own, thereby allowing their narratives to emerge without external imposition. The data analysis process involved multiple steps to ensure that the students' stories were accurately understood and represented. I employed a three-pronged data analysis strategy to facilitate an integrative approach to data collection and support the analytical methods developed throughout the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This iterative data collection process was achieved through: (1) data organisation, (2) writing and representation, and (3) immersive engagement with the data at various stages (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Each audio recording was transcribed into text, and the transcripts were meticulously reviewed in both text and audio formats to ensure accurate transcription of phrases in collaborators' native languages.

Following that process, a two-page narrative vignette of each collaborator was written to ensure I had summarised the conversation appropriately and to identify any areas of uncertainty so that I could conduct a follow-up conversation. Common themes that emerged from the interviews were subsequently analysed. Following transcription, the two-page vignettes and transcriptions were shared with collaborators for their review and engagement. The tracking of narratives was further enriched by additional voice notes and written contributions submitted by collaborators via WhatsApp after they received their transcripts.

The transcriptions were hand-coded according to thematic categories by looking at the intersectionality walk of the three types of intersectionality (representational, structural and political intersectionality) as analysis. While reading the transcriptions, I highlighted conversations that were related to the types of intersectionality as a form of soft analysis. I then uploaded the transcriptions into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software in both audio and textual formats. This facilitated the categorisation of discussions according to various forms of intersectionality, highlighting recurring themes that arose from the narratives provided by the students. Detailed quotations were employed to emphasise these emerging themes. The analysis process concentrated on the content of the stories conveyed by the collaborators.

#### **4.6 Second stage of analysis: Interpreting the narratives through an intersectionality lens**

The research involved a systematic process of data sorting and analysis to ensure that the interpretation of conversations with collaborators was accurately represented, using intersectionality as a theoretical framework for analysis. This phase entailed interpreting experiences across various conceptual dimensions, including examining patterns within individual narratives in relation to patterns across the broader sample and the connections between the collaborators' descriptive accounts and the researcher's interpretations. A coherent analysis of the narrative conversations was essential to uphold the objective of narrative inquiry, which seeks not to uncover a singular, generalizable truth, but rather to “sing up many truths/narratives” (Byrne-Armstrong, 2001, p. 112).

Subsequently, I employed exploratory comments by metaphorically engaging in an intersectionality walk for each collaborator, thereby applying the theoretical lens of intersectionality and its various forms to their conversations. While reviewing the transcripts

and audio recordings, I engaged in a reflective process, adopting the perspective of the collaborator. This approach involved an intersectional analysis of their narrative, allowing me to emphasise key aspects of the discussions through the lens of intersectionality. Each reading of the transcripts included explanatory notes indicating whether the discussions reflected representational, political or structural intersectionality.

Furthermore, this analytical process allowed for a reduction in the transcription content, as the emergent discussions regarding the intersectionality walk and the three types of intersectionality were distinctly evident in the transcripts. Keeping the research question – “To what extent does gender (understood intersectionally) shape students’ experiences in higher education, particularly post the #MustFall movements and during the COVID-19 era?” – in focus, this reduction facilitated the preservation of the narrative while employing a theoretical lens rather than a thematic one. The centre of this analysis was to uncover how gender intersects with different identities as experienced by students in higher education.

In contrast to the conversations with collaborators, the analysis of submitted images accompanied by short descriptions presented a different dynamic. The intersectionality walk was informed not by my interpretation of the images, but rather by the collaborators' interpretations. Some collaborators provided images alongside our discussions, which enriched the analysis; I integrated their conversations with brief descriptions of the submitted images to elucidate their intersectionality walk as a theoretical framework for interpreting the interplay of power and privilege. Smith et al. (2009) encourage flexibility in data analysis, and indeed, some conversations were sufficiently clear without reliance on theoretical constructs, as collaborators effectively articulated and identified the interconnected struggles, experiences and identities they navigate.

#### **4.7 Confirming and validating the narratives: Workshop**

Following the second phase of data analysis I started the process of sharing the findings with the collaborators. I organised a workshop with collaborators, primarily aimed at presenting the identified themes that had emerged in the analysis and facilitating continued co-research with them. This workshop came after all phases of data gathering and the first step of analysis had taken place. The workshop adopted a participatory format, designed to foster collaboration and creativity among collaborators in addressing concerns and gathering opinions. The term

“workshop” originally referred to a space for creation or repair (Merriam-Webster, 2016) but in the academic space, it has often come to mean a seminar where the power dynamics of the lecture theatre remain in place. I was determined to reclaim the idea of ‘creation or repair’. In the context of this study, the workshop's objective was to engage collaborators with the findings derived from their submissions and to collaboratively explore ideas related to the themes that emerged from their discussions. Providing opportunities for participants to engage in the research process, such as co-creating interview questions or discussing preliminary findings, can empower them and reinforce the idea that their contributions are valuable (Bourke, 2014).

For practical logistical reasons, the workshop was conducted online, with provisions made for collaborators requiring data connectivity. I then sent those who needed connectivity data so they could connect and attend the online workshop. Collaborators in the Zoom session had the option to rename themselves upon entry to preserve their anonymity. The workshop spanned a single day and lasted four hours, during which I presented the preliminary findings sequentially, allowing for breakout discussions after presenting each finding. I implemented two breakout sessions on Zoom for the collaborators to collectively discuss their perspectives on each finding after presenting them. Following these discussions, one person from each group would then provide feedback to the larger group. This approach facilitated a collaborative environment, preventing individual collaborators from solely focusing on looking at their own contributions. Instead, it encouraged engagement with the entirety of the findings, fostering a more comprehensive interpretation and analysis.

This workshop proved to be a significant component of data collection, as it facilitated the acquisition of additional information through active engagement with the collaborators. For example, one significant change was the interpretation and translation of a poem discussed in Chapter Five on gender and sexuality where collaborators felt that in my translation I still misgendered while trying to discuss the topic of gender neutrality. That was eye-opening and a learning curve for me to be more sensitive in my discussions and I then changed the translation. Raised in the workshop as well, with some agreeing while others disagreed, was the use of people’s actual names in response to the discussion on the invisibility of marginalised students. This was an ethics concern which I then explained to them as there was no consensus with everyone to use their actual names.

Another issue raised in the workshop was the use of people's actual names. Some felt that they should be named in the study, this point was made in response to the discussion on the invisibility of marginalised students. Others felt that their anonymity had enabled them to be candid in sharing their experiences. This was an important issue of ethical research and representation. After much discussion, it was decided to maintain anonymity in this thesis, but with the possibility of reconsidering this issue in future publications.

The workshop contributed to the accuracy of the information gathered, as it allowed for clarification and correction of terminology and translations from isiXhosa to English, thereby mitigating the risk of misinterpretation or misgendering. Following the workshop, the recorded session was transcribed, with the new insights integrated into the findings to enhance the validity of the research data. The workshop was thus a means of clarification, validation, additional data collection, and a way of ensuring that my collaborators felt comfortable with my analysis and had the space to challenge my interpretations.

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

Artal and Rubenfield (2017) assert that the focus on individuals in social science research presents unique ethical challenges. Given the necessity of conducting research with students from various universities, it was imperative to secure ethical clearance to advance this social science study, particularly due to the potentially sensitive and emotionally charged nature of personal experiences. Ethical approval was granted by the ethical committees of RU in November 2021 (ethics number: 2022-5366-7319) , and this approval was subsequently renewed in July 2024 to include the addition of photographs, under ethics application number 2024-5366-8913 (see Appendix A&B) It is renewed on an annual basis. Furthermore, I sought and obtained gatekeeping permissions from all four universities involved in the research, as documented in Appendices C, D and E. Following the acquisition of these permissions, potential collaborators were invited to participate in the research starting in 2022 (refer to Appendix A for the invitation letter). Upon their agreement to partake in the interviews, I provided them with an informed consent form via email (see Appendix F). In addition, I maintained hard copies of the informed consent forms for those students who may not have been able to print them.

Informed consent is essential to safeguard study participants from exploitation and to ensure they are adequately informed about the study's nature and their rights. However, it is predicated on certain assumptions regarding specific research methodologies. It often presupposes that research is inherently extractive, with data generation occurring unidirectionally from participants to researchers, rather than being a more interactive and collaborative process, as demonstrated in this study. The structure of informed consent forms, for instance, suggests that the researcher possesses exclusive control over the data and its analysis. Conversely, in this study, using ongoing dialogues with collaborators and a workshop designed to solicit feedback on preliminary findings indicated that I did not always maintain sole control over the data. This dynamic is further illustrated in Section 4.7, which highlights the processes of addition, learning and unlearning that occurred throughout the research. While the wording and structure of the informed consent letter are not dictated at RU, as it is at some others, the university does provide a pro forma of an informed consent letter which you can then adapt. This pro forma is written with a formal style that assumes a particular power dynamic between 'researcher' and 'informant/subject/participant'.

Prior to initiating discussions with the potential collaborators, the objectives of the study were articulated clearly, and they were afforded the opportunity to seek clarification on any aspects of the research. Consent for recording the interview sessions was obtained before the commencement of the conversations, and collaborators were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw from the study at any point should they feel uncomfortable. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were employed and the recordings, which were securely stored. Collaborators were also assured of their anonymity.

In cases where the collaborators offered photos to be included, anonymity was upheld through the use of a software application called Canva. The resulting portraits were shared with the collaborators for their approval. I made clear to the collaborators that in any publications resulting from this research, anonymity will be preserved, and no identifying information will be disclosed. However, one of the aims of engaging informally with my collaborators was to explore the possibility of co-authoring a book project to archive their narratives. They expressed a strong desire to have their names included if they were to co-author with me, as they desired to take ownership of their stories. This is an idea I will explore with them for a future project. Anonymity is used to protect the identities of those a researcher is working with

but it also silences them in research. This is a particular concern in cases where these are the voices of historically disadvantaged individuals who have long had their stories sidelined. It was a concern to me that this process might be seen to erase the agency of my collaborators. The idea of anonymity is an institutional protection more than that of the researched and takes away the idea of knowledge-making to liberate marginalized ideas, by exposing how they push against and beyond conventional perspectives and mutations (Knowles, 2024). Work on feminist, decolonial, and critical qualitative methodologies is clear that anonymity often benefits institutions by protecting researchers from liability more than collaborators themselves.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

The selection of an appropriate methodology and research design is crucial for ensuring the validity of the data collected and its representation of the population under study. The decision to employ a combination of methodologies, specifically photovoice and narrative semantics, was a complex one; however, it ultimately facilitated the discovery of diverse narratives and provided comfort to the collaborators involved in the research. The structure of the methods and the approaches to data collection were largely determined by my collaborators, fostering a greater sense of partnership between myself and the students. Although the research methods were time-intensive, they yielded a depth of insight and clarity in the findings that amplified the collaborators' stories rather than silencing them. Engaging in research that had a personal impact on me was also an emotionally demanding experience, necessitating a deep understanding of students' circumstances and a patient approach to their scheduling, time constraints and emotional states.

The subsequent four chapters implement the analytical framework outlined in this study. Chapter Five explores the interaction between identities and systems. Chapter Six examines the university as both a physical and social environment. Chapter Seven identifies various concerns pertaining to the curriculum, including language and digital transformation. The discussions in these three chapters use the theory of intersectionality to analyse intersecting identities, experiences, power dynamics and privilege. Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by synthesising these analyses to consider the implications of the findings for pedagogical

development, practical recommendations for universities studied and future research endeavours.

## Chapter Five: Exploring Intersectionality: The Interplay of Identities and Systems

Kwidolophu eqhelekileyo yaseMolteno,  
ubuntwana bam bupeyintwe ngemithunzi  
    echuliweyo yobuhlanga,  
ayiboniswa ngokuphandle kodwa  
idityaniswe nesiseko soluntu lwethu.  
    imfuno, izixhobo,  
kunye nolwazi lusebenza ngeepokotho zakho  
    Ndibone ubunzima bomntwana ontsundu,  
banyanzeleke ukuba bacinezele amaphupha  
abo kwaye bazifihle ubunyani babo ngenxa  
    yokhuseleko.  
Ikhaya lam alinasini, lahluke ngokupheleleyo  
    kwinkqubo yengcinezelo eyayibonakala  
    ilungiselelwe ukukhuthaza intiyo.  
    ilifa lobukolonyali.  
Ke, siluqala njani uhambo lothando,  
    kukhangelo lwe-decolonisation?  
Lowo ngumceli mngeni ekufuneka siwomkele

A poem by Asiphe Mxalisa

*That is the challenge we must embrace  
    In the quaint town of Molteno<sup>7</sup>,  
my childhood was painted with subtle shades  
    of racism,  
    not overtly displayed  
but woven into the very fabric of our society.  
    The barriers to education, resources,  
and knowledge whispered of a deeper divide.  
    I witnessed the struggles of a Black child,  
    forced to stifle their dreams  
and conceal their true selves for the sake of  
    safety.  
My home, a sanctuary free from rigid gender  
    roles,  
    stood in stark contrast to the oppressive  
    system  
that seemed designed to perpetuate hatred  
    a legacy of colonialism.  
So, how do we emb/ark on a journey of love,  
    a quest for decolonisation?*

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<sup>7</sup> Small town in the Eastern Cape in South Africa where I grew up.

## **5.1 Introduction**

As I embark on this chapter, I find myself reflecting on the personal journey I shared in Chapter One, a journey that encapsulates the complexities of being a Black child navigating a world shaped by multifaceted identities and systemic challenges. This chapter aims to explore the intersectionality walk of identities and systems as experienced by students, particularly as it relates to the decolonisation project rooted in love and understanding. I grapple with the question of how we can construct a framework that not only acknowledges but also acts on the diverse experiences of collaborators as they traverse their unique intersectionality walks. In this analysis, I delve more deeply into the lived experiences of collaborators, examining how their identities intersect with various systems of power and oppression. The chapter focuses on narrative analysis that highlights the experiences of students as they navigate their sexuality, socioeconomic backgrounds and mental health challenges. By centring the voices of students from different universities, I aimed to illuminate the narratives of those who embodied racialised and gendered identities, revealing the profound impact of these intersections on their educational journeys. Through this exploration, I hoped to contribute to a broader understanding of how intersectionality informs our collective experiences and the ways in which we can foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to not only analyse but also to inspire action towards a decolonised approach that honours the richness of our diverse identities and experiences.

## **5.2 Ndingubani - who am I? – identity construction and race**

Ndingubani is a Xhosa word asking, “Who am I”, a question relating to identity and belonging in the context of this study. The construction of identity and its connection to race is one of the key conversations that emerged from the collaborators. Identity and race are connected aspects within the university setting. This section examines how identity and race intersect and influence the experiences of students in navigating the university. Identity encompasses concepts of similarity and difference in terms of social categorisation, group membership and relationships between different groups. It also encompasses individual consciousness and subjectivity (Hammack, 2015). Securing a deep sense of meaning and existence in the South African context is a complex matter for many young people.

The stories on identity and race in higher education were related to how students were perceived and their sense of belonging in the academy. As Kumalo (2018, p. 2) writes, “the South African academy continues to socially construct and produce ‘natives of nowhere’ who are negotiating ontological and epistemic Othering in the academy”. One of the collaborators in this research, Naledi, shared her experience of identity construction and race in the academy:

*Just I've always thought that my race impacted my experience more than my gender, but that could also be because I've focused on it more; if I were a Coloured man, maybe my experience would have been different since that intersectionality stuff. If I remember my first year, my English tutorial was one of the absolute most difficult spaces for me, and I loved English. I love reading, but I was so stupid 'cos I just felt like my accent was too thick and the room was extensive.... My journey is like my race is driving a lot of my thinking and so much so it's almost disappointing that I haven't been able to navigate my gender stuff very well. I think that idea of a loud, angry-Coloured woman is an image I've tried hard to avoid.*

Naledi above shared how her gender and race intersected even though she indicated that she had consciously reflected on more issues related to her race. Naledi faced numerous prejudices and racial biases while trying to navigate her identity as a Coloured woman in the university. These biases are considered normal in the university setting. Even after the advent of democracy, racism still exists in HEIs, particularly historically White institutions and it has harmed the social, cultural, and academic wellbeing of students (Woods, 2001). The racial microaggressions<sup>8</sup>, examined in Chapter Two are also shaped by gender and are situated within a historical framework that categorises individuals racially, resulting in varying levels of marginalisation for women. Racial microaggressions should be examined through the lens of representational intersectionality, as this framework elucidates how the racist and sexist portrayals of Black women contribute to their ongoing marginalisation and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). As illustrated by Naledi's experiences, racial microaggressions often target individuals based on multiple facets of their identity, such as being female and Coloured or female and belonging to a specific sexual orientation. This multiplicity may intensify the

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<sup>8</sup> Bucceri et al. (2007, p. 273) define racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group”.

difficulties faced in an individual's intersectionality walk, which, as shown in Chapter Three, pertains to the practice and comprehension of the interconnectedness of diverse social identities and systems of oppression by empathising with the experiences of others. Naledi articulated this complexity by stating, “*My race has overpowered my experience so much that the gender stuff just falls to the bottom... I always feared being called the crazy Coloured woman.*”

The unique history of South Africa has shaped the intersection of race and identity in higher education through social categorisation, as discussed in Chapter Two. Through legislation, apartheid was a powerful allocator and regulator of identities, especially racial and sexual, which were subject to social control and discriminatory practices (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995; Judge et al., 2008; Reddy, 2001; Thoreson, 2008). These identities, shaped by the historical context of South Africa, infiltrated the academy. Part of the #FeesMustFall memorandums addressed this very concern of social categorisation still evident in systems governing universities.

Naledi further explained how her identity, gender and race have influenced her participation in academic spaces:

*I have very strong opinions about things, but I can feel myself making myself smaller in a room with either too many White people or a group of men, depending on the academic space. Yes, in a social space, not so much I am very happy to share my opinion, but not so much with White people but with a group of men; I'm fine with putting all my opinions. In an academic space, I think the academic space is the hardest one. Even if I think about lectures, I'd be more likely to respond in class if it was a female lecturer rather than a male lecturer. I spent many years making myself small and believing that my ideas and opinions don't matter.*

According to Jayanthi et al. (2014), factors such as gender and nationality significantly affect a student's academic performance. Racial microaggressions make it difficult for students like Naledi to engage in collaborative and pedagogical practices, which are essential for studying. Intersectionality posits that when gender oppression and racial oppression are conceptualised in opposition to one another, an individual's experience of oppression as a woman is contingent upon their lack of oppression as a person of colour. This suggests that racial privilege influences singular interpretations of gender oppression (Carastathis, 2014). The experiences of Naledi illustrate the dual oppressions she encounters, highlighting the interplay between

gender and racial microaggressions. These microaggressions harm students' learning, academic performance and overall wellbeing, which are crucial aspects of education. It is important to note that racial microaggressions are intangible and challenging to address, leading many students like Naledi to remain silent, not only in response to these microaggressions but also in their classroom engagement.

Naledi shared, “*I can feel making myself smaller*” at times. This experience of making oneself smaller is discussed in feminist literature as ways in which women may diminish their presence, voice, or ambitions in social, professional and personal contexts. There is a societal expectation placed on women to diminish their own presence and self-worth to fit into the patriarchal culture which often teaches women to prioritise the needs and desires of others over their own, leading to a sense of inferiority and self-neglect (hooks, 2000). Women depending on different cultures and societies are then socialised to be accommodating and submissive which contributes to systemic oppression. This phenomenon reflects the societal pressures that encourage women to conform to traditional roles, often leading to self-silencing and a reduction of their assertiveness (Gilligan, 1982; Sandberg, 2013). Feminist literature often highlights how societal norms and expectations condition women to be less assertive and to prioritise others' needs over their own which can manifest in behaviours such as downplaying achievements or avoiding confrontation (Bordo, 1993). In professional settings, as shared by Naledi, too women may feel pressured to conform to traditional gender roles, leading them to suppress their ambitions or assertiveness to fit in or avoid a backlash (Eagly & Carli, 2007). And the experience of ‘making oneself smaller’ can vary significantly based on race, class and other intersecting identities.

