

**Exploring higher education capabilities of black women graduates  
towards personal and professional development**

**by**

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## Declaration

I declare that this study, submitted in fulfilment of the Master of Arts in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State, is my own work and that I have not previously submitted this work, either as a whole or in part, for a qualification at another university or at another faculty at this university. I hereby cede copyright of this work to the University of the Free State.



September 2014

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Signature

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Date

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## Abstract

Student success does not cease to be important after students have graduated, but extends to how employable graduates are and what they can do with their lives. Even though more than half of students enrolled in South African higher education institutes are women, men still hold the majority of positions in the labour market. The number of black women enrolled in higher education institutions has more than doubled in the last 19 years, according to a 2014 report by Higher Education South Africa (HESA). However; this seems insufficient progress when compared with the national demographics. Of the total black population, only 3.2% have access to higher education. Local and international literature shows a significant number of policies that attempt to establish gender and racial equality. However, in most cases, black women in both higher education and the workplace are experiencing unfair treatment. Statistics are unable to bring insight into gender and racial inequalities in order to ensure the same quality of higher education for both men and women.

This study investigated the life trajectories of black woman graduates in South Africa, and how and if, in anyway, higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally. The life experiences of women in higher education and the workplace were investigated by the capabilities approach, which is a normative framework developed by Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2003). This framework aids the understanding of what people want to do and be, which freedoms or capabilities enable them to pursue these doings and beings, and which factors prevent them from achieving their being and doings. Thus, this approach allowed me to move from statistical findings to insight into what a group of black women graduates' value to be and whether they have the freedom to achieve well-being.

This study was framed by the following research questions: 1) What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates regarding the professional and personal lives they have reason to value? 2) How do gender and race enable or constrain black women graduates' capability for work, including their career development, over time? 3) Do black women graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

Although studies in feminist research have investigated the life histories of black women, not much work has been done on the capabilities of black women graduates. A feminist methodology was employed in this study, supported by life-history and narrative methods.

These two methods focus mainly on how individuals choose to shape their own lives, whereas the life-history method enables an understanding of people's stories against the wider background of society, in this case, gender equality and social justice. All lives are different; thus, the life-history method draws on both the differences and the similarities of participants' experience. In this study, narratives of nine black women were drawn from to explore the experiences of black women in higher education and the labour market. The selected women had graduated from South African higher education institutions from various fields of study and socio-economic backgrounds. The capabilities approach allowed the analysis of each woman's narrative and the mapping of the similarities.

The capabilities of these women, as generated through higher education, included cross-cultural exposure; communication and interpersonal skills; knowledge, imagination and critical thinking; empowerment; respect, dignity and social consciousness; practical reasoning; lifelong learning; resilience and bodily integrity. The findings shed light, firstly, on how these women are acting as active agents in converting the capabilities into valued beings and doings beyond graduation and, secondly, on how race and gender proved to be both positive and negative social factors that influenced the women.

Owing to the fact that the study is embedded in gender issues and the capabilities approach, which are both concerned with the well-being and agency of women in higher education and the labour market, the research contributes to higher-education research concerned with empowering black women. Furthermore, the study can provide a knowledge base for gender empowerment and fill a significant research gap in South Africa.

Key words: higher education, workplace, capabilities approach, gender and race.

## Samevatting

Studentesukses is meer as om bloot 'n graad te behaal; dit behels ook die indiensneembaarheid van gegradueerdes en die moontlikhede wat daar vir hulle in die lewe vorentoe is. Alhoewel meer as die helfte van studente wat by Suid-Afrikaanse hoërondewysinstansies ingeskryf is, vroue is, beklee mans steeds die meerderheid poste in die arbeidsmark. Die aantal swart vroue wat in hoërondewysinstansies ingeskryf het, het in die afgelope 19 jaar meer as verdubbel luidens 'n 2013-verslag deur Hoër Onderwys Suid-Afrika. Dit blyk egter onvoldoende vordering te wees in vergelyking met nasionale demografika: Van die totale swart bevolking het slegs 3,2% toegang tot hoër onderwys. Plaaslike en internasionale literatuur toon 'n beduidende aantal beleidstukke wat poog om geslags- en rassegelykheid te bewerkstellig. In die meeste gevalle beleef swart vroue steeds onbillike behandeling in hoër onderwys, sowel as in die werkplek. Die beskikbare statistiek gee egter nie genoegsame insig ten opsigte van geslags- en rasseongelykheid ten einde dieselfde gehalte hoër onderwys vir mans en vroue te verseker nie.