The argument surrounding the academic performance and sense of belonging for Coloured students in South Africa is deeply intertwined with the structural and political intersectionality of social categorisations and the accessibility of higher education. From 2002 to 2022, enrolment statistics reveal significant shifts in racial demographics within South African universities. For instance, according to the Council on Higher Education’s Vital Statistics publications (2012; 2024), the percentage of Coloured students aged between 20 and 24<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is known as the “participation rate” and is a standard measure used by UNESCO.

enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) increased from 12% in 2005 to 16% in 2022, reflecting a notable rise in representation. However, 16% is significantly below the national participation rate of 25% and Coloured people have the lowest rate of participation in higher education of all racial demographic groupings in South Africa.

However, despite this increase, Coloured students often face unique challenges that impact their academic performance and sense of belonging. Racial inequities in student performance are the outcome of a long history of the “education debt” whereby students of color have been systematically denied access to equal education (Jones et al., 2020: 2). This underscores the necessity for a critical examination of how historical and contemporary socio-political factors shape the educational landscape for Coloured students, emphasising the need for targeted interventions that promote inclusivity and equity in higher education. There is a connection between racial microaggressions and social categorisations in spaces where power is contested, such as higher education.

According to Erving et al. (2023, p. 108), “gendered racial microaggressions show how race is influenced by gender and how gender is influenced by race for Black women”. These microaggressions also result in imposed identities for Black female students in academic settings. The system of whiteness has a long history of deeming Black women invisible which is reflected in the oppression they face through sexism and racism, seen through the perspectives of Baderoon (2000), Gqola (2009) and Mowatt et al., 2013. Despite progress in granting access to education for people of different races, the underlying system remains unchanged, especially in historically White universities. The system of whiteness still dictates how Black students should behave and adapt to the university environment. This form of systemic racism is not necessarily based on skin colour, but rather on the expectations placed on Black students. Naledi’s intersectional walk, for example, highlights the numerous racist microaggressions she had to navigate even in a democratic South Africa.

As can be seen in the experiences of collaborators like Nomonde, below, the visibility of being a Black woman has shaped how she presents herself and navigates university life:

*My name is Nomonde. I am a Black woman, and I'm 23 years old...Growing up, I never felt comfortable in my skin. ... My identity has been shaped by so many things; family history, a wonderful mother and my dad. The pressure to be successful does something, and it has shaped*

*me. Pre-Varsity, I was very insecure trying to navigate myself from my community and how to reintegrate myself into this (varsity) community. Even my experiences in Aliwal North were not good. We were oppressed as it is an Afrikaans school, and we did everything in Afrikaans. In contrast, I came from a school where we do everything in English, even Afrikaans, so it was very difficult. I had to adapt to that. ... That shaped my experiences because they have shaped me into the strong Black woman I am now.*

Nomonde's experience growing up in a boarding school shaped her at a very young age and impacted her because of the intersection of her gendered identity and racial microaggressions in the space, often rendering her either hyper-visible or invisible. Nomonde is highly visible because of her race and the criticism she faces for being a woman. This combination makes Black women especially vulnerable to microaggressions from White individuals (Gqola, 2010; Mowatt et al., 2013; Obasi, 2022). In high school, Nomonde encountered the feeling of being unseen as a Black woman, which was often enforced by whiteness. She said, “We were not allowed to do burns with our hair (afro). We were not allowed to wear White bras as Black girls because they claimed they were visible.” She was told that her body was too noticeable for White underwear. Microaggressions are typically biased and often take the form of repetitive words and actions.

Correspondingly, they are usually directed towards certain groups of people as a whole, rather than targeting individuals. Nomonde further said:

*I remember I was on the student council in school. I was one of the three Blacks; the rest were Whites out of 12. That made me realise that, like in spaces and positions of power, I was just a front; I was just a Black face to say at least one is a Black person.*

And while being part of the student council, she felt like a representation of diversity but lacked any real authority. I argue that while there has been a notable increase in the representation of Black students and leaders during democracy in South Africa, this has been a superficial measure rather than a genuine commitment to transformative change. For instance, research by Mkhize (2019) suggests that many institutions adopt tokenistic approaches, appointing Black individuals to leadership roles without empowering them or addressing systemic inequalities. The experience of the intersectionality walk for Nomonde in her education journey is one mirrored by political and representational intersectionality: through socialisation practices in

high school, she was forced to represent herself in particular ways (e.g., the way her hair had to be done) and she was pressured into political representation in school leadership even though she knew those spaces were exclusionary.

Similarly, a study by Nkomo et al. (2019) emphasises that the mere presence of diversity in leadership does not equate to meaningful participation or influence, as these individuals may still operate within a framework dominated by existing power structures. This has been the case for Nomonde, who saw her inclusion in the student council as a case of superficial representation, with the school neglecting the need for ongoing efforts to foster an inclusive culture. Nomonde faced discrimination even with how the school had rules on what colour of underwear Black students had to wear. These regulations are not merely about attire but are deeply intersectional oppressions of race and cultural identities, reinforcing systemic inequalities and perpetuating a culture of surveillance and control over Black girls' bodies. Historically, the mistreatment of Black women has given rise to a range of stereotypes, which are characterised by depictions of them as excessively sexual, domineering, and vociferous (Collins, 2004; Opara, 2018). This type of stereotype was also evident in Naledi's experience where she feared being called a "*loud Coloured woman*".

As Nomonde entered the university, she stated that her school experiences had shaped the "*strong Black woman*" she was at the time. The notion of resilience in a "strong Black woman" seems to be expected from Black female students as they navigate these microaggressions. I argue that this plays into another stereotype of Black women. The connotation of "strong Black woman" can negatively and positively affect students. Positively, it drives them to have a voice and develop academic resilience practices. The positive nuances of a resilient, "strong Black woman", can foster the capacity to do well despite navigating different life trajectories and educational pathways shaped by their intrapersonal construction and interpretation of academic resilience (Mapaling et al., 2022). However, the label implies that Black women must remain resilient and hold on even when spaces reject their existence and agency.

The "strong Black woman" label is often offered as a compliment but is enacted to mask the unfair burden of being fearless and ambitious (hooks, 1993). This negative notion protects the more profound understanding of why Black women, like Nomonde, have to be strong despite the structural forces that keep them down. As Black students like Nomonde navigate the space of the university, they must assimilate the mechanisms and orientations designed to

disseminate the operations of exclusionary universities. It is for this reason that scholars such as Kumalo (2018) argue that these institutions are deeply implicated in the ontological and epistemic erasure (and negation) of Black students' lived experiences.

Social context has a considerable impact on identity construction and race. As South Africa has a history of racialised power with racialised categories, there is often exclusion. Exclusions can lead to double rejection: experiencing rejection and discrimination from both dominant and minority groups in society (Comas-Diaz, 1996; Molvey et al., 2017). The intersection of social context, race and identity results in social identity formation based on power differentials in South Africa. Riaan, a male collaborator, also addressed the matter of racial discrimination and how he has been navigating his own identity as an international student coming from a country with a different history than that of South Africa:

*Even though I am a 5th generation Coloured (From Namibia), in South Africa I was received differently. So some friends, neighbours, classmates, even, like some, you know, church friends, they would immediately first assume I'm White, but then like, what usually gives me away is my curly hair.*

For Riaan, coming to South Africa was a massive shift in terms of belonging as he was received differently because of the colour of his skin. In Riaan's story, one can see how notions of identity held by the powerful and the powerless in South Africa are racialised. Riaan experienced the intersectional systems of imposed identity and racial categorisation, which led him to position himself as someone who feared speaking out in specific spaces. This experience affected his day-to-day interactions. It is also important to note how racial categories in South Africa have been used to systematically grant or deny access to goods and services, which is still the case in higher education. People who received Riaan used appearance as the primary cue to racially impose “White” as his racial category/identity. Riaan was going through a complex process of navigating and negotiating his identity within the university, both physically and socially. This process involved dealing with the challenges of having his assigned identity disputed by others (Rockquemore et al., 2009).

Riaan was experiencing racial identity contestation as tensions and challenges associated with navigating and negotiating the disputed identity of being referred to as “White”. This

contestation was due to the intersection of racial identification and racial categorisation, which are at odds with his racial identity (self-understanding). Riann further shared that:

*I am very open and unashamed with telling people I am Coloured because I do not want to necessarily be associated as a White person. After all, there's such a negative stigma. In terms of both Namibia and South Africa, I think many White people are quite racist. And you know, they feed into the stereotypes. They confirm a lot of those stereotypes and biases, and I know this because there are times when I associate with a White person. I don't like to speak up or correct the White people around me, and then they would open up to me in that way, then they speak about Black people or Coloured people in a negative sense in a negative light, and it's always quite heart-breaking.*

Riaan comes from a nation where racism is a pervasive issue that, while present, generally remains shrouded in silence and avoidance in public discourse. This phenomenon can be attributed to the country's complex historical context, particularly the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, which has left deep-seated racial divisions and inequalities (Mamdani, 1996). Following World War II, Namibia was administered by South Africa until 1990. Despite the formal end of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic government, many Namibians continue to experience systemic discrimination based on race, which is often downplayed or ignored in societal conversations (Nambala, 2018). Riaan explains this difference in culture between the two countries:

*Well, when I got here [to South Africa], I needed to adjust to quite a lot of things in terms of being in a new country, in a new town and then having to meet new people, so I did feel very much like an outsider when I first came. ... In South Africa, there tends to be a more liberal stance on many things. ...I kept wondering how much I could share, how I should react and how much I could view and voice my opinions. I feared being an outcast. I didn't want to be targeted for the wrong thing because I didn't realise what not to say. South Africa is different than Namibia, [in South Africa] you can talk about race, the LGBT Community and abortion, and get away with it, like it's common knowledge, so I was very worried about what I was saying.*

The reluctance to openly discuss racism that Riaan reports about Namibia may stem from a desire to promote national unity and reconciliation, yet this silence can perpetuate existing inequalities and hinder progress towards true social justice. Furthermore, the lack of dialogue

surrounding racism can lead to a misunderstanding of its manifestations and impacts, making it difficult for residents like Riaan to believe it exists.

However, as he attends a university in South Africa, he encounters difficulties in reconciling his own identity and sense of belonging. His racial identity is frequently mistaken as some perceive him as “White” in specific environments, leading to his having to tolerate microaggressions directed at Coloured and Black people (his racial background). It is essential to critically examine the privileges associated with being White, particularly in the context of societal assumptions regarding competence and superiority. Riaan's perspective highlights a significant tension: he perceives whiteness not as a privilege but as a marker of racism. This viewpoint challenges the conventional understanding of White privilege, suggesting that the societal advantages often linked to being White can also carry a burden of complicity in systemic racism. Riaan's experience can be understood through the framework of structural intersectionality, which facilitates an examination of power dynamics in the context of persistent inequalities among different groups (Levine-Rasky, 2009). In Riaan's situation, this structural intersectionality is influenced by his mistaken racial identity, resulting in differential treatment stemming from the presumption that he is “White”. In the South African context, being perceived as “White” is associated with significant privileges and access to resources. That means as scholars like DiAngelo (2018) argue, White privilege can lead to a disconnection from the realities faced by marginalised communities, fostering a sense of guilt or discomfort among individuals who recognise their privilege.

### **5.3 “He/she okanye yena”: Identity construction and the use of gendered language**

Unongayindoda akamntu

Yinto!

Akayontombi, engengomfazi, engeyondoda

NguNongayindoda

An extract from a poem by Mthunzikazi Mbungwana (2021, p. 48)

This section begins by introducing an extract from a poem that addresses the topics of gendered language and sexual misrecognition on campus. The poem explores the complexities of sexuality and how communities perceive gender through the use of gendered language. When translated, the extract poem reads as follows:

she cannot be a person  
she's something!  
she is not a girl, not a woman, not a man  
she is acting like a man

While the above might be a common translation of the poem, it is not a direct one. The direct translation is important in understanding the effects of gendered language which often contributes to gender discrimination and misrecognition. The poem demonstrates how language influences our perception of gender. When read in isiXhosa, there is minimal or no confusion about gender. However, when translated, the use of pronouns in the translation reveals a gendered language. For example, “she” in the poem is “u” in isiXhosa which could mean anyone. It does not pertain to a specific gender. A more direct translation of the poem would be as follows:

they cannot be a person  
they are something!  
They are not a girl, not a woman, not a man  
They are acting like a man

It is thus important to understand gender and sex categories in the South African context. This will assist in understanding how students navigate the intersections of gender and sex in universities. Although it is widely accepted that gender is a sociocultural construct, its interpretation and implementation vary across different contexts as discussed in Chapter Two. There are then many faces of gender and the local context is very important to understand that gender is not limited to a binary. For example, research conducted in India on hijras, kothis, and intersex individuals indicates the existence of a “third sex” or individuals who do not

conform to traditional gender and sex binaries (Monro, 2007, p. 3). This challenges and disrupts the assumptions of heteronormative and cis-gender and sex norms. This shows the importance of acknowledging diverse gender identities and the necessity of re-evaluating societal frameworks to foster inclusivity by exploring the cultural and social dimensions of gender, emphasising the need to rethink traditional binaries that often exclude non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals (Husakouskaya, 2013; Matebeni, 2019; Mnyadi, 2020). I argue that there then must be a critical reflection on gendered language in societies and even in institutions of higher education.

The problem of gendered language was highlighted in the narrative by Abongile. In their narrative, Abongile shared how they, as a Black person navigated language with its different hierarchies, while also reflecting on the gendered language experience that they have experienced in different spaces. Abongile shared their experience as they were navigating gender and sex when growing up to their university experience:

*I grew up a trans person since I was a kid but I just never had the words for it. Hearing what people said from church and what my teachers said and just having to come out to them and not having the greatest experiences about that delayed my transition. I just, you know, knew that she/he pronouns are not for me, maybe he is for me.*

From the narrative above it is clear that for as much as gender is a sociocultural construct, people's sex is not a defining factor of who they experience themselves as being. For Abongile, they already knew that they did not subscribe to the sex categorisations of male and female even though they had not come across the language for their gender. Their experience was also influenced by their religious background as a result of the religious ruling of what was deemed right and wrong. There is an intersection of Christianity and coloniality which reveals that Western Christianity has historically functioned as a significant instrument of colonial expansion and cultural domination. Scholars argue that the missionary zeal of Christian denominations often accompanied colonial endeavours, promoting a worldview that justified the subjugation of non-Western peoples under the guise of civilising missions (Mamdani, 1996; Stoler, 2010). I argue that this perspective not only facilitated the spread of European cultural norms but also entrenched systems of racism, sexism and homophobia, which were often rationalised through theological doctrines.

Furthermore, conservative Christian institutions have perpetuated these colonial legacies by upholding traditional gender roles and opposing LGBTQ+ rights, thereby reinforcing societal hierarchies that echo colonial power dynamics (Cameron, 2019; Tinker, 2004). Most churches have centred the language of gender and gender norms, imposing masculinisation of religion in order to argue against any other norms that people subscribe to. Thus, it was a difficult experience for Abongile to come out in church. Abongile further shared that:

*in 2020, I had started my first year and so the first few months when we were still going to school before COVID and in the class lecturers would say every morning 'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen'. I remember feeling left out and wanted to say 'Can you just say good morning like 'Molweni'?' Even when I order in a restaurant somewhere I am called 'M'am'.*

Expanding language and communication beyond English and into various African languages is crucial for promoting LGBTQ+<sup>10</sup> rights in Africa while embracing cultural and Indigenous beliefs about ancestral spirits and providing guidance in navigating fluid gender identities (Nyanzi, 2014). Many African cultures recognise multiple gender identities beyond the binary male and female, often integrating these identities into their spiritual practices and beliefs. It is important to understand the intersectionality of cultural contests and gender fluidity as valid and significant within their cultural frameworks (Amadiume, 1997; Williams, 1992).

This also relates to Abongile's experience of how they were misgendered in the classroom because of how lecturers would refer to them through categorisations of "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen" instead of saying "Molweni" which is a collective Xhosa greeting that does not have any gendered connotations. Understanding the reflections of Abongile is important because, as Matebeni argues (2021), sexualities and gender are critical points of view in decolonisation efforts as there is a loss of meaning in translations. The story of Abongile highlighted the challenges of using a gendered language like English while desiring a gender-neutral language like isiXhosa. It is not that isiXhosa does not have genders but rather that they

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<sup>10</sup> An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons that is also used as shorthand for "persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expressions or sex characteristics" (Arzinos et al., 2021).

are not used as pronouns as they are in English (while French, for example, has gender infused grammatically into all cases of nouns).

Initially, many feminists supported the use of neutral language in order to decrease the focus on gender and promote inclusivity. Some feminists like Spender (1985) and Penelope (1990) have argued that English is, in some quite general sense, masculine because male terms are taken as the norm. I argue that English which is the South African medium of communication and instruction in universities does not accommodate non-binary individuals who need neutral language to express their preferred pronouns (Hord, 2016). However, the issue at hand is how to incorporate gender-neutral terms into languages that have more intricate grammatical structures that rely heavily on gendering. Furthermore, the lack of vernacular terms in South African local languages to describe non-heteronormative or non-binary gendered communities has led to a heavy dependence on English terms (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015).

Abongile also shared a picture shown below of themselves showing how they navigate the university and their sense of belonging (see Figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1: Picture of Abongile**

The above picture was submitted by Abongile, and they shared the following narrative:

*I was also coming from quite a disadvantaged background so I kept looking at what other kids have and what I didn't have. So I had dresses to wear, all those dresses were quite difficult for me and in that school where I was we were not allowed to wear trousers so if you are a female you had to wear skirts and we had to have long hair. In my first year I remember I cut my hair and in the first few weeks of staying at res, actually there's that whole residence orientation thing, where you have to wear Black shorts and those red shirts and I was wearing those for a week and I had really cut my hair in a very masculine way and I had those shorts for a week so I remember the first time we got out of those clothes and I wore my dress to school I could literally feel everyone really just staring at me. Like, 'Who is this?', and also me feeling very awkward*

As Abongile shared their experience, they also spoke about how they had to navigate their comfort while still wearing dresses because at home, their parents insisted on buying them dresses. The rigid gendered roles at home (no trousers) were left behind when they entered university, but then they had to navigate the perceptions of people as they wore the only clothes they had which were dresses. This idea of clothing as a representation of what it means to be female is gender performativity and biological facticity.

As Butler indicates (1988, p. 522):

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. The notion of a 'project', however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs.

The concept of gender performativity, as mentioned earlier, refers to the expectations that Abongile's parents and the society they belonged to, including the church, had regarding gender roles. In South African societies, gender is strongly emphasised and the way people dress becomes a symbol of their sexuality and the adherence to binary norms. According to Matebeni (2021), the way people dress in society is what makes them recognisable and allows them to connect with others as members of the community. Abongile's choice of clothing raised numerous questions in this situation as they sought acceptance within the LGBTQ+ community. This also impacted their experience at the university, both physically and socially.

Similarly to Abongile, Siphokazi's narrative shed light on how she had explored her sexuality in a university setting:

*I almost always go into relationships with an expectation of violence, you know, and it really added an element of fear even in terms of my queer becoming where now I start to define myself as a lesbian woman. How do I then exist in a space that disregards my being? I existed nama (with) comrades, you know, my comrades are anyone and everyone, you know and I didn't exist in spaces with rainbows. I existed in political spaces usually managed by Black men, you know and I think it added like an element where you almost overthink your existence continually, you know, almost trying, constantly trying to theorise. But I feared the day comrades find out I am gay and, you know, what type of violence am I going to be met with? What type of reaction am I going to meet with? And I think there was something that I thought about a lot in my experience of the university in the later years of my undergrad.*

*But later on, I think what I ended up doing is finding safe spaces - whatever that means, you know. I've got this memory in my head of a party we had at one of my friend's, there were games, we were having so much fun and at some point we started to chanting, 'We are not gay! We are not gay' and it was sort of like something we did in protest against the self-hatred that we had been taught to harbour in ourselves. And, yeah, like I just, I think that that's how I ended up approaching my becoming in the space. But you know I actually need to find myself spaces where I can be safe; where I can be who I want to be.*

As Siphokazi navigated her sexuality, there was an element of fear owing to the terrors that the LGBTQ+ community experienced. According to a report by Human Rights First (2014), most countries in Southern Africa have made homosexual relationships illegal, except for Madagascar and South Africa. The number of homophobic incidents is increasing in communities, which means that even higher education spaces are not safe. There is corrective rape in South Africa which is an alarming prevalence of this form of violence, rooted in deeply entrenched societal norms and attitudes towards sexuality. Studies indicate that corrective rape is often perpetrated against lesbian women, with the misguided belief that such acts can 'cure' their sexual orientation. Research by scholars such as Jewkes et al. (2009) and Mathews et al. (2014) underscores the intersection of GBV and homophobia, revealing that victims frequently face not only physical harm but also psychological trauma and social ostracism. The fear of violence, including corrective rape, creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals like

Siphokazi, and many students, who may feel compelled to hide their sexual identities to avoid victimisation.

Siphokazi described how she had to navigate the university as a physical and social space in a particular way to ensure her safety. This was because she was navigating spaces, such as student politics, which were largely dominated by patriarchal discourses. I argue that the structures and practices within universities often marginalise voices that challenge traditional gender norms, thereby perpetuating a culture of exclusion and inequality. So, I suggest that while there have been efforts to address these disparities of gender power dynamics in student politics, significant barriers remain, including institutional resistance and the persistence of toxic masculinity in political discourse in general which trickles down to student formations. The stagnant progress not only hinders the advancement of inclusive policies but also contributes to a culture that marginalises diverse voices, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at fostering equality (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2016). While Siphokazi is claiming her voice as an activist she is doing so in a space where institutional whiteness (RU) might historically have silenced people who looked like Siphokazi (Black woman).

But then even in this space of student activism, Siphokazi's intersectional walk has to be trod carefully because she fears violence from her fellow activists if she is found to be lesbian an added layer of identity. Her experience signifies the intersection between sexuality and the expectations around gender roles in the dominant masculinity prevalent in student politics. Siphokazi positioned student politics as a space that upholds heteronormativity and patriarchy as she mentioned that she navigated political environments typically overseen by Black males where those who did not conform to the accepted forms of masculinity were excluded and pushed to the margins. In these political spaces, as Butler (1990) argues, the normalisation of the male/female binary and heterosexuality occurs when gender and sexuality intersect, while homosexuality is considered culturally incomprehensible and deviating from the norm. Such understandings result in fear of isolation and violence, which Siphokazi has experienced.

Both Siphokazi's and Abongile's narratives shed light on the effects of the overlapping systems of gender and sexuality prevalent in universities as they navigate the space. While the two narratives elucidate different moments of tension in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality, it was evident that the issues were also determined by historical and material legacies.

Abongile gave me a poem titled “The performance of queerness” to conclude the discussion, sharing their personal experience:

*The performance of queerness*

An act we supposedly need to put together to show our togetherness,

Our being.

Who you are, Who you are part of.

A performance of belonging.

We learn most about who we are not from those who got us here.

In fact, we mostly hide it from them.

Who we are has and have always been erased,

but that's another story.

We learn from those who dare to put themselves in the public eye.

Queerness as a brand, not a person.

The heteronormative society stole what belongs to people as just expression to a role.

A standard.

There's a way femininity should look like,

there's a way masculinity should look like.

A mirror of binaries.

Gender-nonconforming and-trans people need to perform these roles, to pass.

To be seen as real....or whatever.

A good friend of mine calls it the performance of femininity for her;

To pass.

There's an image to look up to.

I want to urge queer people to liberate ourselves from this performance,

from the queer brand.

To know that you don't need to become what you're told to see.

But to be who you are.

Energy is an expression.

Let it flow with its flaws.

Be who you are.

The way you are.

Curtains closed,

Stage lights off.

During conversations and engagements with the above-mentioned collaborators, certain topics regarding the university as both a social and physical environment became apparent. This included the experiences of distress and anxiety faced by LGBTQ+ students, which were deeply rooted in their physical presence on campus. The stories shared by the students frequently connected their traumatic experiences to their sense of safety, acceptance, belonging and overall wellbeing within the university setting. The discussions with the collaborators also emphasised the importance of examining gendered language, which often results in the misidentification of individuals based on their sexuality on campus. This includes instances where individuals are unsure of how to address someone, using phrases like “Am I she/he or yena,” and recognising the gendered nature of the English language. Such concerns about gendered performances were not restricted to people identifying as female as we see in the next section.

#### **5.4 “Indoda ayikhali” – a man does not cry: Mental health and masculinity for male students**

The internalisation of masculinity and its relationship to mental health is a critical problem faced globally. Empirical studies suggest that conventional masculine norms, which manifest across diverse cultural settings worldwide, impose societal pressures on men to adhere to inflexible gender roles reinforcing a binary understanding of gender (Courtenay, 2000; Kilmartin, 2005; O’Neil, 2008). The societal expectations regarding male behaviour are frequently reinforced by prevailing notions of conduct that are deemed inappropriate for boys and men. This phenomenon, referred to as “laddish” behaviour problematised by Jackson (2003:584), encompasses the pressures placed on males to suppress emotional expression, which is often characterised as a feminine trait. This adherence to “laddish” behaviours leads

to heightened incidences of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, societal expectations often inhibit emotional expression and vulnerability in men, contributing to detrimental mental health consequences (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Courtenay, 2000; Wong et al., 2017). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental health issues in men exacerbates these challenges, as many individuals may avoid seeking help as they fear being perceived as weak or unmanly (O'Neil, 2008).

Addressing these matters also requires a comprehensive understanding of how masculinity is constructed and its implications for mental health and the promotion of healthier, more flexible models of masculinity that encourage emotional openness and support-seeking behaviours (Kilmartin, 2005; Wong et al., 2017). In Africa, it has been observed that men who adopt patriarchal norms that limit the range of masculinities and ways of being human are more prone to experiencing mental health issues (Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020; Ngwenya, 2022). Through one of the conversations with a collaborator, Amandla, it was particularly evident that there was an intersection between gender, race and mental health. Social constructions of masculinity were clearly a contributing factor in how Amandla navigated his wellbeing. He provided a critical reflection on the impact of stress on Black male students who encounter difficulties seeking help in the university. He reflected on the stigma surrounding men and their mental health in society, which can hinder their willingness to seek assistance and call on student health services:

*I come from a very poor background. So when it comes to COVID-19, it played a very toxic role to everyone. Coming here was not what I was expecting. Bekunzima [It was difficult] to adjust. I experienced lot of pressure but now I think I have adjusted. Another thing I can comment on is the issue of the wellbeing of students. Universities, or maybe let me say Rhodes, they say that if one needs assistance with your mental health you must make a booking with the counselling centre. However it takes time, weeks even and that is not nice for students who cannot afford private psychologists. Kodwa ke Indoda ayikhali (which often means a man cannot go through difficulties and cry about them but rather deal with them by himself).*

In Amandla's account, it is evident that he faced difficulties adjusting to university, which he attributes partly to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. He discussed the academic pressure he experienced, which led to his need for psychosocial support. It is worth noting that he

adhered to the societal expectation of “Indoda ayikhali” (A man does not cry), a cultural stigma that associates crying with weakness. To grasp the significance of this notion, it is important to consider the sociological context in which many South African boys are raised. This stigma contributes to a lack of open communication, limited social support and increased financial challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the navigation of mental health within the intersectionality of gender, culture and masculinity. Courtenay (2000) has suggested that gender may be one of the most significant factors to consider when attempting to comprehend men's behaviour and choices related to health care, including mental health care.

Various factors contribute to a culture that suppresses the necessity to express emotions such as fear and insecurity and which positions help-seeking behaviour as weaknesses (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Ntombana, 2011; Seedat et al. 2002). Many students have been raised with the sayings, “Indoda ayikhali!” (A man does not cry!) and “indoda izikhotha amanxeba!” (A man must lick his own wounds!) This adds another layer of complexity for many men to navigate. Fortunately, while Amandla believes he must find ways to cope without showing vulnerability, he also recognises the need for assistance in managing his mental health. While this was offered by the university, the process of getting the support was longer. The experience of Amandla shows that the intersection of class, gender, and mental health becomes evident when he mentions that access to mental health support was primarily available to those with financial means, as obtaining free sessions at the university was time-consuming.

Navigating the intersection of gender, masculinity and mental health is crucial when considering the challenges faced by individuals in university settings, both physically and socially. Amandla's experiences underscore a pervasive issue among men from various cultural, traditional and social backgrounds, where societal norms discourage emotional expression and promote the notion of self-reliance in problem solving. This cultural conditioning can lead to detrimental outcomes, including an increased risk of GBV in university settings. Research indicates that traditional masculinity often emphasises emotional stoicism and aggression, which can manifest in harmful behaviours when men feel overwhelmed or frustrated (Mahalik et al., 2003; O'Neil, 2008). Furthermore, studies have shown that men who adhere strongly to these traditional masculine norms are more likely to engage in violence as a means of coping with emotional distress (Courtenay, 2000; Kilmartin, 2005; Sabo, 2005). Amandla's narrative also emphasises the importance of psychosocial

support and the need for students to seek help when they are in distress. However, it is worth noting the role of social class in determining who suffers from unaddressed mental health issues in universities, with men from disadvantaged backgrounds without medical funds being particularly vulnerable in this context.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how students at universities in the Eastern Cape navigate the university with intersecting identities such as gender, race and social stigmas. The narratives highlighted how these intersecting identities shaped students' experiences and sense of belonging in the university, revealing the enduring impact of historical racial categorisations and the resulting microaggressions. The chapter also addressed the challenges of misidentifying gender and the importance of using gender-inclusive language to foster a sense of belonging. It promotes the use of native languages, such as isiXhosa, to reduce misgendering and promote inclusivity. The discussions also touched on the pressures of traditional masculinity, emphasising the stigma surrounding emotional expression among male students, encapsulated in the phrase “Indoda ayikhali” (A man does not cry), which complicates their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Overall, the chapter underscored the need for a critical examination of these intersecting factors to create a more inclusive and supportive university environment. The next chapter builds on these findings to show how students navigate issues of GBV, trauma and safety on campus.

## **Chapter Six: Exploring the Intersectional Walk of the University as Social and Physical Space**

*“Coming to university was a way for me to escape the drama that was going on at home...”*

### **6.1 Introduction**

The above quotation comes from one of the collaborators named Linda. For her, university was an escape from the ‘drama’ at home and a space that had the potential to be safe. Linda was one of many students who embody multiple social identities, experiences and educational paths within the realm of higher education. In this chapter, we look at more stories like that of Linda’s. In every story, there is an experience to be understood, heard and made visible. Through the lens of intersectionality, this chapter explores how collaborators experience the university not just as a physical space but as a dynamic social space. In particular, it takes an in-depth look into three key elements of interacting with the university environment and how these shape students' sense of self: the first is the university as a safe/unsafe space, the second is the impact of GBV on students’ choices of universities, and the third is the movements against GBV.

### **6.2 Comprehending the university as a social and physical space**

This section outlines the locationality of students’ experiences. In order to comprehend the university as a space that transcends mere architectural structures, it is crucial to discuss the concept of space itself. Space extends beyond physical design and encompasses elements such as connectivity, security and individual experiences. We can draw insights from Soltani and Kirci (2009, p. 1):

Architectural space is for living in and our experiences occur while living in space... Our experiences could be mental, physical and sensory and are largely subjective. This is experienced by the being navigating the space. The body, which has considerable importance in the experience of space, allows us to touch our environment; and as a result, it causes measurement and perception.

The notion of space comprises diverse components, encompassing cognitive and sensory dimensions in which perceptions and constructions of experiences occur. Within the university setting and the scope of this study, space is encountered through historical contexts and present interactions during the collection of narratives. In Chapter Four, I explained how the collaborators assumed responsibility for deciding on the space in which to engage with me, and I reflected on how this fostered a sense of ownership of the storytelling process. Furthermore, when participants submitted their photographs accompanied by narratives for inclusion in the study, many contextualised their experiences in terms of how the university, both physically and socially, influenced their perceptions of space. Consequently, this indicated that the university as a conceptual ‘space’ was delineated by their interpretations.

Movements such as #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) have contested the university space, particularly in relation to the enduring architectural remnants of colonialism, evident in statues, curricula and institutional structures. The actions undertaken by #RMF – such as the defacement of statues and destruction of artworks perceived to symbolise colonialism – were aimed at advocating a political transformation in education, with the goal of creating an environment within universities that reflected an intersectional representation of historically marginalised groups (Booyesen, 2016). Universities are increasingly positioned as needing to be critical yet safe spaces. As noted by McCoy and Theule-Lubbers (2020), universities must navigate the delicate balance between promoting free expression and maintaining a supportive atmosphere, ultimately preparing students to thrive in a pluralistic society.

However, as discussed in Chapter Two, the higher education system has been structured in such a manner that the concept of ‘safe spaces’ continues to be influenced by colonial frameworks, thereby failing to protect the safe spaces for the marginalised groups adequately. The idea of a safe space within academic institutions, for example, originates from the historical context of how unjust colonial spaces were characterised by exclusion and a lack of inclusivity. The term ‘safe space’ has been utilised in diverse contexts within higher education, encompassing activism, academic discourse, student support services and classroom settings. In the realm of student experiences, the concept of safe spaces, as articulated by Ali (2017:4), is supposed to prioritise the safety of marginalised groups, while in academic discourse, it is linked to the evolution of queer, womanist, and critical race theories (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019; Luhmann, 1998; Martin & Mohanty, 1986).

The comprehensive examination in this chapter of the university as both a physical and social space delves into the experiences of students navigating the university space post #MustFall movements and during/after COVID-19. Chapter Two discussed how the #MustFall time was characterised by often violent protests against how things have changed superficially in the institutions in my study. Students persist in navigating the university environment through various approaches, which will be further explored in this chapter. From the narratives shared by students, it was evident that gendered experiences and social identities shaped their perspectives on the university as a physical and social space.

### **6.3 “Siphefumla ngenxeba”:** Embodied suffering and living in fear

The term ‘Siphefumla ngenxeba’ translates as “we are breathing through the wound” and was introduced in a television advertisement by Outsurance vehicle insurance in 2019, coinciding with the tragic murder of Ms Uyinene Mkrwetyana, a 19-year-old student at the UCT. Rasool (2020) elucidates that 2019 marked a turning point in South Africa, as GBV escalated to a nationwide crisis, inflicting profound wounds on the society. During the 2019/20 year, a total of 53 293 sexual offences were reported, an average of 146 per day, up from the 52 420 offences recorded in the 2018/19 year (African Health Organisation, 2021). These numbers show how GBV ranks high in South Africa and grows every day.

Furthermore, the Governance, Public Safety, and Justice Survey conducted in 2019 indicated that approximately 50% of assaults and femicides were carried out by individuals familiar to the victims, while 29% were executed by unidentified perpetrators. These data highlight the concerning rate of GBV and femicide, which contributes to a pervasive sense of fear among numerous students in South African universities.

The problem of past traumas or “amanxeba” caused by GBV was explained by one of the collaborators, Linda, who shared her story of wounds:

*Born from the Eastern Cape in Libode, but I lived in Bizana with my aunt and her family. I am the only child, and my mother passed away. Nevertheless, life has moved on, and I have been waiting to share my pain with a stranger. At my aunt's place, there was no peace. I would only get food at school during the week. I would visit to get food. She would come back and beat me up for that, and her children, who are boys, sexually harassed me and I could not talk to her because she was always aggressive. So it was hard for me to even ask for money for sanitary*

*towels. My mom passed away when I was 11, and I did not know my father... I applied for varsity, so the results came back, and I was accepted.*

Linda was not initially invited to be part of this study; however, she approached me on one of my site visits to ask what the purpose of my visit to her institution was. The experience of her approaching me suggested how the sharing of stories, such as through this study, had the potential to offer healing. It was also a reminder of how women who continue to be relegated to the margins knew that their embodied knowledge offered influential sites of knowledge as they remained an “intense storage of intuition, feelings, sentiments and emotions enacted through bodily practices” (Tavares, 1998, p. 240).

Students like Linda arrived at the university with prior traumas and then found the university itself lacking in safety measures. Through analysis, it was evident that gendered bodily suffering centres on the students' adaptive strategies in the face of their traumas, which I have conceptualised as “amanxeba”, wounds. Motsemme (2010) writes about amanxeba configured through embodied suffering by looking at survival modes to protect oneself from pain and to find meaning in living. The wounds from GBV can be invisible and sometimes visible. While safety-related wounds are prevalent within the university setting, it is crucial to acknowledge that safety concerns are a pervasive issue in South Africa, particularly GBV, exacerbated by generally high crime rates. This then means universities are a micro-ecosystem that mirrors the broader society. Violence, especially GBV, led to embodied trauma that impacted the collaborators' identities and how they navigated the university space with caution, always anticipating further violence.

Furthermore, in the above narrative, Linda brought her embodied suffering with her into the university as a young Black woman who grew up in a family home without parents where she experienced GBV. In society, when we think of ‘home’ we tend to associate it with ‘safety’. The concept of home, traditionally viewed as a sanctuary of warmth and comfort, is exemplified in Mbungwana's poem (2021, p. 39) which describes it as “Ikhaya sisonka esibhakwayo” meaning “home is the smell of fresh baked bread”. Perhaps this definition of ‘home’ extends, to some extent, to the university which should also, by extension, be a safe space. But what was clear from my collaborators' narratives was that this was not the case and that these so-called safe spaces became spaces of violence for many of them.

What the narratives showed is that despite typical conceptions of home, violence permeated into these spaces and led to embodied suffering that many students like Linda brought to the university. Sexual assault and abuse as traumatic experiences are not limited to instances that may or may not occur in the university environment; for many students, they are deeply ingrained in the psyche and physical memory from childhood, shaping the sense of security (or lack thereof) for many female students in higher education. For individuals like Linda, ensuring safety within the university setting is paramount for feeling protected and preventing re-victimisation.

Linda held the university space as a place where she could escape those wounds as in her home there was no support for her to report the GBV case. According to University Hospitals of Leicester (2024, para. 3):

Research consistently shows that victims of sexual assault are more likely to be members of racial and ethnic minorities. Historical trauma, institutional racism, and cultural barriers are a few things that might make vulnerability worse. It may be challenging for survivors from these groups to get culturally relevant support services and navigate the criminal justice system.

The above discussion by the University Hospitals of Leicester indicates the necessity for an intersectional approach to addressing sexual assault, as it reveals that the impact of such violence is not uniform but rather intensified for certain groups. For individuals like Linda, who carried the weight of prior trauma, the university represented a hopeful refuge. However, when this space is perceived as unsafe whether through physical threats or the presence of institutional racism and cultural obstacles, students become increasingly vulnerable to feelings of alienation. As outlined in Chapter Three, the concept of structural intersectionality elucidates the influence of power dynamics on the interplay between intersectionality and GBV. This framework reveals how various forms of privilege and disadvantage inform women's experiences of trauma and their access to resources, such as housing (Humbert et al., 2024), as illustrated by Linda's case who had no other choice but to stay with her aunt despite her experiences. The cumulative effects of trauma, as experienced by Linda, interacted with her other life experiences within the university environment. In Linda's situation, structural intersectionality served to highlight the social determinants that contributed to GBV resulting in trauma. This situation emphasises the urgent need for universities to actively cultivate an inclusive and supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges

faced by marginalised students, ensuring that they can truly find solace and safety in academic spaces.