Hierdie studie ondersoek die lewenspad van swart vroulike gegradueerdes in Suid-Afrika en hoe, en indien wel, hoër onderwys hulle met die vermoëns toegerus het om op professionele, sowel as persoonlike vlak, sukses te bereik. Die lewenservarings van vroue in hoër onderwys en in die werkplek is in hierdie studie ondersoek aan die hand van die vermoënsbenadering 'n normatiewe raamwerk wat deur Sen (1992) en Nussbaum (2001) ontwikkel is. Hierdie raamwerk bevorder die begrip van wat mense wil doen en wil wees, watter vryhede of vermoëns hulle in staat stel om hierdie "doen" en "wees" na te streef en watter faktore hulle verhinder om hierdie "doen" en "wees" te bereik. Met behulp van hierdie benadering kon die navorser dus weg beweeg van statistiese bevindinge na insig in die soort mens wat 'n groep swart vroulike gegradueerdes graag wil wees en of hulle die vryheid het om welsyn te bereik.

Die studie is omraam deur die volgende navorsingsvrae: 1) Watter bydrae het hoër onderwys gelewer tot die vermoëns en waardevolle funksionerings van geselekteerde swart vroulike gegradueerdes ten opsigte van die soort professionele en persoonlike lewe wat hulle as waardevol beskou? 2) Hoe het gender en ras die swart vroulike gegradueerdes se vermoë vir werk, insluitend hulle loopbaanontwikkeling, met verloop van tyd bevorder of beperk? 3) Het swart vroulike gegradueerdes die agentskap en vryheid om dít wat hulle op professionele en persoonlike vlak as waardevol beskou, te bereik?

Alhoewel studies in feministiese navorsing die lewensgeskiedenis van swart vroue al ondersoek het, is daar nog min aandag geskenk aan die vermoëns van swart vroulike gegradueerdes in Suid-Afrika. 'n Feministiese metodologie is in die studie aangewend, ondersteun deur lewensgeskiedenis- en narratiewe metodes. Hierdie twee metodes fokus hoofsaaklik op hoe individue kies om hulle eie lewens te vorm, waar die navorser spesifiek met behulp van die lewensgeskiedenismetode 'n begrip kan vorm van mense se verhale teen die breër agtergrond van die samelewing, in hierdie geval, gendergelykheid en sosiale geregtigheid. Alle lewens verskil; dus put die lewensgeskiedenismetode uit die verskille, asook die ooreenkomste, van deelnemers se belewenisse. In hierdie studie word die narratiewe van nege swart vroue gebruik om die belewenisse van swart vroue in hoër onderwys en die arbeidsmark te verken. Die geselekteerde vroue het hulle grade by Suid-Afrikaanse hoër onderwysinstansies in verskeie studieverdele en sosioekonomiese agtergronde behaal. Die vermoënsbenadering maak die analise van elke vrou se narratief en die uiteensetting van die ooreenkomste moontlik.

Hierdie groep vroue se vermoëns, wat hulle deurmiddel van hoër onderwys bekom het, is onder meer kruiskulturele blootstelling; kommunikasie en interpersoonlike vaardighede; kennis, verbeelding en kritiese denke; bemagtiging; respek, menswaardigheid en sosiale bewusheid; praktiese redenering; lewenslange leer; veerkragtigheid; en liggaamlike integriteit. Die bevindinge werp lig op die volgende: eerstens, die wyse waarop hierdie vroue as aktiewe agente werksaam is om hierdie vermoëns om te skakel in waardevolle “wees” en “doen” ná universiteit; en tweedens hoe ras en gender as positiewe en negatiewe sosiale faktore in die vroue se lewe teenwoordig is.