Furthermore, identity intersections can affect how families respond to sexual assault and that promotes victimisation, long-term wounds and lack of support for survivors. Linda's wounds (*amanxeba*) are also a reminder of survival that the body remembers when the mind replays those moments of pain. Through *amanxeba*, a story can be told, and knowledge can then be situated. The concept of situated knowledge, as articulated by Gherardi (2008), emphasises that knowledge is inherently tied to the specific context in which it is generated. In this framework, Linda's experience at the university illustrates the complexities of navigating an environment that feels both alien and unsafe, necessitating a protective stance to cultivate a sense of belonging. This struggle is compounded by the systemic violence that Black women face, as highlighted by Crenshaw (1989), who discusses how they are subjected to dual oppressions: the overarching male power structures and the stigmatisation of sexual promiscuity within their own communities. Systematic violence is further elucidated through the lens of political intersectionality, which highlights the significance of social margins, awareness of GBV, and the pursuit of justice as they pertain to individuals' social locations (Gueta, 2020). This raises the question of whether Linda was aware that she could report incidents beyond her familial circle in order to seek justice, and to what extent her background influenced her exposure to such awareness. Furthermore, there is often a lack of attention given to the problem of sexual assault in the Black community, which contributes to the marginalisation of these experiences and contributes to a cycle of othering. This intersectional analysis underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by Black women in academic settings and the broader societal implications of their situated knowledge.

Despite being subjected to violence in her own home, whenever the university was closed, Linda continued to return to the same environment where her perpetrators resided owing to the intersection of her socioeconomic status and dependence on her aunt as her family. Socio-economically disadvantaged women often have to return to sites of abuse because they have no other option and that is part of a broader system of domination that impacts women (Crenshaw, 1991). While efforts have been made to address GBV on university campuses across South Africa universities have often neglected the holistic wellbeing of students, including their past traumas upon entering the academic setting. For example, student-led

campaigns are often held to raise awareness. The following image provides an example of such an initiative held at NMU in 2022 shown in Figure 6.1.



**Figure 6.1: Photo submitted by a collaborator to show some student initiatives**

The image above was submitted by Luyanda to show some of the student-led anti-GBV initiatives that she worked with while being a student leader in the residence system. This picture depicts an event which aimed to combat GBV by encouraging individuals to voice their concerns and by providing a supportive platform for the reporting and management of GBV incidents among students and staff. Such initiatives exemplify the importance of student-led programmes that universities implement to assist those who encounter difficulties in seeking protection on campus. The experiences of GBV are shaped by both structural and political intersectionality, as illustrated in Linda's narrative. This is influenced by the perceptions and interpretations of GBV within the Black community and the socioeconomic circumstances of victims who remain in the locations where they have experienced violence, often viewing education as a means of escape. It is essential for university engagements to recognise these complexities and facilitate discussions that enable victims to communicate their experiences with their families.

#### **6.4 Surviving the shadows: Addressing gender-based violence and coping strategies in university environments**

While recognising initiatives such as the MEMEZA campaign (see Figure 6.1), it is equally crucial to consider the trauma that the fear of GBV has inflicted upon numerous university students. The experience of embodied trauma resulting from violence especially GBV was prevalent in other collaborators' narratives and was often connected to feelings of safety and security on campus. Another collaborator, Ashley, shared concerns about security on campus as a priority in our conversation, though she came from a different university from Linda:

*When I walk to campus, I will always have pepper spray, which I should not have to; I should not have to be worried when I walk to campus. However, I do, unfortunately; in South Africa, we do.*

Ashley shared above how her coping mechanism of walking with pepper spray does not feel like enough of a deterrent. Ashley's narrative of fear and safety was different from Linda's narrative in that she was now located at a university in a big city and feared external spaces while Linda feared being at home. Sexual violence on campus has induced fear in female students (Dosekun, 2007). This fear has led to coping mechanisms like walking with pepper sprays as a form of survival used by students to protect themselves and mitigate their vulnerability to rape which has arguably been normalised, tolerated and managed (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Shefer et al., 2017). Structural intersectionality offers a framework for examining the social positioning of African women, highlighting their qualitative differences in comparison to the experiences of White women (Waller et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that all women in this country are vulnerable to situations related to safety and the fear of GBV even though Black women are the most vulnerable in South Africa.

Because of the high number of unresolved GBV cases in South Africa, females, who are the most common target of assault, have resorted to protecting themselves and educating themselves on how to avoid male dominance. Part of this involves depriving themselves of freedoms like walking freely on the streets and in university spaces. The responses of students like Ashley: "*I should not have to be worried when I walk to campus*" are what Crenshaw (1989, p. 162) refers to as "women's vulnerability to male dominance". This phenomenon

occurs as patriarchy leading to the movement of women, their being and safety, even while on campus.

### **6.5 Voices of resistance: Gender-based violence movements and university system critique**

In South African universities, there have been demonstrations addressing GBV, notably exemplified by the #MustFall movements during 2015/2016, which included the hashtag #GBVMustFall. The reflection of these protests and their impact was evident through the narrative of Ashley who further shared:

*It was horrible to see the female students feeling like they could not share their experience, being so overwhelmed that they only had one option: protest as the university was not doing anything and the police too. Nevertheless, something came out of it as they created a route for all those afraid to walk alone, which had security, but I found that was not enough.*

In her narrative, Ashley reflected on the 2015/2016 protests stating that these were a resort for female students in response to their feelings of being unsafe at university. As already noted in Chapter Two, these protests formed a critical turning point in South African higher education. The 2016 protests were a period where students exercised their agency to think, reflect and act on societal matters that concern all citizens (Du Preez et al., 2017). Some #MustFall movements were concerned with sexual violence on campus, such as #RapeMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall, as contextualised in Chapter Two. These #Fallism campaigns responded to the dehumanising practices of GBV on campus, a longstanding problem leading to many students fearing for their safety. However, the #RapeMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall received much less attention than other Fallism movements. This pertains to the prevalence of a single-axis framework, both within the general understanding of social injustice and within the protest movement itself. A single-axis framework challenges the assertion that the fight against racism can be separated from combating sexism, which is then given lower prioritisation, particularly in the context of women residing in a society shaped by racial and cultural subordination (Crenshaw, 1988; 1989; Du Preez et al., 2017). Gender-based violations are side-lined when attention is focused predominantly on other deficient grand narratives.

However, while there exists a history of segregating women's concerns, women have been organising themselves against the intersectional violences they experience. As argued by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1241):

Over the last two decades, women have organised against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives. Drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognised that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This politicisation in turn has transformed the way we understand violence against women.

Crenshaw's statement highlights the political intersectionality of violence against women, which was exemplified by activists protesting against GBV on campuses across various South African institutions, especially during the #MustFall movement. These protests emphasised that racism cannot be viewed in isolation, as there is a critical neglect of the patriarchal structures that exist within the Black community, a reality that is also apparent in academic settings.

Crenshaw further characterises the violence against women as a manifestation of structural intersectionality and systemic abuse, where matters of race, gender and class intersect. Interventions must be tailored to address the intersectional experiences in order to address the distinct obstacles faced by distinct women, as highlighted by Crenshaw (1991). Nevertheless, this does not imply that the experiences of non-Black students facing violence are disregarded. Rather, it underscores the importance of prioritising the needs of marginalised female students in areas such as housing, transportation and academic resources. Many of these students are compelled to study on campus late into the night because they lack access to computers or Wi-Fi off campus.

During the #MustFall movements, students with diverse backgrounds, genders and social classes came together as role players in conceptualising and executing these movements (Martin, 2015). However, even in the movements themselves, patriarchal attitudes deformed these campaigns. This is explained by one of the collaborators in the study, Siphokazi, who was part of the #Mustfall movement in one of the institutions. Siphokazi shared her reflections on being a woman in a student political organisation during the period of #FeesMustFall and submitted a portrait of herself leading a peaceful march as part of her contribution:



**Figure 6.2: Photo submitted by Siphokazi**

In response to the above portrait, Siphokazi reflects on the challenging patriarchal agendas in the #Fallist movements:

*My experience has always felt like a battle, I was always angry, always fighting for justice in the system. Starting from #GBVMustFall movements to #FeesMustFall. This picture is also an awareness of what endurance in university has meant for me. Having to fight for my safety and that of others too.*

Through her involvement in the activist space, Siphokazi had to navigate the multiple interconnected struggles that students face in the system of higher education. She shares that her experience has been characterised by anger because of inequalities that exist in universities, particularly within the constant protests against GBV and Fees. While marches and protests against GBV can result in actions and awareness, the activist movement spaces are also difficult to navigate. In our conversation, Siphokazi further reflected on the patriarchal nature of such movements, which she characterises as male-centred, reproducing inequality and ignorance when it comes to matters of gender:

*I had to separate from the movement during the #RURferenceList<sup>11</sup>. In politics, there are many trade-offs expected from a woman. However, I was not ready to trade off my safety and being a woman. Violence and alienation during the protests were part of the space's triggers. I was aware of the gender dynamics in university. However, I did not have a language for it, and when the reference list came, the males in the political formation distanced themselves from this crucial problem.*

Siphokazi's experiences highlight the dynamics of the student political space and its vulnerabilities due to male dominance. As Siphokazi explains above, "[i]n politics, there are many trade-offs expected from a woman". These expectations add to one's wounds and embodied suffering. Siphokazi's reflection can be interpreted as a form of 'political intersectionality'. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991, 2018) scholarship advocates both structural and discursive transformations via the implementation of intersectional policies and practices in contexts where discrimination and oppression are prevalent. While there have been policies and inclusion measures implemented in universities and student politics discrimination and suppression still continue. This is particularly relevant in the political arenas described in Siphokazi's narrative.

Siphokazi further shared:

*The other thing was that comrades were protecting one of the names on the list, and that made me very angry as I knew that even though nothing had happened to me yet, the woman being assaulted and getting no justice could be me one day.*

According to Siphokazi, the #RURferenceList, which comprised the names of individuals informally accused of some forms of sexual violence at Rhodes University, included the names of certain student political leaders. However, these individuals were protected by the male students in the political organisation. The reflection by Siphokazi on what it means to

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<sup>11</sup> The #RURferenceList was a protest against rape culture in 2016 that began when a "reference list" of names of purported rapists was anonymously published on a Rhodes University student Facebook group (Mail & Guardian, 2018).

participate in politics as a woman is an experience that has history embedded in it in South Africa which is the history of politics as a man's world. This is explained by Erlank (2003, p. 653):

In 1935, Alfred Bitini Xuma, African National Congress (ANC) president from 1940 to 1947, wrote a paper expressing confidence in the ability of Africans to participate responsibly in governmental politics because of their 'status of full manhood.' In 1946, A Lembede, leader of the ANC Youth League, wrote a charged news article describing how a 'young virile nation' was in the process of being rebirthed, drawing strength from a nationalism which fed on the idea of Africa as a 'Black man's country'.

It is important to acknowledge that the two comrades mentioned in the above quote from Erlank (2003) were not the only men who represented the liberation struggle as a masculine space. Throughout history, protests and movements have often excluded women, despite their critical role in the armed struggle and their efforts to bring attention to gender matters within the struggle (Magadla, 2023). However, in present-day protests and student movements, gender issues are still neglected by male-dominated groups who believe that these issues are not as important as larger struggles like decolonisation or fees. This limited interpretation is also seen as an attempt to reduce the politicisation of domestic violence and the marginalisation of women in politics, with the aim of preserving the cohesion of the community (Crenshaw, 1991). Many men view gender as a secondary concern that can be addressed later after racial equity has been achieved.

This mindset was evident during the #FeesMustFall protests which is discussed in Chapter Two where Nompandolo Mkhathshwa, the Student Representative Council (SRC) president at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, issued instructions and was met with male counterparts shouting derogatory remarks about women and feminism (Pilane, 2015). Similar to Siphokazi's experience while leading university students, she recognised the necessity of self-protection, particularly in instances where she encountered gender-related derogatory comments. Those who did not fear such comments during #FMF attempted to draw attention to the fact that the movement was marginalising gender issues. However, the movement not only excluded female activists but also potentially contributed to an increase in GBV by minimising the significance of such violence. As raised by Siphokazi, the political movement of students often protected comrades who were accused of sexual assault. Female student activists reported experiencing misogyny and sexual assault by male activists during the #FMF movement (Seale, 2016). Today, institutions of higher learning are grappling with a climate of

terror and fear, where students, particularly women, are concerned for their safety amidst the transformation called for by the #MustFall campaigns.

There is an intersection between gender identities and experiences of safety on campuses, with female students expressing greater fear of crime and violence compared to their male counterparts. This heightened sense of vulnerability can be attributed to various factors, including societal norms, past experiences of harassment and the prevalence of GBV in educational settings. The case of the #RURreference list raised by Siphokazi serves as evidence of the prevalence of GBV in higher education where female students populated the list with their stories of trauma and violence naming their accused perpetrators. This has been documented in existing research, for example, Fisher et al. (2000) found that female students are more likely to perceive their campus environment as unsafe and to experience anxiety related to potential victimisation. This disparity in perceived safety not only affects the mental wellbeing of female students but also impacts their academic performance and overall campus engagement.

Siphokazi's account underscores the challenges associated with addressing GBV within student political environments through the lens of political intersectionality. She articulated her awareness that the women experiencing assault at her university, who were not receiving justice, could potentially be her in the future. This concern is particularly pertinent given that GBV represents a significant social issue in South Africa, and universities in the Eastern Cape have garnered attention due to the alarming GBV incidents on its campus reaching media, resulting in a pervasive sense of insecurity among students.

This intersectional safety experience was also shown in an annual Quality of Residence Life Survey conducted with RU students between 2010–2013. This survey revealed the gendered nature of fear and safety on campus (RU Sexual Violence Task Team, 2016). This is particularly important because during the #RapeMustFall campaign, RU was among the universities with a reference list, as mentioned in Siphokazi's narrative, followed by NMU. This #RURreference list, as explained by Mohana (2016, para. 1), started with a campaign and then led to protests:

The campaign Chapter 212, highlights Rhodes University's flawed sexual assault policy. Later, after a list of alleged rapists was publicised on the RU Queer Confessions, Questions and Crushes Facebook page - quickly going viral - protests began breaking out at Rhodes over the

mismanagement of sexual assault cases on campus. Moreover, for the first time, campus sexual assault becomes more than just a woman's problem.

Shortly following the #RUReferenceList protest, a solidarity protest took place at NMU in March 2018. This protest highlighted the ongoing vulnerability experienced by victims of GBV within universities in the Eastern Cape region. The protest was organised in response to the expulsion of two activists at RU in November 2017 who were involved in the apprehension of two individuals accused of rape (Tau, 2019). The protest at NMU was a demonstration of the body at war with the university's systems and policies that did not address GBV. These demonstrations between RU and NMU were part of the #RapeMustFall which was dominant in the university during the #MustFall era. Even with many cases of sexual assault on campus, it is noteworthy that the #RapeMustFall demonstrations were perceived as impeding the advancement of the #FeesMustFall campaigns, underscoring the importance of recognising intersectionality among students and administrators (Du Preez et al., 2017, p. 98).

It is thus ironic that the #RapeMustFall campaign has received little attention in comparison to the other 'Fallism' movements. Moreover the #RapeMustFall campaign, which focuses on gender-based violence in universities, has predominantly focussed on the (non)existence of policies and their tendency to engage with gender-based violence in a 'by the way' fashion as opposed to addressing it as a problem in its own right.

The #RUreference list generated significant media attention, resulting in RU being characterised as an unsafe environment for female students. This perception was influenced by the university's responses to incidents during the 2016/2017 period, which highlighted the prevailing culture at the institution. The annual sexual violence=silence protests<sup>12</sup> at RU have played a crucial role in fostering open discussions about GBV, creating a platform for dialogue that has often been stifled at other universities where such matters are cast as shameful. The now nationwide silent protests, as noted by Ashley, may not provide immediate justice; however, they play a crucial role in compelling the nation and its institutions to prioritise matters related to GBV and femicide. Unlike institutions that perpetuate silence around GBV,

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<sup>12</sup> The annual Silent Protest are protests initiated at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in 2007 showing solidarity with rape survivors and fighting for their right to Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) (<https://www.ru.ac.za/latestnews/archives/2017/subvertingthesilence-10yearsofsilentprotestsaainstrape.html>)

the protests at RU have challenged the stigma associated with sexual violence, allowing survivors to share their experiences and advocate change. As highlighted by Orth et al. (2029), a university's approach to addressing rape reflects its regard for women. By addressing these intersecting forms of shame, the protests have illuminated the complicity of societal norms in enabling GBV, emphasising the need to bring these issues into the open for meaningful discourse and reform. The problem of GBV at RU has a historical context, explored in Chapter Two, which discusses the university's transition from an all-male institution to admitting female students starting in the 1940s, contributing to a culture that marginalised women.

### **6.6 Impact of gender-based violence on university choices for prospective students**

Despite universities' efforts to address GBV, incidents such as the #RUReferenceList and associated protests have contributed to the fear of safety among students and prospective students. This sentiment was seen in Luyanda's account, where she shared her apprehension about safety while navigating her institution, RU:

*I am a postgraduate student, but I did not quit because I was doing BComm law, and now I'm doing LLB. I am from Tsolo originally, but I grew up in Queenstown. I started studying at university... in 2018.... I did not think about applying at Rhodes. We heard a lot about Rhodes University when we were high school students. We would see those things about rape on the news and social media we would see those things and it was scary.*

Luyanda refrained from applying to RU due to her apprehension around safety; however, her narrative reveals that GBV transcends individual academic institutions. She recounted a distressing incident of sexual assault within her own institution, expressing her fear by stating:

*I also know there is a rape case on campus, which scared me because these are the campuses we go to. It is terrifying. I am terrified to walk around campus. I am still scared now, but I think you grow and form ways to cope.*

This experience served as a stark reminder to Luyanda that her safety is compromised, underscoring the prevalence of rape in South Africa. Luyanda shares how she feels scared being on campus, and how that is her reality every day. In essence, she must face embodied suffering every day. She must navigate the complexities of intersectionality concerning her spatial experience, gender and age, particularly in relation to the male gaze and the

apprehension of violence on campus. Age is a significant factor within the university context, as many young individuals are in the process of identity formation and striving to engage fully in their lives. This intersection of age and gender can exacerbate feelings of insecurity, as young women may feel particularly scrutinised and objectified, which can limit their freedom of movement and expression. This is referred to as the male gaze in representational intersectionality where women's bodies are objectified particularly that of Black women (Nas, 2022). The male gaze not only influences how women are viewed but also shapes their own perceptions of safety and belonging in academic spaces. The fear of violence and harassment can significantly impact young women's participation in campus life, reinforcing the need for institutions to address these concerns comprehensively (Buchanan, 2020). By acknowledging and addressing these intersecting factors, universities can create safer and more inclusive environments for all students.

Furthermore, the internalisation of the masculine gaze functions as a panoptic mechanism that disciplines women, regardless of their visibility (Valentine, 2000), thereby restricting their access to specific areas of public spaces (Day, 2001). The restriction happens as one chooses to stay away from certain spaces because of fear. This phenomenon is evident from Luyanda's experience of discomfort characterised by a continual consciousness of potential violence, irrespective of whether they have directly encountered aggression.

The prevailing reality for women in South Africa necessitates the adoption of coping mechanisms to ensure personal safety, as men often perceive the responsibility for preventing rape and safeguarding women as solely resting with women themselves (De Klerk et al., 2007). Both Luyanda and Ashley's narratives illustrate how female students have resorted to strategies such as carrying pepper sprays, moving in groups and internalising the notion that their safety is primarily their own responsibility, acknowledging that instances of rape often occur when safety measures are not in place. The fear of violence was also shared by Siphokazi relating to the fear that queer students experience as well.

Part of the complexity of GBV on campus is the intersectional nature of this violence. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1241) explains structural and political intersectional violence as the following:

*Since violence is used to control women in patriarchal societies, it is important to understand the nature of patriarchy and its relationship to other forms of oppression such as racism, colonialism and heterosexism. Violence against women of colour is affected by the intersection of racism and sexism and the failures of both the feminist and anti-racist movements to address this issue seriously.*

The fear and occurrence of violence against women in universities is a form of oppression that is influenced by various systems such as race, class and ability. According to Crenshaw (1991), violence is a structural and political matter which requires an understanding of interconnected oppressions and privileges. The fear that women feel is often politicised and is a response to the patriarchal powers that are intertwined with sexism and racism. Black female students like Siphokazi, Naledi, Mihle and Luyanda in particular face the challenge of navigating their subordinate position in society, where they are often seen as simultaneously the “second sex” and the “last race” (Blue, 2001 as cited in Mophosho, 2013, p. 24 ). This position can be traced back to both colonialism and African customary structures, which historically excluded Black women from formal education.

Over and above widespread condemnation of colonialism, imperialism and racism as oppressive forces against African women, some African feminists contend that African customary structures also play a significant role in perpetuating women's oppression (Aina, 1998; Daymond, 1998; Mama, 2001). This perspective highlights the dual layers of oppression that African women face, as not only were they marginalised by colonial powers that sought to exclude them from educational opportunities, but they also encountered restrictive gender roles embedded within African customary law that further silenced their voices and limited their agency. The gender roles that are evident within student political organisations are exemplified by the experiences of Siphokazi and Naledi, who highlight that male student leaders have controlled power in those spaces, and some have not been held accountable for their reported cases of GBV. This is crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression and patriarchy faced by African women and underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to feminist activism that challenges both external colonial legacies and internal cultural practices.

The combination of class, race, and gender has a significant impact on the social and material aspects of women's lives. This creates specific power dynamics that should not be overlooked (Davis, 2008). The intersection of race, patriarchy and sexism is then at the helm of GBV as

men rationalise violence. The intersection of race, patriarchy and sexism opens Black women to increased vulnerabilities of safety and harm. Researchers have contended that individuals who have experienced GBV and those impacted by their gender at birth face varying degrees of discrimination, oppression, and violence due to their intersecting identities (Warrier, 2021). In the context of this study, the university's social and physical spaces linked to society continue to disempower already marginalised bodies.

For example, the university's physical spaces include residences in which students live. These residences often form the basis of the communities in which universities are situated. A university residence or rented accommodation is often described as a “home away from home”. These “homes away from home” have often, however, been a crime scene of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Through her narrative, Mihle described an incidence that occurred while living in a residence located outside of her university’s campus:

*I felt that I could be safe on campus as the campus itself is secluded and in an enclosed space, but when I was there as a woman, to be honest, I would say I did not feel safe and protected in any way because of the absence of lights and the infrastructure of some spaces. Even in my residence, there are security concerns as I am staying in a big residence with both males and females. It is 5 to 6 stories high, with only one security guard on the ground floor. If something could happen, it would be complicated for security to reach me as I am on the 4th floor. Men personally chased me into my residence as I was walking from the shops; I knew that day was going to be my day of being a statistic of rape and maybe murder. Lecturers are also violating us. I know students who have been raped and violated by lecturers, and I can tell you many female-based stories; I am not trying to say that these things do not happen to men, but I am trying to speak from my own story.*

Mihle shares her experience of living in fear in a space where she thought she would be protected. She has to constantly be vigilant as she walks on the streets to her student accommodation while also noting that women experience fear within the residences themselves. The most critical concern from the above story is the power dynamics of violence and sexual harassment that lecturers are involved in. The intersectional understanding of power and sex in relations involving staff members is another sensitive matter that universities in South Africa are battling with (Omar, 2019). Many cases of sexual assault are related to romantic or sexual relationships between university staff and students.

Furthermore, rules regarding these relationships are not discussed or included in the draft policy and strategic framework produced by the Department of Higher Education (2017), even though scholars argue that there is a need to regulate relationships with uneven power dynamics as part of a university's holistic approach to sexual harassment and preventing sexual violence on university campuses (Mack, 1999; Omar, 2019). In the Eastern Cape, universities have varying approaches and protocols regarding relationships between students and staff members. As described in Chapter Two, many have encountered challenges in addressing cases of sexual assault involving students and faculty members, primarily due to the lack of clear and decisive policies and a firm stance from the universities. The significance of this stance is underscored by the intricate power dynamics inherent in such relationships, which often result in the legal system failing victims of assault in these circumstances.

Similar power dynamics are present in personal relationships and are also seen within student political bodies. From the reflection by Siphokazi earlier, we also saw the dynamic of the intersection of power and GBV when she shared her experience in student politics and how SRC powers are at play. Naledi also shared experiences of similar power dynamics:

*... I remember leading a vote of no confidence at some point against an SRC member accused of rape or sexual assault, and the SRC executive took the decision back. Nothing happened to that man because of their political power.*

In cases like the above, there is victim-blaming and often, men hide behind the blurred lines of consent (Kon, 2024). In contrast, others refer to sexual assault accusations as a plot against their political power. This phenomenon is attributed to the anti-racist political narrative that fails Black women by exclusively focusing on the historical portrayal of rape as a crime primarily committed by Black perpetrators against White victims, thereby neglecting the violence faced by Black women from both legal and extralegal sources (Crenshaw, 1991). The apartheid government in South Africa strategically employed the threat of rape by Black men as a central component of their 'swart gevaar' (Black danger) narrative, which served to justify oppressive policies and maintain White supremacy.

I argue that this tactic was rooted in historical fears and stereotypes that portrayed Black men as inherently violent and sexually predatory, a narrative that was not only prevalent in South Africa but also echoed in various international contexts. For instance, during colonial rule and

the era of segregation in the United States, similar fears were propagated through the portrayal of Black men as threats to White women, which was used to rationalise lynching and other forms of racial violence (Hoffman, 1998). In South Africa, the apartheid regime amplified these fears through propaganda, suggesting that the liberation of Black individuals would lead to an increase in sexual violence against White women, thereby inciting fear among the White population and consolidating support for apartheid policies (Mamdani, 1996). The legacy of these narratives continues to influence societal perceptions and policies regarding race and gender, demonstrating the enduring impact of the 'swart gevaar' strategy both in South Africa and beyond. The notion of Black men being politically targeted through rape accusations has been observed in global and national politics, where many politicians dismiss sexual assault allegations as politically motivated attacks aimed at tarnishing their reputation (Gouws, 2017). Such beliefs contribute to the silence of numerous victims and survivors, who fear lacking the necessary support and political influence to address these matters.

While this was prevalent during colonial times, it is crucial to acknowledge how this single-axis framework marginalised the experiences of Black women who were victims of assault by both Black and White men. The comprehension of sexual assault in the context of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa was intertwined with structural violence, wherein Black women were subjected to violations by White men as a form of political assertion (Armstrong, 1994; Gqola, 2015). Such sexual violence during colonialism would never be investigated. The narrative by Naledi shows this political and structural intersectionality of sexual violence as experienced in South African HEIs.

Even in universities, the notion that SRC members are above the university law and that accusations about sexual assault are politically motivated has led to many students remaining silent about their experiences. This culture of silence is exacerbated by the fear of retaliation or disbelief, as highlighted by research indicating that victims often feel their experiences will be dismissed or politicised (Buchanan et al., 2019). Furthermore, the power dynamics inherent in student governance can lead to a lack of accountability for SRC members, reinforcing the idea that they are untouchable (Smith & Johnson, 2020). These power imbalances in universities ought to be mitigated through policy and practice to hold all students, regardless of their position, accountable for their actions and create a supportive environment that encourages reporting and addresses the stigma surrounding sexual assault.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This chapter showed how collaborators navigated the university as a physical and social space looking at their safety concerns on campus and the intersection of racism and sexism. The narratives revealed the structural and political intersections of GBV in and outside universities. These narratives revealed the physical and emotional suffering experienced by women and the strategies they employ to cope with the dominant violent hierarchies that exist not only on campus but also in their communities, such as walking as groups, protecting themselves by staying away from universities deemed dangerous and carrying pepper sprays. The chapter also discussed the impact of violations that occur in places that should be safe like homes and how these experiences affect how students navigate the university, which is also perceived as unsafe. While not all the narratives come from individuals who have personally experienced sexual violence or physical assault, it is clear that the stories they have heard or witnessed have greatly contributed to their fear of walking on campus and living in student housing, where the constant threat of violence is present. This chapter and Chapter Five emphasise the need to address and reject violent masculinities and the patriarchal individuals who protect and enable them. As we transition to the next chapter, which delves into intersectional narratives of the curriculum both enacted and hidden, we will explore how these lived experiences and the systemic concerns they reveal are reflected in educational practices and policies. This exploration aims to uncover the ways in which curricula can either perpetuate or challenge the dominant narratives regarding the intersectional identities of students.

## Chapter Seven: Intersectional Narratives of the Curriculum

Welcome to the University of Global Excellence!

We are an African University committed to decolonised education.

(McKenna & Swartz, 2024, p. 1)

### 7.1 Introduction

I begin this Chapter with the above-mentioned lines from a poem by Sioux Mckenna titled “Welcome to the University of Global Excellence”, which was penned in 2024. This poem reflects on the global academic experience, the pressure to perform, teach, learn, conduct research and still be human for academic employees. This reflects my own experiences an emerging academic doing research in a historically White university collaborating with students from both historically White and historically Black institutions. Though this research primarily focused on student experiences in universities in the Eastern Cape, it has also acknowledged the challenges encountered by marginalised academics in universities, which in turn impact students as they navigate the university both physically and socially. This then calls for a reflection on the health of the stakeholder relationship between academics, students, university administration, community and civil society more broadly.

As explored in Chapter Five and Six, the university can be understood as a complex physical and social environment that encompasses the power dynamics of various dimensions, including gender, sexuality, race, and social class. This chapter delves deeper into the intersectional walk of students as they navigate the intersections between the formal curriculum and the less visible aspects of the university experience, such as language, notions of achievement, and the influence of race and gender on their experiences of engaging with their studies. This chapter examines curriculum-related challenges faced by students in universities, which encompass a wide array of intersectional issues that students encounter. These issues include language barriers, funding concerns, and the implications of digital transformation and access.

## **7.2 Curricula concerns in universities**

It is important to define what curriculum is in context to this chapter and South Africa. The definition of curriculum, particularly in the context of South African universities, can be understood as a structured framework. Boughey and McKenna (2021) define curriculum as how the university distributes academic goods, and this includes the syllabus, the teaching and assessment, and so on. In South Africa, the curriculum is influenced by the country's unique historical, social, and political context, which necessitates a focus on inclusivity, transformation, and relevance to local and global challenges. According to the South African Qualifications Authority, the curriculum should not only impart knowledge but also foster critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to engage with complex societal issues (SAQA, 2012). Furthermore, the Higher Education Qualifications Framework emphasizes the importance of aligning curricula with national goals, such as promoting social justice and equity in education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). This then means the curriculum ought to address issues of transformation and social justice in universities from diverse students. Issues of transformation includes centering gendered teaching, literature and queer studies. The legacy of apartheid which shaped the higher education landscape in South Africa has affected the curriculum which still requires transformation work beyond just the content being taught. While thinking about curriculum reform post-apartheid it is important to also look at intersectional decolonial theories, literature, experiences to build an inclusive curriculum for the students.

## **7.3 “Ukuphanda”/hustling: Socioeconomic instability among Black students**

During the discussions with the collaborators, the topic of how they navigate the overlapping aspects of race, class, online learning and gender were often discussed in relation to their economic upbringings. The opening of access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds brought attention to socio-economic issues. Prior to 1994, higher education was available to black people but within very limited parameters, as discussed in Chapter Two. Institutions designated for black people were divided into specific ethnic groups,

were underfunded, and the programmes offered, and curricula implemented were carefully controlled by the state. When universities opened their doors to students of all race groups in the early 1990s, students from a great diversity of backgrounds made their way to the previously advantaged, historically white institutions. This broader access to higher education has led to a greater understanding of the challenges faced by historically disadvantaged students in terms of knowledge access and success. In our conversation, Inga below shared his intersectional walk, explaining how he was able to access university despite coming from a disadvantaged background:

*I'm Inga from Queenstown, like from rural areas in Queenstown, and then, like, I did my matric 2018 and then in 2019 I went to Cape Town since I didn't apply for varsity [university] in the previous year. So I did Mechanical engineering [at a technical college] then I applied to varsity since I wanted to go to varsity not a college so I applied, got accepted in many universities but I chose a university close to home.*

Inga comes from the rural regions of Queenstown, and his pursuit of higher education was fraught with obstacles. A primary challenge for Inga was his comprehension of the academic programmes available at colleges and universities. His experience at a community college led him to believe that attending a university was essential for the legitimacy of his academic and professional aspirations. This situation exemplifies the difficulties encountered by young individuals from rural areas who lack access to vital information when selecting higher education institutions to which they wish to apply. Addressing these challenges necessitates the application of a structural intersectionality framework to thoroughly investigate the issue of access to adequate information regarding higher education for youth in rural communities. The limited access to information can be linked to the forms of cultural capital<sup>13</sup> available to rural students resulting from the legacy of apartheid. In this context, affluent and educated parents typically possess the knowledge, competencies, resources, and skills necessary to facilitate their children's learning (Sayed & Singh, 2020) and to guide them in choice of studies.

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<sup>13</sup> Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is gained mainly through an individual's initial learning, and is unconsciously influenced by the surroundings (Bourdieu, 1886).

This was not the case for Inga's family and as a result, Inga did not have the cultural capital or financial support in order to make adequate choices about his career.

Inga also faced issues with funding attributed to structural inequality.

*So I started in 2020. I didn't have NSFAS. My Mom was on umgalelo (stokvel)<sup>14</sup> so she took that money and gave me R1500 for travelling and then got registered with a down payment. When I got my stationary list she sent me R3000 so that I can buy books and then other things. Because I wasn't funded by NSFAS [at the technical college] in Cape Town, since I didn't have any, I tried applying for NSFAS and other bursaries. I didn't get accepted then later around August 2020 got accepted. So from January till March before Covid I had to find ways to survive as my mother also did not have money to give me.*

Inga did not have a bursary and funding for three months and within those months his mother had to make means to support him until the NSFAS paid. As outlined in Chapter Two, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) serves as a significant social grant that facilitates access to higher education for numerous South African students who are unable to afford tuition fees. Despite its critical role in supporting students, NSFAS is frequently criticized for its persistent delays in fund disbursement, leading to administrative confusion and leaving students in a state of uncertainty regarding their financial support at the start of the academic year (Nkosi, 2022; Yende, 2023). Inga's experience underscores this issue,

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<sup>14</sup>A stokvel is defined as “an association formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation” (Ardener, 1964:201). Stokvels (‘stokvelle’) are an integral part of urban and rural South Africa (Government Gazette, 16:2000; Lukhele, 1:1990) and a means by which a collective band together their money to ensure that funds are available for crises or to ensure a shared savings scheme. While they emerged in part as a response to the racism of the banking system during apartheid and as a means of surviving minimal wages through collective investment, they continue to this day.

illustrating that while family financial support is invaluable, it is insufficient on its own to ensure success in higher education, highlighting the urgent need for timely financial assistance to empower students fully (Smith, 2023).

Despite their status as the majority among university attendees, this situation raises significant social justice concerns, particularly when these students are compelled to return home due to a lack of financial resources, as exemplified by the case of Inga. As elaborated in Chapter Three, the matters raised by Inga pertain to critical education, wherein Black students are deprived of the privilege of choice until they adeptly manoeuvre through the system by employing various strategies for survival. The demographics of students who struggle with financial stability in universities are those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in South Africa this remains largely aligned to race. Through Inga's story we can see structural intersectionality where class structures impact access to higher education. Inga shared the sacrifices that his mother had to make and how despite these he still needed more financial means to get by. This calls for an intersectional framework in order to understand socioeconomic inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Bailey & Mobley, 2019). In South Africa, the interconnected dynamics of financial stability, race, and class continue to be significant, even in light of the development of a black middle class. Inga further shared that:

*During the three months in university before Covid I was trying to focus more on my studies, Ndaphanda [I hustled] looking for jobs to gain experience and extra cash since I had no bursary. I was busy doing personal training and stuff so I can have money since I didn't get allowances from home so I was trying to balance some with these other things.*

The socio-economic status of Inga as a black male in the system shaped his experience of university as he navigated the balance between his studies and finding side hustles (ukuphanda/ukutabalaza). The concept of "ukuphanda/ukutabalaza" is a social phenomenon that exists in various communities, especially among the working class. It refers to the act of finding ways to survive, get by, and make ends meet by drawing on many sets of skills (Motsemme, 2010; Magadla, 2023). Ukuphanda (hustling) for students in universities has become a means of survival where they then balance the money received from home and NSFAS to make ends meet. In a university the intersectional walk of students differs: while there are numerous university students who engage in supplementary employment to support themselves, others receive the support entirely from their families. Inga had to get a job in the

university gym in order to make money to subsidise his life at university and even to send money home to support his family. This then required him to balance studying and working part time.

Furthermore, engagements about the intersectional walk alongside collaborators' navigating financial demands demonstrated a notable convergence between gendered experiences identity and socioeconomic status. This was exemplified by Abongile a gender non-binary collaborator (introduced in Chapter Five), who articulated their discomfort with wearing dresses. Abongile stated that:

*I think one of the things of which people don't necessarily talk about is the fact that, yes the university becomes a free space for many queer people but if you come from a background where you are financially unstable especially in the queer community, if you come from a space we are not either financially that is stable to buy the clothes that they refer to as 'appropriate' for the community, you get eliminated. I could not dress a certain way. There was no way that I could transform my whole wardrobe in a year so all of those things affected my transition to that community especially in first year.*

Financial constraints prevented them from acquiring clothing that aligned with their self-expression. Abongile emphasized the importance of financial stability in the form of funding and financial assistance. This was crucial for them to purchase clothing that would make them feel comfortable in their gender-nonconforming identity. Abongile also compared their life to other students, highlighting the clear class differences often observed in university settings, where there are assumptions about equal access to basic resources. Although it is vital for students to acknowledge their diverse backgrounds, the experience of feeling marginalized within the university context can be dehumanizing.

Adjusting to university life is a significant accomplishment for students. According to Mtshweni (2022), adjustment refers to the response to the challenges and stressors of the university environment. McMillan (2013) defines it as the process of modifying one's behaviour to establish a harmonious connection with the university environment after going through a transition. This adjustment can sometimes lead to students leaving university if they struggle to finance their education or adapt to their new surroundings or feel that there is space for them within these new spaces. Akhona shared her experience of accessing university:

*It wasn't easy to get here I was really struggling for years to be admitted. After finishing matric I went to study in Eastern Midlands college because it was affordable and I heard NSFAS ufumaneka lula [was easily accessible]. I did not even finish my studies there ngoba umama wohluleka ukundithumelela imali kuba NSFAS wayendisokolisa [my mom struggled to send me money as NSFAS was giving me issues]. The following year kwabe sekungena uSister wam esikolweni kwanyanzeleka ndiphangele mna [the following year my sister then went to school so I had to find a job]. This was 2015 and I only got admitted in 2020 in university as I did not want to give up.*

Akhona encountered difficulties in obtaining an education because of her upbringing and financial limitations at home, which ultimately resulted in her dropping out. The interaction involving Akhona, as examined in Chapter Three, pertains to the various contexts that evolve as students gain increased social status, funding, and resources, thereby enhancing their comprehension of education. Education is viewed as a privilege: in essence, institutions need to foster critical education frameworks that are linked with intersectionality to ensure social justice for students like Akhona who come from marginalised backgrounds. Akhona's experiences highlight the obstacles that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face in completing their studies, as they often lack the financial means to continue their education. Akhona had to make a family sacrifice of dropping out and looking for a job so that her younger sister could then study as she knew that her mother would not be able to pay for both of them. Akhona's experiences illustrate the structural intersectionality discussed by Collins (2019), highlighting that various factors cannot be distinctly isolated from one another, as they collectively exert an intersectional influence on an individual's lived experience.

The same sentiments were shared by Mihle, another collaborator, who stated that:

*...doing a course like BCom is very stressful with many people already focusing on themselves in class, I could not afford textbooks as I applied for NSFAS late which resulted to them not taking me. It was then difficult to pass many modules because textbooks are expensive. So I had to repeat some modules and I wanted to drop out.*

The above predicament shared by Mihle is not uncommon among Black students, particularly Black women who frequently encounter the dilemma of either persisting through such adversities or withdrawing from university due to an inability to access essential resources. Many courses in universities were designed through the apartheid system and policies with no Black student or Black woman in mind when it comes to some courses. Empirical studies indicate that students coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to complete their qualifications in comparison to their more affluent counterparts (Vignoles & Powdthavee, 2009; McMillan, 2015; Letseka & Maile, 2008). The experiences of Akhona and Mihle underscore the detrimental effects of socioeconomic challenges on educational attainment. In 2015, Akhona returned home to secure employment, thereby facilitating her sister's opportunity to attend university. She subsequently resumed her studies in 2020. Conversely, Mihle demonstrated resilience by continuing her education despite encountering academic setbacks attributed to insufficient resources.