Weens die feit dat die studie in genderkwessies en die vermoënsbenadering gewortel is – wat albei met die welsyn en agentskap van vroue in hoër onderwys en die arbeidsmark gemoeid is dra hierdie navorsing by tot hoër onderwysnavorsing in die bemagtiging van swart vroue. Die studie kan ook 'n kennisbasis verskaf vir genderbemagtiging en so ook 'n beduidende navorsingsgaping in Suid-Afrika vul.

Sleutelwoorde: Hoër onderwys, werkplek, vermoënsbenadering, gender en ras.

# **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

## **Introduction**

This chapter introduces the study by providing the background, mainly focusing on the South African context. Gender will be presented then as one of the main themes of the study, followed by discussing the research problem, the aim and value of the study. Before outlining the chapters of the dissertation, I will share my personal interest in conducting this study.

### **1.1 Background and problem statement**

For many years, South Africa has been fragmented by racial inequalities according to the apartheid system. For example, black and white people had to attend different higher education institutions (Bunting, 1994). Although the South African population at the time comprised 88% black people, only 9% were represented in higher education in 1993 (CHE, 2004: 62). After democratisation in 1994, numerous strategies were implemented to increase access for marginalised groups to higher education. The government at that time prioritised, among other things, the inclusion of all in both higher education and the workplace. The South African Constitution (RSA, 1996) and Higher Education Bill of 1997 encouraged equality for all regardless of gender or race. According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA, 2014:2), access to higher education for black students especially has increased significantly as 81% of the student body were black and 19% white in 2011. Of all the women enrolled in higher education, 40.9% were black women and 30% white women and the other percentage is made up by other racial groups. Despite the fact that the access and success rate of black women in higher education has increased, the literature shows that black students experience discriminatory practices at some higher education institutions.

The major objectives of higher education include:

First, universities educate and provide people with high-level skills for the labour market. Second, they are the dominant producers of new knowledge, they assess and find new applications for existing knowledge, and they validate knowledge and values through their curricula. Third, they provide opportunities for social mobility and strengthen social justice and democracy, thus helping to overcome the inequities inherited from our apartheid past (DHET, 2014:27).

Even with these objectives, black women graduates struggle to obtain employment after completing their degree (Lehohla, 2012). Results from AltbekerandStorme (2013) indicate that it takes black women graduates longer than white women to acquire a job. One reason could be that black women attend universities which are seen as academically inferior. The percentage of unemployed women with higher education degrees is 12.3%, while that of males is 7.3% (Altbeker and Storme, 2013). Considering that 21305 more women obtained undergraduate and postgraduate qualification from 2006 to 2011 than men, similar patterns would be expected in the workplace (CHE, 2012). However, the majority of employed women hold junior positions, while only a very small percentage occupies managerial positions (Lehohla, 2012). The South African Institution for Race Relations (2013) reported that white men represent 80.2% of top management positions, 69.2% of senior management positions and 60.3% of decision-making positions. However, only 3.6% of black women hold top management positions, 6.1% senior management and 16% mid-management. Furthermore, white women represent 13% of top management, 18.6% of senior management and 17.5% of mid-management.

These statistics show great gender and racial disparities between the gender groups, irrespective of the Employment Equity Act of 1998. This Act argues for equality for all qualified people in the workplace, especially those who were previously disadvantaged, including black women. Chapter 2 discusses in detail the higher education and gender policies that were put in place for a more equitable South Africa. Although the statistics presented above show gender gaps in higher education and the workplace, they do not explain which capabilities women gain in higher education and whether they could turn these capabilities into valued functionings. This study, therefore, becomes significant in exploring life trajectories of black women graduates to determine how, or if, in any way, their higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally.