Despite their different backgrounds and them attending different kinds of institutions, historically white or historically black, both Akhona and Mihle's experiences were structurally intersecting. But it became clear that these experiences were shaped to some extent by the university's administrative responses and existing systems. Both Akhona and Mihle's struggles are that of Black students in South Africa who struggle with resources to be able to participate in their academics while also having to balance part-time work with their academic responsibilities. Many students face financial pressures that necessitate part-time employment, which often leads to time constraints and increased stress, negatively impacting their academic performance. These students frequently experience fatigue and a lack of study time, resulting in lower grades and higher dropout rates (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2018). Additionally, the intersection of socio-economic factors and systemic inequalities exacerbates their struggles, as many come from under-resourced backgrounds that limit access to academic support and resources (Ndlovu, 2020). Students like Mihle and Akhona need institutional support systems, such as flexible class schedules and financial aid, to help mitigate these challenges.

The narratives in this section highlighted the intersection of race, gender and social class. This connection is crucial to understand in the context of the South African history, where disadvantaged groups had to fight for recognition within systems. The narratives shared above were narratives from Black students who are part of the historically disadvantaged groups in

South Africa. Although the education system is now in theory accessible to all, many students continue to face financial challenges when navigating it.

#### **7.4 The impact of gender, race and language on constructions of success**

Various factors, including the language of instruction and the digital divide, significantly influence students' navigation of the curriculum. The prevailing focus on university access and funding often results in the oversight of both visible and invisible curriculum concerns. Consequently, numerous educational inequalities persist, impeding the success of many students who manage to gain university admission. The COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated these systemic disparities, underscoring the relationship between “access” and its subsequent impact on “success” (Woldegiorgis, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the intersecting narratives of students to gain a deeper understanding of access to higher education and the interconnected concerns of students when it comes to the curriculum

##### **7.4.1 Language problems: English as the medium of instruction**

In the realm of higher education, language plays a crucial role in providing access to knowledge. When implementing decolonial approaches in academic institutions, it is essential to consider the influence of linguistic imperialism on students' interaction with the curriculum. According to Phillipson (1992), “linguistic imperialism refers to a particular theory for analysing relations between dominant and dominated cultures, specifically the way English language learning has been promoted”. Linguistic imperialism in South Africa can be traced back to colonialism and the apartheid project of control. The utilization of native languages was often linked with notions of inferiority and were positioned as evidence of the person being 'uncivilized', whereas proficiency in colonial languages is often considered a sign of superior intellect and the epitome of civilization.

The legacy of Apartheid and the dominance of western literacy practices in South Africa's higher education mean that our students may not have easy access to the linguistic codes or cultural practices of the academic communities ... there is frequently a significant difference between the literacy practices of our students' homes and those expected of them at [higher education institutions]. (McKenna 2004: 274)

This legacy persists whereby language can serve as a barrier to epistemic access, with the implication that certain aspects of Black students' identities are unwelcome within academic institutions. This issue was notably highlighted during the #FeesMustFall movement, where students advocated for the decolonization of language (Boughey and McKenna, 2021). One of the reasons for the movement of decolonizing language was a response to how the curriculum in universities continued to undermine the cultural and linguistic diversity that students bring to the academic environment but also shows feelings of alienation among those who do not conform to the dominant language norms. The perception of English as a mechanism of exclusion, alienation, and oppression, coupled with students' feelings of belonging or lack thereof in higher education environments, contributes to the tendency of institutions to view students' home identities and languages as challenges to be addressed through academic development programs (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011).

Monolingualism as a colonial wound in South African universities has been one of the challenges affecting teaching practices and academic staff development. Student engagement in classroom activities can be hindered by their apprehension regarding their proficiency in English. The prominence of English in South African education, particularly in higher education, is largely attributable to its global significance (Hurst & Mona, 2017). The exclusionary and detrimental impact of monolingualism was highlighted during the #MustFall movements, as elaborated in Chapter Two. This movement critically examined the entrenched ideologies, which permeate our cognitive frameworks, curricula, and pedagogical methodologies (Garuba, 2015).

Students of colour, whose first language is often not English, are forced through South African educational policies to distance themselves from their home languages, and to assimilate to English for academic participation (Hurst & Mona, 2017). As reflected by Abongile:

*I went to Nelson Mandela university which was also a transition, just the university on its own because in rural areas you are taught everything in isiXhosa even English so it was a big transition for me on its own to adapt to that situation that took a while*

For Abongile the transition to university was a big step as they needed to learn the language that was dominant in the university despite coming from a rural school where teachers used multilingualism for facilitating the understanding of the curriculum. Multilingualism serves as

a mechanism to empower and promote an education framework centred on social justice, as elaborated in Chapter Three, which emphasizes the integration of intersectionality and critical education. In the context of higher education institutions in South Africa, there is an ongoing debate and disagreement regarding the reconciliation of English monolingualism with the implementation of multilingualism in the curriculum (Lumadi, 2021). This issue holds significant importance for both the decolonisation and transformation agendas of these institutions. South African universities can thus be said to have adopted a narrative of transformation, yet not implemented substantial structural and cultural changes beyond merely altering the demographics of staff and students (Vorster & Quinn, 2017).

The tensions surrounding language as a means to decolonise the university were evident during the #MustFall movements, which called for the adoption of an African-centred curriculum (De Vos & Riedel, 2023), with a rallying cry that the multiple languages spoken by the student body should be welcomed on campus and used for instruction and other purposes. This is why intersectional knowledge projects are important. According to Collins (2012:445):

Intersectional knowledge projects acknowledge that the distinctive social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations have important epistemological implications. Intersectional scholarship suggests that all knowledge, including its own, cannot be separated from the power relations in which it participates and which shape it.

The intersectional knowledge project can be seen as part of the decolonization efforts of South African universities, highlighting the need for linguistic transformation as a crucial component of the broader transformation initiative. Linguistic transformation involves engaging with the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions, as stipulated in Section 27(2) of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (as amended). This framework was established as a guideline for the resourcing needed for the advancement of African languages in order to address language challenges within South African higher education institutions. From the framework, however, universities established their language policies but the sector has seen limited change in terms of perceptions and language use in universities (Mutasa, 2015). Some universities have however started finding ways of implementing their language policy as a decolonial tool to address imperial monolingualism through communication, teaching and learning.

Language cannot be understood simply as the medium of instruction. The ways in which language is used in academia is particular to that context and varies across disciplines. Writing for Physics is different from writing for Philosophy, regardless of whether the medium of instruction is English or not. Students from marginalized backgrounds may struggle with language barriers due to a lack of exposure to academic discourse or insufficient support systems, leading to disparities in academic performance and participation (Xulu-Gama, 2022 ; Munyaradzi, 2024).

The idea of decolonising language has been coupled to a call for the use of multilingualism in universities to accommodate inclusive practices that support linguistic diversity. However, such a move has presented its own challenges for some students. For example, Candice comes from an institution that has been implementing bilingualism, yet she experiences this as an exclusionary act:

*They are not inclusive here on campus physically. If I would go stand with another group of people they would assume I speak Xhosa and if I address it and say 'OK guys, I don't understand Xhosa.' They would they would speak English but later switch to Xhosa and I would just leave it because I already addressed in class. I am the only Coloured girl and even in class there is this one lecturer that speaks Xhosa and when I ask him to kindly translate, he always laughs and dismisses me.*

As demonstrated in Candice's account, the opportunity for isiXhosa speakers to participate in class discussions in their native language at the historically black institution she attends is seen as privileging some, yet hindering her ability to interact in class. Such experiences show the need for careful consideration in language policies of how language can be used and experienced differently by different students. The literature further substantiates that an intersectional approach to language entails recognizing that intersectionality provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the various dimensions of oppression and bias, as well as the social and political structures that function to exclude, marginalize, and render individuals as 'Other' (Hlatshwayo, 2020). Creating an inclusive learning environment that is conducive to both learning and unlearning requires context-specific considerations. As Meyer & Coyle (2024) assert, language is so deeply ingrained in classroom settings that it becomes almost imperceptible, much like water is to a fish. Language is central to the process of teaching and learning, and therefore intersects with academic achievement, race, and socio-economic

class, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not had access to English-speaking schools.

#### **7.4.2. The potential for tension between the academic curriculum and spirituality**

Language transformation in higher education is also important as it is the medium through which Abantu (people) share more than their thoughts and opinions about their physical and social experiences but also about their spiritual environments (Mabela & Ditsele, 2024). Indigenous knowledge systems allows for the curriculum and the university space to be open to diverse cultural and spiritual needs and knowledge of the students. The link between spirituality and language use is strong for many, who might thus feel that their spiritual worlds are unwelcome in the monolingual academy. As Nomonde says:

*Also, I had a spiritual and an intellectual shift. That's something we need to pay attention to in higher learning institutions because if you have self-conflict, how are you supposed to articulate yourself if my spirit and being are not OK? How do you expect me to produce a 2000 word essay? How am I going to express myself? How am I going to articulate myself, if my spirit and being are not OK?*

Nomonde's is a Black woman whose reflections highlight the interconnectedness of spirituality, language, the curriculum. Her reflections call for indigenous knowledge systems to create opportunities for students with spiritual inclinations to engage in university education. In this context, spirituality refers to the process of attributing meaning to a specific aspect of life and personal experience. This is generally done through language and so the language itself is a vital aspect of many people's spirituality. Mayhew (2004) emphasizes that spirituality is a relational phenomenon, involving experiences of connectedness with one's inner self, other human and non-human beings, the natural world, the cosmos, and higher purposes and powers that transcend individual concerns. The spiritual dimension is often overlooked, particularly for African students who must navigate their spirituality within the confines of Eurocentric norms and expectations in the classroom.

Furthermore, students with spiritual callings often need study leave to attend to their spiritual health. Most universities do not cater for such demands. Some students need to perform the

burning of herbs like Impepho<sup>15</sup> to heal and connect with their spiritual beings but because they reside in university residences that have different protocols, they are often restricted from engaging in these practices. This was the case for Nomonde at Rhodes University. Nomonde, as a spiritual being, struggled to then articulate her experience as she navigated the university where she was expected to perform academically while also struggling spiritually. For example, she often missed submissions on days where she was struggling spiritually. She describes how she did not have the language to explain the dynamics of navigating her spirituality and the academic expectations needed.

To comprehend the influence of spirituality within South African universities, it is crucial to recognize the significance of the advancement of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. This involves acknowledging the diverse and complex nature of the knowledge domain, which underscores the importance of incorporating local languages and the influence of African spirituality (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014).

#### **7.4.3. Digital divide and intersectional inequality**

Transformation in higher education has also entailed a process of digital transformation for students and staff members to progress the curriculum. Digital transformation is a process to assist academic staff and students in the 21st century to gain teaching and learning capabilities in a time of rapid educational change and adaptation. However, there exists inequality of opportunity when it comes to digital advancement for different institutions in South Africa. The unequal distribution of resources in South African public universities can be attributed to the apartheid-era education system. This is evident in the contrast between historically disadvantaged institutions and historically advantaged ones among the 26 public universities (Nkanyane, 2023).

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<sup>15</sup> Impepho is an indigenous African plant that, once dried, is burnt in order to communicate with one's ancestors (Ntsangase, 2012).

During the implementation of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Minister of Higher Education and Training declared a transition to online remote education, delegating the decision-making process regarding the specific methods of online instruction to the discretion of individual universities (Knowles et al., 2023). The issue of distribution of resources and intersectional inequalities was exposed during the Covid19 pandemic where students were required to study from home using the internet and their laptops to keep up with the curriculum. During the pandemic historically advantaged universities, were able to distribute laptops more rapidly than the historically disadvantaged universities, where a significant proportion of students were situated on the less favourable side of the digital divide (Ngcobo, 2022). This then meant the curriculum continued with those who had means to participate while disadvantaged black students were stuck in villages with no connectivity and laptops to engage.

In his narrative, Inga explained how he experienced a lack of resources during emergency remote learning, and how the inequitable distribution of resources created divisions in his online learning environment:

*...Covid came and we had to go back home so since I was at home I wasn't able to study there because there are no labs around and I didn't have a laptop. But I applied for [a laptop from] varsity and I received it in June since they were lot of us who applied and they were processing all that. Then there were pathways, like pathway one starting from March up until June, people who started studying from March those who had laptops and connectivity and I was pathway two and started in June.*

In Inga's university, students were divided into two groups during online learning as a result of COVID19. Those who had resources to study were moved to what was known as 'pathway 1' while those who still needed connectivity and laptops were then moved to 'pathway 2'. At the time, the thinking was that students in pathway 2 could resume their studies face-to-face from June after the pandemic was estimated to be over, and catch up on the curriculum. According to Jack (2020: para. 2), Nelson Mandela University made a statement in 2020 during the pandemic that :

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach, such as only adopting online learning to complete the first semester, would exclude many of our students. Given our strong commitment to social justice and equality, this is not an acceptable option for us, hence we have developed two learning and

teaching pathways (and variations of these) to enable our students to complete their first semester modules and the academic year.

In June, however, the pandemic did not end and that meant the pathway 2 students had to now start online learning. The pathway 2 students included those with issues of connectivity (rural areas), unconducive home environments, and students without laptops. These students also included first year students whom came from secondary schools without computer or digital literacies. While the university's intention was to ensure there was no student left behind, deep-seated patterns of socioeconomic inequality – mainly categorised according to race, gender, class and geographic origin – were exposed (Black, Spreen & Vally 2020). Students in Pathway 2 were disadvantaged as those who possessed prior resources for online learning (pathway 1 students) were able to progress with their learning. With the pandemic continuing past June, the university had to adjust its plans and provide support to Pathway 2 students to do online learning. This led to students in Pathway 2 receiving pressure to rapidly assimilate upon the receiving of resources like Laptops. Despite the university offering support, I contend that this situation fostered a sense of division within the institution and highlighted existing structural inequalities. Addressing such challenges requires a structural intersectionality framework to fully understand the nuances between experiences.

Through Inga's narratives, it is evident that exclusions resulted from the divisions of students in two pathways during COVID19 online learning. Despite the support provided to pathway 2 students, the categorization of students into different pathways highlighted the persistent issue of inequitable access to education. In South Africa, online learning does not serve as a viable solution for ensuring educational equity. Online learning during COVID19 resulted in reinforced the digital divide, highlighting the disparity between individuals who have access to computers, the internet, and data and those who do not, which appeared to be a significant obstacle that hindered the practicality of e-learning in South Africa (Van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019; Faloye & Ajayi, 2021). It is pertinent to examine fundamental statistics regarding digital divides. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2019, merely 53.6% of the global population had access to the Internet, with a significantly lower figure of 19.1% in the least developed countries. While, in 2016, 59.3% of South Africans had access to the internet through work or internet cafés, only 9, 5% had internet access in their own homes (StatsSA, 2016). These figures have continued to grow with more and more South Africans able to access the internet on their phones. But the high cost of data means even those

who now have both the hardware and the signal coverage are unlikely to use the internet for much more than social messaging, through WhatsApp and Facebook (Statistica, 2024).

Those living in poverty and those with disabilities, who are already on the disadvantaged side of the digital divide (Martinez, 2020), experienced the constraints of the pandemic in particularly acute ways. Inga had to move to the rural areas in Queenstown, where he struggled to get access to WiFi. Accessibility and the unequal allocation of resources and the speed at which computers were provided to students in need during the COVID-19 online learning period resulted in the perpetuation of social class divisions.

Following the onset of the lockdown, a number of students withdrew from university expressing their discontent with the online learning system, contending that it was tailored for rich students, thereby disadvantaging those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Monama, 2020). Numerous students in their final year were preparing to enter the workforce and secure essential income; however, the COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated existing challenges.

A study by Mpungose (2020) revealed that only a few students had access to the pertinent online learning platform across the country. Zinzi, one of the collaborators, shared her experience with online learning during the pandemic by providing a picture of herself and a narrative to explain the picture



**Figure 7.1: Picture submitted by Zinzi**

*This picture reflects a day where I was doing my home chores a day before writing an online test. In university I got admitted in 2020 which was during COVID-19. We had to go back home and study online which was a huge challenge for me because I did not have a laptop, and our community internet café cost a lot of money to study there. In my high school we did not do computer lessons so using a computer was a big challenge as well. Another huge challenge was that I struggled with network as home is in the rural areas. Also, as a girl child I was expected to do chores at home while still struggling to catch up with my studies and my marks suffered a lot.*

Many universities tried to assist students by providing laptops for studying. However, these took time to be delivered while those students who had resources were engaged in online classes. While the process of online learning allowed accessibility at the difficult time of the pandemic it also exposed multi-layered inequalities for students like Zinzi. The majority of students who come to universities are from the rural areas which are underdeveloped with lack of access to internet café as well as network.

In addition to slow resource allocation and connectivity issues, Zinzi also faced the dual challenge of managing her schoolwork while also fulfilling her responsibilities at home, highlighting the intersectionality of gender roles, as women disproportionately bear the burden of 'invisible work' in the household (Danielsson & Eriksson, 2020; Hatton, 2017). In many homes, there are still gendered responsibilities particularly imposed on females and Zinzi had to partake in those responsibilities. As discussed in the work of Knowles et al. (2023):

During online learning there were unseen burdens placed on many students from poorer households, where academic activities were deprioritised, often in gendered ways, as female students were expected to take on caring and household chores

While many universities played a critical role in assisting many students to access the study material on time while trying to cover the syllabus, only a few students had access to conducive learning environments in their homes (Mpungose, 2020: 2). These exclusions can be analysed through the lens of structural intersectionality. Zinzi is a black woman from a small town her position within the socio-economic hierarchy is marginalized affecting her educational experience as well. It can also be seen as political intersectionality as she is being positioned at home as a “girl child who must do girl chores”.

Yongama, another collaborator, also shared his experience with online learning as he started university in 2018 before the onset of Covid-19:

*I started my higher education journey in 2018 doing a degree in education as I had been previously enrolled in another institution for two years but could not finish due to financial constraints. I started pre-Covid which I attended in contact classes and you know the benefit for that was the interaction with the lecturers. Then when COVID hit, the integration to the new system was a bit different as It took us a while to integrate to the whole technological demand and online classes... For us who had no laptops at the time of online learning we had a lot of catching up to do*

Yongama had to transition from being a student who attended classes face-to-face to now moving online during the pandemic. She mentions the difficulty of having no face-to-face interaction with the lecturers due to the pandemic. Mpungose (2020) argues that the process of learning is fundamentally interactive. However, during emergency remote learning, interaction

was limited. This was due to various factors including the fact that many students were still navigating the use of digital learning platforms while at the same time trying to grasp the new knowledge being taught and catch up on work already missed. This left little time to properly engage and interact with the curriculum. Without the necessary interaction in the teaching and learning space, there was a loss of communal knowledge-building which African feminist thought tells us is key to learning that takes the African context into account (Ntseane, 2011). Communal knowledge construction serves as a method for academic integration among students through the facilitation of face-to-face interaction. Despite the availability of platforms intended to facilitate continuous collaborative knowledge construction online during the Covid-19 pandemic, students were already overwhelmed by the requirements of the adapting to an online space.

While many students complained about online learning, there were other students who were also able to reflect about the lessons and skills that they received during the online learning phase. One of the collaborators, Yongama, shared that “the benefit of online learning is that as a future teacher I can now use technology properly as the education system evolves”. On the other hand, one of the collaborators Olwam indicated that:

*Doing online learning indincedile ngoba (has assisted because) as I could just sit and listen instead of worrying if bazandiva na (they will understand me/my point), so I could go back to recordings to listen to lectures instead of asking a lecturer to repeat themselves as I struggled with English. I was also able to do part time jobs and study later.*

Engaging with the recorded content for Olwam was easier than having to ask about content in a face-to-face class. This intersectional experience shows the difficulties of navigating language and the curriculum in universities due to monolingualism as Olwam was worried about his English articulation and understanding in face-to-face classes. For Olwam, online learning seemed like a benefit however it was just another context that exposed the other strategies of colonialism involving 'othering' and 'invisibilisation' (Tamale, 2020: 247). This is shown through Olwam's actions of keeping quiet rather than asking a question even with online learning as he feared his English understandings and language use would not be understood. This means language and digital learning for Olwam showed a combination of structural and political intersectionality. Language in

South Africa is political and structural due to the shift to monolingualism so it digital access.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

The narratives presented in this chapter have illustrated the intersectional experiences of students navigating the complexities of gender, queer spaces, race, language, geographical locations and socioeconomic backgrounds within the curriculum. These accounts highlight the unique challenges faced by those who must navigate through predominantly gendered monolingual institutions while simultaneously embracing their diverse cultural identities, including aspects such as African spirituality. Despite the predominance of English in educational settings, language policies often fail to accommodate the needs of individuals from non-English backgrounds, further complicating their educational journeys. Collaborators shared their multifaceted gendered experiences of overcoming barriers related to access to digital resources, economic constraints, gender roles and language proficiency, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition to online learning not only exposed existing economic and social disparities but also underscored the universities' struggles to effectively address these inequities, revealing how intersectionality profoundly shapes the educational experience.

## Chapter Eight: Research Conclusion

*Let's flap our wings and fly together,*

*Break the chains of patriarchy forever.*

*We stand united, hand in hand,*

*No longer silent, we take a stand.*

(Islam, 2023, para. 1)

### 8.1 Introduction

The above opening lines from a poem by Ayesha Islam is a reflection on embracing equality and equity in gender. There is power in embracing equality and equity even in higher education a space where individuals learn, unlearn, get empowered and build knowledge. The findings chapters in this thesis have demonstrated that there is still room for work to be done to embrace gender equality and equity in higher education. Having shared the key findings in the previous three chapters, I now turn, in this chapter, to present a summary of the findings, sharing initial recommendations for curbing gender inequality in higher education, reflecting on the contributions of this study to knowledge, and making some suggestions for further research.

Drawing on the findings, the chapter discusses feasible interventions that Eastern Cape universities can implement and strengthen to drive gender transformation that will transform student experiences. It identifies the gaps highlighted in the findings and makes recommendations for the transformation and development of programmes that will effectively address gender inequality using primary prevention strategies informed by the theoretical frameworks grounding this study. It also highlights some of the protective factors which these universities should have to promote the prevention of violence. The chapter describes the study's contributions to knowledge, that is, the provision of a deeper understanding of the context of student experiences of gender in higher education and some of the ways students navigate the university as physical and social spaces. The final part of the chapter provides

suggestions for future research and considers the gaps identified that this research could not address.

## **8.2. Overview of the Study**

This research provided a comprehensive examination of the interconnected gender experiences of students at the four Eastern Cape universities in South Africa. I started the research by drawing from my personal journey as a student, gender activist, scholar and employee within these institutions. I then introduced and drew on the conversations I had with diverse students from the four universities to gain perspective on their experiences. The central research question was, “How does gender (understood intersectionally) shape students’ experiences in higher education, particularly post the #MustFall movements and during the COVID-19 era?”. This question guided the exploration of how gender intersects with various identities and systemic factors that influence students' experiences in higher education. By focusing on the lived experiences of students, the study aimed to highlight the complexities of gender matters beyond the existence of gender policies and quotas, emphasising the need for a practical understanding of these challenges in higher education. The research sought to interrogate the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives within universities, recognising that the mere presence of policies does not guarantee their impact on students' lives.

The research employed a comfortable and inclusive data-gathering process, allowing students to share their experiences in safe environments. This approach not only facilitated a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of gender with other identities but also provided valuable insights into the transformation implications of gender equality initiatives. The objectives of this research also included the need to contextualise the history of gender construction and resistance within South Africa’s higher education system. This was important as South Africa has a unique history with interconnected systems of oppression that affected marginalised groups. Gender construction in Africa was also interrogated to work on the understanding of what is “gender” and to see whether universities understand the concept of gender and how it is mainstreamed in systems, decisions and practices of the universities. Therefore, by amplifying student voices and experiences, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender in higher education, advocating a more nuanced and intersectional approach to understanding and addressing the complexities of gender in academic settings.

The research also aimed to underscore the importance of historical resistance in comprehending the persistent inequalities present in higher education. This objective was pursued by examining the legacy of colonialism in South Africa and its relationship to the historical exclusions within the higher education system. Such an analysis was crucial for illustrating how contemporary gender issues are rooted in colonial legacies and how these challenges are intertwined with broader societal dynamics. In addition, the exploration of historical resistance encompassed an examination of two significant contexts that prompted a further look at transformation in higher education: the #MustFall movements and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, these contexts were situated within the timeframe from 2015 to the onset of the pandemic in South Africa in 2020. The #MustFall movements highlighted the necessity of acknowledging students' lived experiences as a means to inform and enhance gender equity initiatives within universities, ensuring that these initiatives are not only theoretically robust but also practically effective in promoting an inclusive educational environment. The demands articulated during this period centred on decolonisation and immediate action. While the #MustFall movements facilitated ongoing discussions regarding interconnected matters, it became evident that students continued to encounter overlapping exclusions within the university system, a matter that will be addressed in the subsequent summary of findings. Furthermore, the pandemic period further illuminated existing inequalities, particularly concerning the interconnections between gender, social class and language.

### **8.3 Empirical contributions**

This study fills a gap in the literature by expanding the existing body of work on gender in higher education by focusing on the four universities in the Eastern Cape. Through intersectionality, this work was able to show how student experiences and their responses to situations can either facilitate or hamper their negotiation within the university space(s). It was interesting to see how factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality and age, simultaneously affected the manner in which students negotiated complexities within the university. Several findings emanated from this study. Chapter Five offered the first set of findings focusing on the interplay of identities and systems. Collaborators shared their experiences when it comes to race and racial microaggressions which they experience in and outside of universities. The analysis in Chapter Five highlighted how these intersecting

identities shape students' experiences and sense of belonging within the university, revealing the enduring impact of historical racial categorisations and the resulting microaggressions. Through their understanding of representational and political intersectionality, universities could foster awareness of intangible and often difficult-to-articulate racial microaggressions, both within and outside academic environments. This awareness is essential for facilitating unlearning processes among students and staff, ensuring that marginalised students do not continue to experience an exclusionary atmosphere in universities.

Another key finding in Chapter Five is the challenge of gendered language and gender misrecognition, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and more (LGBTQI+) students. The study emphasises the need for gender-inclusive language to foster a sense of belonging, advocating the use of native languages like isiXhosa to reduce misgendering and promote inclusivity. Another significant finding concerned the intersectionality of masculinity, mental health and social class among male students. Narratives revealed the pressures of traditional masculinity, including the stigma against emotional expression encapsulated in the phrase “Indoda ayikhali” (A man does not cry). This expectation, rooted in gendered social constructs, significantly complicates the mental health and emotional wellbeing of male students, as it intersects with broader societal expectations of strength and stoicism, often hindering their ability to seek support or express vulnerability.

Chapter Six on the other hand focused on the intersectionality of GBV affecting female students. The findings highlighted a pervasive atmosphere of GBV that undermines safety and belonging on campus. The narratives underscored how intersecting identities such as race, class and gender amplify the experiences of violence and marginalisation, aligning with Crenshaw’s framework on systemic oppression. The study calls for a nuanced approach to addressing GBV, taking into account these intersecting identities to create a safer, more inclusive university environment. South African universities could make use of a multifaceted approach that considers the complex interplay of identity markers such as race, gender, class and sexuality. The healing and support strategies for survivors could move beyond a one-size-fits-all model to using intersectionality in order to acknowledge how marginalised groups, particularly Black female students, LGBTQ+ students, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience GBV differently.

Chapter Seven addressed concerns within the curriculum in higher education, revealing challenges related to language, the digital divide and equity. Despite open access to education, the study found that the diverse backgrounds of students require a more inclusive approach to ensure educational equality, addressing the intersectional dynamics that affect students' academic experiences. This study emphasises the need for an intersectional approach to understanding the benefits and drawbacks of blended learning in promoting equality within South African higher education. While blended learning offers flexible access to education, it can disproportionately benefit students with stable internet access, technological resources and a supportive home environment as shown through the narratives shared. The chapter explored the intersectionality of class, gender and race, particularly through the lens of “Ukuphanda/Ukutabalaza” (hustling), which reflects the financial survival strategies of many Black students. Black students in particular found themselves hustling with part-time jobs in order to assist themselves and their families as the financial aid often takes time to pay out and sometimes the money paid out is not enough.

Through this study, I sought to explore the lived experiences of students, focusing on how gendered norms and inequalities are perpetuated in university spaces despite ongoing transformation efforts. The empirical findings provide new perspectives on how HEIs can improve their responses to gendered violence, exclusion and marginalisation, aligning with recent calls for more intersectional and student-centred approaches in university policies (Crenshaw, 1991; Kimmel, 2005). Overall, the empirical contribution of the study is centred around the call for a more inclusive, intersectional approach to addressing the complexities of gender, mental health, GBV, race, social class, sexuality and curriculum issues in higher education.

#### **8.4 Methodological and theoretical contributions**

When I began this research, my primary aim was to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on gender concerns in higher education, particularly how they are maintained or addressed within broader transformation initiatives. My research is situated within the field of social justice and transformation in higher education, which is a critical area of study as institutions work to become more inclusive and equitable particularly post #MustFall movements and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to explore the lived experiences of students I generated data through a novel methodological approach, which was partly shaped by the input from my research collaborators. This empirical data was then analysed using a critical social theory, intersectionality. This section outlines how the study has contributed both methodological and theoretical knowledge to the field of higher education studies.

#### **8.4.1 Methodological contributions**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, which, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), enables researchers to gain deeper insight into the lived experiences of participants. I used an experience-centred narrative methodology, combined with photovoice, to explore these experiences. As outlined in Chapter Four, the initial decision to use narratives as a methodological approach was made without fully knowing how it would evolve. This research was conducted as a collaborative project between my collaborators and myself, where the traditional roles of researcher and participant were intentionally deconstructed. Typically, collaborators, often referred to as “participants,” are seen as subordinate to researchers, who are positioned as the “experts” extracting relevant information from the “subjects” (Rider, 2005, p. 36). This hierarchical relationship is one that feminist researchers reject, advocating instead an interdependent and egalitarian partnership between researchers and collaborators. In this study, I did not view myself as the “expert” but approached the field with openness, ready to collaborate in the development and design of the research methodology and methods alongside my collaborators.

In this spirit of collaboration, we co-created a new methodological approach that we termed “Ukuncokola”, a conversational method within the narrative framework. Unlike traditional research methods that rely on pre-designed interview questions, Ukuncokola is driven by the spontaneous flow of conversation between the researcher and the collaborator. This flexible approach led to the emergence of diverse conversations, some of which contributed directly to the research data, while others facilitated mutual growth and healing for both the researcher and the collaborators.

This collaborative process deepened our understanding of the purpose and nature of research conducted with people. Nadar (2014, p. 18) refers to this process as “data with soul,” arguing that storytelling plays a profound role in knowledge production by humanising research.

Feminist scholars assert that storytelling is not only a legitimate but a scientifically valid component of research. The stories shared in this study and the active participation of all collaborators throughout the research process constitute a significant contribution to knowledge. Moreover, this work contributes to feminist methodology and epistemology, as it foregrounds the importance of storytelling in the research process from the telling and listening of stories to the construction of narratives that represent research findings.

Furthermore, the implementation of collaborative data generation through the workshop facilitated critical engagement with preliminary findings among collaborators, reinforcing the notion that knowledge is not monopolised but rather that all individuals possess valuable contributions especially when research is about their experiences. The incorporation of photovoice emerged organically as collaborators presented a poem and photographs, reflecting their willingness to co-develop the research methodology, despite its absence in the initial proposal. This spontaneous adaptation underscores a commitment to counteracting the perception of research as an extractive endeavour, as articulated by Tamale (2020), who critiques the Eurocentric research paradigm for prioritising the researcher's agenda over the interests of participants. In this study, a deliberate transition from the term 'participants' to 'collaborators' was made, necessitating a relinquishment of complete control over the research process and the creation of space for collaborative input. Such practices are recognised as vital components of the research process within feminist scholarship.

#### **8.4.2 Theoretical contributions**

The primary focus of this study was on the intersectionality of gender in student experiences, though when I began the project, I was uncertain of the specific interconnections that would emerge. As such, it is important to reflect on how the study has contributed to the existing body of theoretical work on gender and intersectionality as an analytical framework. The theory of intersectionality, as discussed in Chapter Three, examines the overlapping and interdependent systems of race, gender, class, ability, and other social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). This research, therefore, contributes to expanding the understanding of intersectionality, particularly by exploring how systems beyond the traditionally recognised categories of race, class and gender intersect in the experiences of students. It highlights the importance of understanding gendered norms to better grasp how students navigate these complex intersections.

A key contribution of this study was the use of an “intersectionality walk” as a methodological approach. This approach emphasises embodied practices for exploring intersectional experiences, allowing students to articulate their identities and experiences in their own terms, rather than imposing pre-defined categories. Rather than constructing identities based on theoretical assumptions, I let the collaborators define their own intersections through storytelling. While I specified ‘gender’ in my initial approach and informed consent process, I opened the data collection process to whatever aspects of their experiences they wished to share. This created a space where students could narrate their experiences without the researcher needing to assign labels. The intersectionality walk thus became a dynamic and collaborative process, with each story unfolding as a unique, individual journey through multiple social systems. The walk allowed for a deeper understanding of the diverse and fluid ways in which students navigate intersecting identities, providing rich, nuanced insights that were not confined to predetermined categories of analysis.

### **8.5 Recommendations for Eastern Cape universities (and beyond)**

The main recommendation emerging from this study is the need for all of us the wider higher education community to reflect on issues of social justice and equity from an intersectional approach. While much research, curriculum transformation and student and staff development initiatives take considerations of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion seriously, they typically do so from a single-axis perspective. But as the narratives shared here attest, student experiences do not emerge from single identity markers: race always works in relationship with gender, which always works in relationship with social class and so on. There is thus a very real need for us to consider, in all higher education policies and procedures, how experiences emerge intersectionally.

Alongside this general recommendation for a consciously intersectional approach to all higher education activities come a few more specific recommendations. One of the key concerns raised by students in this research was the need for a deeper understanding and proactive engagement with gendered language, not only within universities but also within broader community contexts. Students highlighted the exclusion and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, which is often perpetuated using community slang and gendered language. This

underscores the urgency of addressing the linguistic practices that marginalise non-binary, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals.

As a recommendation, universities in the Eastern Cape could work collaboratively, particularly through their transformation offices, to develop a glossary of inclusive terms and pronouns. Such a glossary should serve as an educational tool for students, staff and faculty, helping to raise awareness and promote the use of gender-neutral and affirming language within university communities. The glossary should be distributed widely across campuses and incorporated into university orientation programmes, workshops and staff training sessions. This initiative could also be extended to local communities, as inclusive language practices have the potential to reduce stigma and foster more inclusive social environments both within and outside academic settings.

Implementing such a project aligns with broader calls for the decolonisation of language and the promotion of linguistic justice which recognises how language shapes power dynamics and social inclusion (Lorde, 1984; Pennycook, 2007). Moreover, it would contribute to the creation of more inclusive and supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, fostering a culture of respect and dignity. This leads to the next recommendation emerging from this study which is the pioneering of gender inclusivity through inter-varsity engagements and research collaborations on intersectionality and gender. Universities in the Eastern Cape, and beyond, should establish cross-institutional partnerships to develop and share best practices for fostering gender inclusivity in higher education. By creating collaborative platforms for research on gender, intersectionality, and social justice, universities can collectively advance knowledge and strengthen their capacity to address the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalised gender identities.

Correspondingly, inter-varsity collaborations could take the form of joint research projects, conferences and workshops that focus on gender inclusivity and intersectionality in educational settings. These initiatives would not only provide opportunities for knowledge exchange but also allow institutions to engage in collective problem solving. This could also touch on the next recommendation which is the integration of social justice and decolonisation in all departments' curricula such as gender curricular integration. This will support intersectional pedagogies that account for the overlapping dimensions of race, gender, class, ability and other social categories. These pedagogies would help create more inclusive curricula and teaching

practices that reflect the lived experiences of all students, particularly those from LGBTQI+ and other marginalised groups (Collins, 2000). There is a lack of inclusivity policies that address the LGBTQI+ community even though there have been pockets of work done around the rights of the LGBTQI+ community. Also, another recommendation is for universities to work on their academic integration programmes for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly regarding financial support and their navigation of the university curriculum.

To promote a more inclusive and equitable university environment, it is essential that universities implement courses on mediation and social justice approaches as part of their core curricula. These courses should aim to facilitate the unlearning of racism, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. Such initiatives should be integrated into the onboarding process for both students and staff, perhaps through gender sensitisation workshops or human resources awareness videos that are delivered prior to employment or academic recruitment. This recommendation comes with the awareness of the dangers of such interventions becoming superficial and having no impact on institutional structures and cultures and the need for any such interventions to be part of a larger integrated initiative to ensure intersectionality is taken to consideration.

In response to concerns about the safety of female students, particularly in the context of GBV, universities could adopt a trauma-informed, stakeholder-driven approach to address GBV. Such an approach should include clearly communicate systems for reporting, raising awareness, and ensuring proactive responses, with collaboration among university communities, law enforcement, and students' families. GBV remains a significant issue in South Africa, and universities must take a leading role in mitigating its impact. Furthermore, universities could strengthen existing policies to address and reduce power imbalances in relationships between staff and students. Additionally, universities in the Eastern Cape could build into their many established partnerships with local communities, especially schools, to engage in collaborative efforts aimed at raising awareness and unlearning patriarchal norms. This would contribute to fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment both within and beyond university settings. Given the extent to which both patriarchal suppression of women and girls and GBV are prevalent across South African society, as this study data attests,

this would be a complex and ongoing project requiring careful collaboration between all partners.

A further recommendation is for universities to prioritise compliance, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of gender equality policies. This could involve consultation with students to ensure that equity in policy design and implementation is institutionally understood. Finally, it is crucial for the Department of Higher Education to reconsider the funding models for universities which currently place a significant financial burden on middle-class families and students who rely on NSFAS. Addressing these financial challenges is essential for ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have equitable access to higher education. By implementing these recommendations, universities can foster a more inclusive, safe and supportive academic environment for all students. As indicated, universities in South Africa, including those in this study, have put in place various interventions to support students, including ‘extended curricula’, ‘foundation programmes’ and ‘augmented programmes’. But without an intersectional approach, such interventions can easily serve to reinforce the notion of the ‘remedial student’ in need of assistance while the mainstream curriculum remains untouched (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

## **8.6. Limitations of the study**

This study was restricted in scope, with only four institutions of higher learning and eighteen collaborators. The inclusion experiences of the collaborators certainly cannot be regarded as universal and I have never intended for it to be understood as such. Even though the research was open to anyone who wanted to participate in order to ensure diverse views only the 18 which are introduced in Chapter Four expressed interest. Given the extensive time period (multiple conversations and the online workshop) and, perhaps more importantly, the potentially challenging nature of the data creation, it is unsurprising that the number of people volunteering to take part was limited.

However, it is important to acknowledge the value of the methodological approach, particularly the use of narrative inquiry, which prioritizes individual lived experiences. Given the extent of my engagement with the collaborators, it would no doubt have proved challenging to do justice to the lived experiences of more than 18 collaborators. This approach has allowed for a rich,

in-depth understanding of personal experiences, providing nuanced insights that may not be easily captured through more standardized or quantitative methods.