Gender is one of the main concepts in this study. I will now give a brief explanation of gender and how the concept is applied in the study.

## **1.2 Gender framework**

In order to understand the role of gender, we need to understand the meaning of 'gender'. According to the United Nations (UN, 2012), gender is a range of physical, mental and behavioural characteristics that distinguish between masculinity and femininity. Scott (1986) defines gender as knowledge that establishes the meaning of bodily difference between

male and female. Perceptions of gender are rooted deeply within cultures and change over time; however, in all cultures, gender determines power and resources for females and males (Sonya, 2010). Each society emphasises particular roles that each sex should fulfil, for example, men going to the labour market and making money for the family, and women staying at home and caring for the children (Hesse-Biber and Carger, 2000). Gender is, thus, determined socially; it is the social meaning assigned to being male and female.

Inequalities between genders are prevalent; men and women are not only situated differently in society, but also situated unequally (Bennett, 1989). In most cases, women enjoy less social status, material resources, power and self-actualisation than men who share their social location, for example, across dimensions of class, race, education, religion or occupation (Newman, 1991). These differences stem from the way in which society is organised and not from biological differences between men and women, explains Butler (1990). The existence of a public and private sphere – men’s primary location being the public (workplace, politics), while women’s being the private (home) has emerged over time with the identification of sexual division of labour (Butler, 1990; Scott, 1986). Both genders are socialised from a young age to follow the trends of the gender that has been assigned to them. Gender theorist and feminists strive to challenge critique and bridge the gender gaps and ensure equal freedom, whether in public or private, for both males and females (Newman, 1991). All humans want the freedom to be what they will to be, despite their gender. Thus, black women should not be treated differently because of their gender and race.

Owing to the persisting underrepresentation of black women in higher education and the workplace, as the statistics above show, this study questioned the role of higher education in equipping women with the capabilities necessary to equal them to males in the labour market and in their personal lives.

In this study, race is used in the same way which most statistics define racial groups. Therefore, black women do not include Indian and coloured women. Although the coloured and Indians were also discriminated against, i found it more suited to only focus on black women as they are said to be the most oppressed due to their race and gender, in many ways that will be explained further in the study.

In the next section, I set out the development of my argument in the study.



### **1.3 Argument**

I propose that, using the capabilities approach, one should be able to gain insight into the capabilities with which black women have been equipped by higher education and whether these capabilities could be turned into functionings that women could use to reach their well-being after leaving university. This approach, firstly, focuses on the actual opportunities that people get to live a life they have reason to value (well-being) and, secondly, argues for individual agency and empowerment, in this case black women's empowerment, by creating opportunities for their development. By following this approach, I could gain insight into what promotes or inhabits personal and professional success of nine black women graduates.

### **1.4 Aim and research questions**

#### Aim

This study aimed to explore the life trajectories of black women graduates and determine how, and if, higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally. I formulated these aims into three research questions.

#### Research questions

What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates regarding the professional and personal lives they have reason to value?

In what way do gender and race enable or constrain black woman graduates' capability for work, including their career development, over time?

Do black woman graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

### **1.5 Value of the study**

Owing to the fact that the study is embedded in feminist views and the capabilities approach which are both concerned with issues such as the well-being of women in higher education and the labour market my research contributes to the higher education scholarship of empowering black women and general transformational goals of higher education in South Africa. In addition using life narratives helped enable understanding of people's stories

against the wider background of society, in this case, gender equality and social justice. To bring out the voices of black women that are said to be silenced in the literature.

The results could encourage higher education institutions and the labour market to attend to the implementation of gender and anti-discrimination legislation. In addition, higher education institutions could use the results as a building block on which to expand capabilities in order to increase development and chances for success of black women.

The next section gives an overview of whom I am and why this study is important to me.