One key strength of the study is the inclusion of a gender non-conforming student currently undergoing a transition to becoming a male, which significantly enriches the research. This is especially noteworthy given the limited academic focus on transgender and gender non-conforming experiences in South Africa (Bottomman, 2021). The inclusion of such a participant provides a rare and valuable perspective, contributing to the underrepresented discourse on transgender bodies and identities within the context of higher education. This insight not only enhanced the diversity of the study but also offered critical contributions to filling an important gap in existing literature, ensuring the study's relevance and impact in advancing understanding of gender diversity in South African academic settings.

### **8.7 Personal reflections on the study**

Since the beginning of my study, I have engaged in personal reflections to position myself both as a researcher and as an individual who has also shared her own narrative in Chapter One. Reflexivity is a vital aspect of qualitative research, as it allows the researcher to critically examine their role in the study and acknowledge their personal subjectivity (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the study, I practised introspection to assess how my personal experiences and perspectives influenced the research process.

The data collection and analysis stages were emotionally challenging, as I navigated the personal and often painful experiences of students still facing significant struggles in a democratic society. I constantly questioned the purpose of social justice initiatives in universities if marginalised groups continue to experience exclusion. Despite universities having policies in place to address these matters, I grappled with the question: “Who is the includer, and who is the included? Whose voices matter?” I was surprised to discover that academic staff in HEIs are often not adequately trained to address matters such as gendered language, racism and GBV. In addition, the power dynamics between staff and students often make these difficult to address effectively.

While coding the raw data, I had to assign pseudonyms to the collaborators, which made me reflect on how I, too, was contributing to their invisibility. This experience led me to reconsider my ethical approach, and in hindsight, I wish I had revised the ethics application to allow those who wanted to be named to do so. I now hope to co-write a book with my collaborators and archive their stories, honouring their voices more visibly.

Although my emotions were deeply involved in this research, I maintained a rigorous approach to developing categories, themes and subthemes. I share this because conducting emotional work and collecting stories of students facing multiple exclusions is not an easy task. Detachment, to some extent, is a privilege I did not have. Being emotionally invested in the project allowed me to care for my collaborators, remain committed to their stories, and listen as a human being rather than as a detached researcher.

Once I moved into the interpretation phase of the study, I shifted into my researcher role, carefully analyzing the photo narratives and transcripts. I made a conscious effort to interpret the data according to my collaborators' experiences and perspectives. Deciding which aspects to focus on and which to exclude was emotionally fraught. The use of intersectionality and my research question guided me in my analysis but there was much that was said by my collaborators which was of interest, albeit not related to my study. It felt like a challenge to select what issues to focus on and to select one or two quotes among the many to illustrate a finding. Even during this initial stage, I consistently returned to my collaborators for clarification, ensuring I accurately represented their stories. The other important tool in this regard was the workshop that I facilitated with the collaborators which went beyond fact checking. While time-consuming, this process was essential for strengthening my relationship with them and ensuring the validity of the research.

### **8.8 Implications for future studies**

During the course of this study, particularly during the data analysis phase, I realized that there is much more to be explored regarding the interconnected needs of students, as reflected in their experiences. The findings of this research could serve as a foundation for further, more focused studies, particularly in exploring the disparities between historically Black and historically white universities. I recommend that future research delve deeper into specific issues, including the individual and institutional responses to GBV. It was evident that at times

institutional structures contributed to the revictimization of students who experienced GBV. This area requires urgent attention to ensure that support systems are truly empowering and effective for survivors.

Another key area for future research is the heteronormative and gendering nature of universities, which continues to marginalize and dehumanize non-normative bodies. As scholars like Msibi (2013) have illustrated, the assumption of the academy is that everyone embodies one of two genders and is heterosexual. This phenomenon requires further exploration to understand how gender norms are embedded within institutional practices and cultures, often leading to exclusion and harm for students who do not conform to traditional gender expectations. For example, some universities still include “Mr/Miss/Mrs” in their applications and other communication, suggesting that a woman’s identity as a student is tied to her marital status in a way a man’s isn’t. And even where “Ms/Mr” is used in emails and applications (with no other options available), there is an assumption of gender duality.

Additionally, interactions with participants revealed a significant issue: while universities communicate available help and resources, especially for financially needy students, there is a pervasive sense of shame and frustration associated with navigating the often-lengthy administrative processes to access support. Research into these structures is necessary to understand how institutional processes can be reformed to be more responsive, empathetic, and efficient.

I also recommend research that critically examines the othering of gender in political movements, particularly how the exclusion of women and marginalized genders within these movements often results in the violation of their bodies and voices. This research could help identify strategies to make political activism more inclusive and protective of all participants.

Finally, I recommend further development of decolonial methodologies to create more inclusive and equitable research practices. By adopting and advancing these methodologies, researchers can challenge the dominance of Western-centric perspectives and ensure that research processes better reflect the diverse lived experiences of marginalized groups. These recommendations, if pursued, could significantly advance our understanding of the intersections of gender, race, class, and power in higher education and beyond.

This research has examined the experiences of students regarding gender within the context of higher education, particularly through the lens of intersectionality and its connection to various social justice issues. But it is also crucial to consider the current state of global politics and its potential implications for future research concerning exclusion, social justice, and equality. One could argue that the contemporary global landscape, particularly the policy changes enacted by the American administration right now at the time of my proof-reading this thesis, reflects a continuation of historical patterns of white colonization and imperialism, characterized by efforts to extract and control wealth while marginalizing Black identities (Gumbo, Knaus & Gasa, 2024). The need for transformative research is more pressing than ever as we navigate a new era of power dynamics, particularly in light of funding cuts from the United States that jeopardize critical projects and research addressing social injustices. Therefore, it is imperative to persist in investigating the relationship between international institutions, the state and higher education during this pivotal time.

## **8.9 Conclusion**

The primary objective of this chapter was to synthesize the key findings of the study, reflect on its implications, and provide a critical overview of the research process. This reflection involved examining the methodological and theoretical frameworks that shaped the study, demonstrating how they served as the foundation for the research. Additionally, I outlined the significant contributions this study makes to the existing, yet limited, body of knowledge on gender and intersectionality in higher education.

In conclusion, this study advocates for gender transformation within higher education institutions, with a particular focus on the universities of the Eastern Cape. Although the scope of the study was geographically limited, the broader implication is clear: institutions of higher learning need to work hard and collaboratively to create inclusive and socially just environments that consider the intersectional experiences of all students. As diverse students enter university spaces, it is imperative that universities not only open their gates but actively work to integrate and welcome students from marginalized backgrounds.

While universities were not originally designed with marginalized groups in mind, the expansion of access presents an opportunity for transformation. This underscores the necessity of creating spaces that are truly inclusive and equitable as universities are the mirror of the

society and therefore perpetuate many of the prejudices and injustices found in society at large. As the research revealed, the playing field remains uneven, and this disparity contributes the idea that some students are less deserving of success in higher education just as they find themselves marginally placed in society at large with its many colonial legacies. The experiences shared by students in this study reflect the ongoing challenge of belonging in a space that, for many, was not designed to include them. We need continued commitment to gender transformation and equity, and to the creation of university environments that genuinely embrace the full diversity of student identities.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethical Clearance



Rhodes University, Education Faculty  
Research Ethics Committee  
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0) 46 603 8197  
Fax: +27 (0) 46 603 8328  
email: [e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za](mailto:e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za)

<http://www.ru.ac.za/research/gateway/ethics/>

2 December 2022

Miss asiphe mxalisa

[g21m8590@campus.ru.ac.za](mailto:g21m8590@campus.ru.ac.za)

Dear Miss Asiphe Mxalisa

**Re:** Students' experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2022-5366-7319

This letter confirms that your research ethics renewal application has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC).

Approval is granted for 1 year. An annual progress report is required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the progress report is due.

Should any substantive change(s) be made during the research process, that may have ethical implications, you should notify the Education Faculty REC Chair via email. This includes changes in investigators. The REC Chair will advise as to whether a new application is necessary.

Do keep this clearance letter secure and accessible throughout your study and after its completion. It will be needed when a thesis is examined and when publications are submitted to journals.

Please also submit a brief report to the REC Chair on the completion of the research. This can be done via email. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully and whether any ethics-related matters arose that the committee should be aware of, in order to guide future studies.

Sincerely,

**Prof Eureka Rosenberg**

**Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee**

## Appendix B: Permission from Nelson Mandela University



Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Human)  
Tel: +27 (0)41 504 3624  
[Dalray.Gradidge@mandela.ac.za](mailto:Dalray.Gradidge@mandela.ac.za)

NHREC registration nr: REC-042508-025

Ref: [H22-EDU-ERE-EAP-001] / Approval: 21 June 2022 – 21 June 2023

21 June 2022

Dear Prof McKenna

**STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF GENDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION POST #MUSTFALL MOVEMENTS AND DURING THE COVID19 ERA: AN INTERSECTIONAL STUDY**

PRP: Prof S McKenna  
PI: Ms A Mxalisa

Your application for ethics approval to conduct research at Nelson Mandela University has been considered by the REC-H on the basis that the study has been duly vetted and approved by the Rhodes Research Ethics Committee.

Kindly use the following ethics reference number **H22-EDU-ERE-EAP-001** together with your University's ethics clearance number in any correspondence with gatekeepers and participants at the University. Ethics clearance is valid for one year.

Please inform the REC-H, of any changes that may arise during the execution of the study, particularly to the methodology.

It must be noted that the Nelson Mandela University assumes that the Research Ethics Committee responsible for providing the original ethics approval/clearance has undertaken both ethics and scientific review of the protocol according to the National Health Research Ethics Committee (2015) Guidelines, and assumes primary responsibility for oversight with regard to any ethical issues that may arise in the course of the study. The Nelson Mandela University would also wish to be provided with an executive summary of the findings from the research.

We wish you well with the project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Gradidge', is written over a white rectangular background.

**Dr D Gradidge**  
**Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Human)**

cc: Department of Research Development

## Appendix C: Permission from University of Fort Hare



13<sup>th</sup> June, 2022

**Asiphe Mxalisa**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**Rhodes university**

[asiphemxalisa@gmail.com](mailto:asiphemxalisa@gmail.com)

[a.mxalisa@ru.ac.za](mailto:a.mxalisa@ru.ac.za)

Dear Asiphe Mxalisa

**RE: Permission to Conduct Research at the University of Fort Hare.**

We have reviewed your request for permission to approach students at the University of Fort Hare to participate in a research project titled “**Students’ experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study**”.

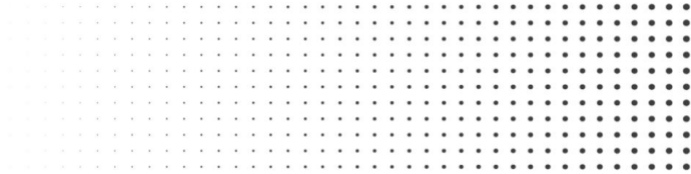
This letter serves to notify you that permission is hereby granted for you to carry out the research and to utilise the data for this project as laid out in

- your request for this gatekeeper’s permission
- your research proposal
- your letter of invitation to participate
- and in accordance with the stipulations under which ethical clearance for the study was issued by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Rhodes University.



EN Zuma  
University Registrar

## Appendix D: Permission from Walter Sisulu University



**DIVISION OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND RESEARCH  
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

**Nelson Mandela Drive**  
Mthatha Campus  
Private Bag X1  
MTHATHA 5117  
Tel: + 27 47 502 2137/2044  
Fax: +27 47 502 2185

[wakpan@wsu.ac.za](mailto:wakpan@wsu.ac.za)

**Buffalo City**  
Potsdam Campus  
EAST LONDON  
Tel: + 43 708 5444  
Fax: + 43 708 5458

10 March 2022

Ms Asiphe Mxalisa  
Rhodes University  
GRAHAMSTOWN  
6140

Dear Ms Mxalisa

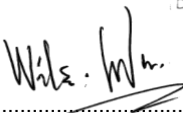
Gatekeepers Permission Letter to conduct research at Walter Sisulu University

Ethical Clearance Number: 2021-5366- 6463  
Institution: Walter Sisulu University

A Gatekeeper Letter is hereby granted for the study "Students' experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study" provided that copies of your completed study will be submitted to the Campus Rector of the campus in which the study will be conducted and the Directorate of the Research & Innovation.

All data pertaining to Walter Sisulu University will be treated confidentially and you are required to abide by ethical principles at all times. It is your responsibility to seek consent from Participants.

Kind regards

  
Prof. W. Akpan  
Senior Director: Research & Innovation

Directorate: Research Development

WALTER SISULU UNIVERSITY  
PRIVATE BAG X1 MTHATHA 5117  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA  
TEL: +27 502 2947 FAX: +27 502 2185

Walter Sisulu University

## Appendix E: Permission from Rhodes University



**RHODES UNIVERSITY**  
Grahamstown • 6110 • South Africa

CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH, TEACHING AND LEARNING  
Email: [chert-admin@ru.ac.za](mailto:chert-admin@ru.ac.za) • Tel: +27 (0)46 603 8171/3 • Fax: +27 (0)46 603 7352

### PERMISSION LETTER TO HEAD OF INSTITUTION

28/02/2022

#### REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

To whom it may concern

My name is **Asiphe Mxalisa** and I am a PhD student in Higher Education (21M8590) at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa. The research I wish to conduct for my doctoral studies entails me holding narrative interviews with approximately five students in your institution, ranging from 1<sup>st</sup> year to postgraduate level.

This letter serves to seek consent to approach students in the university as potential participants for this research. I have identified potential students through my own networks and will invite them to consider participating. I attach a copy of my research proposal which includes a copy of the provisional ethical clearance approved by Rhodes University. I have also included the participant consent form which indicates that their participation is voluntary, that their identities will be anonymized and that they are free to withdraw at any stage.

Because this study includes all universities in the Eastern Cape but is not comparative, however the identities of the institutions may at times be identifiable, for example if documents from the public domain are quoted.

Upon completion of the study, I undertake to provide the participants and the university with access to the research findings. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on **0787017489** and via email: [asiphemxalisa@gmail.com](mailto:asiphemxalisa@gmail.com).

You are also welcome to contact my supervisors, Professor Sioux McKenna ([s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za)) and Dr Kirstin Wilmot ([k.wilmot@ru.ac.za](mailto:k.wilmot@ru.ac.za)).

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely

Mxalisa Asiphe (21M8590)  
Rhodes University

## Appendix F: Informed Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

<b>Research Project Title:</b>	<b>Students' experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study</b>
<b>Principal Investigator(s):</b>	<b>Prof Sioux Mckenna (Supervisor) &amp; Dr Kirstin Wilmot (Co-supervisor) Ms Mxalisa Asiphe (Researcher)</b>

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. I am really excited to hear about your experiences. As I explained I first need to make sure that you are fully informed about the project and are happy to voluntarily participate in the study.

#### Participation Information

- I understand the purpose of the research study and my involvement in it
- I understand the risks and benefits of participating in this research study
- I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time
- I understand that my identity will be kept anonymous throughout the study and in future publications.
- I understand that photographs might be used in the study, but I will be informed so I can consent and my face and identifying features will not be made visible.
- I understand and agree that the interviews will be recorded electronically
- I understand that I will be given the opportunity to read and comment on the transcribed interview notes and I will be invited to a workshop where the initial findings will be discussed.
- I understand that I am not being paid for participating in this study.

#### Information Explanation

I confirm that the above information was explained to me by **Ms Asiphe Mxalisa** and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study: **Students' experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study**

The above information was explained to me in English and I am in command of this language:

#### Voluntary Consent

I, ....., voluntarily give my consent to participate in the above-mentioned research.

Signature:

Date: / /

Researcher Declaration I, **Asiphe Mxalisa** declare that I have explained all the participation information to the participant and have truthfully answered all questions asked by the participant.

Signature:

Date: / /

Supervisor details

Prof Sioux McKenna ([s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za))

Dr Kirstin Wilmot ([k.wilmot@ru.ac.za](mailto:k.wilmot@ru.ac.za))

If you have any concerns about the ethical nature of this study, you are welcome to contact:

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics

Ethics Coordinator: [ethics-commitee@ru.ac.za](mailto:ethics-commitee@ru.ac.za)

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707

Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

## Appendix G: Interview Protocol

### Interview Protocol

Time of Interview

Date Place

Interviewee Number

Dear Student

My name Asiphe Mxalisa, thank you for volunteering to participate in this research study. There is no right or wrong responses to the question that I am going to ask you. I am very interested in your opinions, feelings, and experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era. Your responses will not be associated with your name. I will use a pseudonym to maintain records. I will be recording your responses electronically to maintain accuracy and will be taking written notes. Your responses will be kept very confidential. Your taped responses will be destroyed after they are transcribed. None of your information will be shared. This interview should last approximately an hour and a half. I will be following up this interview with another session to review your comments for accuracy. I will contact you to schedule this follow up meeting in the next few weeks. If at any time you need to get a drink or take care of any personal needs, please feel free to do so. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

### Research Description

The information gained from these interviews will contribute to the field of higher education with a specific focus on students' gendered experiences in the university post #MustFall Movements and during the COVID19 era. The study seeks to broaden the understanding of protests as action regarding multi layered inequalities and oppressions. Centering gender will thus help in contributing to the research field of gender transformation in the era of Africanising universities especially the universities situated in the Eastern Cape. Most of these universities have been historically disadvantaged in research and resources. The study will also contribute to the recurring university policy initiatives, engagements and interventions for students

working towards a gender transformed Higher Education. This research will also offer a platform for students to share their lived experiences which can be documented and contribute to necessary policy engagements and conversations working towards an equal higher education space.

**Research Question-** To what extent does gender (understood intersectionally) shape students' experiences in higher education particularly post the #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era?

**Narrative Conversation guiding question-** Think back from the beginning of your studies until now, and tell me about your transition and student experience that has been the most and least valuable. Please describe the difference between these experiences.

*Should there be need to clarify*

- How are you finding the university space?
- Your shared understanding of what gender is?

## Appendix H: Participant Invitation Letter

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Rhodes University  
Makhanda  
6139

Dear (participant name)

**Re: Invitation to participate in a research study**

Thank you for chatting to me on the phone earlier. As I explained, you are invited to participate in a research study entitled: **Students' experiences of gender in higher education post #MustFall movements and during the COVID19 era: An intersectional study**. The aim of this research is to contextualise the history of gender construction and resistance in higher education in South Africa by highlighting the issues of gender inequality intersectionally. Intersectionality is the idea that we all have many different identity characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, class, ability etc. and that in order to understand one aspect it's important to consider how they interact. While #MustFall movements heightened the call to decolonize the university space, the debates on the students' experiences some years later demonstrate a much needed research focus examining the extent to which the context of COVID19 has also highlighted inequalities in the higher education space.

Your participation is important to the research so I can capture your experiences of gender understood intersectionally through your story.

The research will be undertaken through narrative interviewing where I will place you at the heart of the research study. The interviews will be setup in a conversation manner where I get to listen to your story and journey in the University space. Your participation in the research is anonymous and your identity will not be revealed. The collection of this data will require between 60 to 90 minutes of your time. The time will depend also on the follow up interviews that many be required. Should you chose to submit a photo or poem to tell your story we shall engage regarding that

My supervisors are Professor Sioux McKenna and Dr Kirstin Wilmot. You are welcome to contact them at any time ([s.mckenna@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.mckenna@ru.ac.za)) and ([k.wilmot@ru.ac.za](mailto:k.wilmot@ru.ac.za))

If you agree to participate, I will explain in more detail what would be expected of you and provide you with the information you need to understand the research, via email or through an online call. These guidelines would include potential risks, benefits, and your rights as a participant.

Participation in this research is voluntary and a positive response to this letter of invitation does not oblige you to take part in this research. To participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you understand and agree to the conditions, before we start the interview.

Thank you for your time and I hope that you will respond favorably to our request.

Yours sincerely,

Asiphe Mxalisa  
Student number: 21M8590  
Contact details: 0787017489  
Email: [asiphemxalisa@gmail.com](mailto:asiphemxalisa@gmail.com)