## **1.6 About me**

My name is Nteboheng Mahlaha. I was born on 16 January 1986, the first of three children, into a somewhat matriarchal family. I went to private schools from grade 1 to matric. After matriculating in 2005, I pursued a Bachelor of Social Science degree at the University of the Free State. Thereafter, I completed an honours degree in criminology, focusing on women in penitentiaries in South Africa. I was exposed to a great variety of people, both educated and uneducated. After completing my studies, I found it difficult to find a full-time job and became curious as to why this was this case. I was then working as a student assistant at a research centre at the university. This job stimulated my interest in higher-education issues and student success. That same year, a very close cousin of mine, whom I had always looked up to, got married and decided to leave her career in industrial psychology. As I have always been opinionated and curious, I began to ponder about women, education, rights and equality, especially whether we still enrol at tertiary institutions as a pastime until we find a husband. My life experiences, my background and curiosities culminated into my current master's study of whether the education we receive as women and/or our backgrounds better equip us with the capabilities needed for us to be competent and excellent in the workplace and personal lives. I think to some extent the capabilities I gained in higher education were actualised into functionings as I was able to make informed decisions about my future, deciding whether to study further or try find a job. Although it leaves me pondering whether it my choice or the lack of a lucrative job maybe influenced my decision.

I chose the capabilities approach as my theoretical framing. This approach allowed me to evaluate the opportunities that have been available for the participants. Sen (1999) explains that the capabilities approach is concerned with the freedom that people have to achieve what they value. Therefore, I used this approach to understand the actual opportunities that the women had and whether they could turn these capabilities into valued functionings –

taking into account all the external factors that could prevent women from achieving their well-being, such as gender and racial constraints.

## **1.7 Chapter outlines**

The sequence of the chapters is as follows.

### Chapter 2: Theoretical surveys and literature review

Chapter 2 begins by conceptualising feminism, followed by a description of the evolution of South African policies concerning gender equality, higher education and the workplace. The chapter concludes with a review of relevant international and local literature.

### Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

I explain here why the capabilities approach was deemed as the best approach for this study. This chapter will also explain the capabilities approach and its concepts, arguing why it was a good framework to use. The chapter focuses on the issues of gender, higher education and empowerment in relation to the capabilities approach.

### Chapter 4: Research methodology and methods

Since my study was situated in the interpretivist paradigm, this chapter provides an explanation as to why the narrative and life-history methods were chosen for the study. I outline the importance of feminist methodology and the ethical considerations that were implemented while I was conducting the study. I explain the research questions and the steps that were taken in the data-collection process, including the pilot study and compiling the research questions.

### Chapter 5: Biographies, findings and discussion

Biographies are presented to introduce the participants and their life stories, after which findings that emerged from the study are categorised and explained thematically. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings, applying them to the capabilities approach.

### Chapter 6: Summary, recommendations and conclusion

This chapter summarises the study, offers an account of the limitations of the study and make recommendations for future research, followed by a few concluding thoughts.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide an explication of the relevant literature to shed light on women's transition from higher education to the workplace. The chapter starts with a conceptualisation of feminism by investigating the three waves of feminism and their impact on women and higher education. This is followed by an evaluation of South African policies concerning gender equality, higher education and the workplace. International and local literature on the transition from higher education to the workplace is evaluated then. Lastly, issues that affect women, especially black women in the workplace, are discussed.

### **2.1 Feminism**

This section investigates the lives of women through a feminist perspective to gain understanding of their historical background and how this affected, firstly, their access to higher education and, secondly, their success in job attainment as a result of their higher education. In order to have insight into the future of women, we must understand their past. Feminist studies have great relevance to the current study as I am trying to understand the experience of women against their social and personal background and to obtain a clear picture of the struggles that women have and are still experiencing.

Feminism is based on a belief in social, political and economic equality of the sexes (Sonya, 2010). The goals of feminism are to (Newman, 1991):

- determine the importance of women;
- reveal that, historically, women have been subordinate to men; and
- bring about gender equality.

The feminist movements are divided into three eras, namely the first to third waves of feminism. These waves of feminism will be discussed in more detail next.

#### **2.1.1 The first wave of feminism**

The first wave of feminism occurred from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Britain and the United States. This wave focused primarily on gaining suffrage for women, establishing the right to education, creating better working conditions, and changing double sexual

standards and other inequalities that women were facing at the time (Scott, 1986; Krollokke & Sorensen, 2006). The emphasis of this movement was on officially and legally mandated inequalities. According to Sonya (2010), feminists in this era were liberal and wanted to ensure that all women had rights and equal access to resources. In other words, liberal feminists advocated legal equality between men and women. They protested against bondages, such as no access to higher education, that were created to prevent women from being equal to men.

From the outset, higher education institutions were designed for men because, according to the general view, women had to stay at home. However, in the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft and other British women from the elite fought for the same access to education as their male family members (Krollokke & Sorensen, 2006). These white women from the upper class believed that gender equality in educational opportunities would bring about the change that was needed in society then, which was to ensure that women have rights, especially voting rights (Scott, 1986). The same struggle was being fought in Europe where white upper class women campaigned for women's issues which included education, the right to vote and employment. Many of the people who supported these women believed that education was necessary to make women more effective wives, mothers and teachers. In the 1860s, few people saw education as a way to change women's lives; it was seen as a way of making women better wives for their husbands (Scott, 1986; Penn, 1995).

The fight for women's suffrage represents one of the fundamental struggles of women. By denying them representation in legislation, the then public governmental bodies sent an unambiguous message that women are viewed as second-class citizens (Scott, 1986). In 1918, British women above the age of 30 received the right to vote for the first time; two years later, women in the USA were awarded voting rights. South African white females received voting rights only in 1930. The major victory of the movement also included access to education, workplace, and health care.

According to Berger (2008), African feminism developed differently than the gender movement in Europe. He explains that African women, before colonialism, were often treated as equals to their male counterparts but that the colonial systems, which were implemented between 1880 and 1900, introduced gender differences. This, however, cannot be blamed solely on colonial power, but also on African male elders, who agreed with the white colonial powers' view of women as second-hand citizens (Thomson, 2002). There is very little information on feminism in Africa in this era. African people did not view their protest against patriarchy and white oppression as feministic, but as a political protest against

inequality (South African History Online [SAHO], 2014). However, in the early 1900s, some African women such as Adelaide Caseley Hayford also referred to as an “African Victorian Feminist” was an activist for women’s rights in Sierra Leone; Huda Sharaawi established an Egyptian Feminist Union and, lastly, Charlotte Maxeke founded the Bantu Women’s League in South Africa (Grey, 2012; Okonkwo, 1981; SAHO, 2014). These women fought for gender equality, but did not view themselves as feminists. By the end of this era, most African countries were being decolonised, but the struggle of women continued with the perpetual oppression of African women. For instance, in countries such as South Africa, black women were still not allowed to vote.

Even though women in Europe and America could vote and had access to education, many issues were still left unaddressed which led to a new era of feminism (Penn, 1995).

### **2.1.2 The second wave of feminism**

The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. This wave unfolded in the context of anti-war and civil-rights movements in the USA and the growing ethnic consciousness of many minority groups around the world (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The voice of the second wave was increasingly radical. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues, and much of the movement’s energy was focused on the passage of the American Equality Right Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex (Thompson, 2002). Different kinds of feminists worked towards somewhat different ends, even though all worked for forms of gender equality.

Second-wave feminists made a huge impact on education. They distinguished between sex and gender (Penn, 1995), which was, an important theoretical move and allowed for the investigation of sociological explanations for girls’ educational results and choices. Liberal feminists emphasised the parts played by sex-role socialisation, stereotyping and discrimination (Coote & Campbell, 1982) and they endeavoured to eliminate the barriers to female achievement in mathematics especially.

Socialist feminists focused on the reproduction of the classed and gendered relations of production and reproduction, while radical feminists pointed to the male dominance of knowledge and the sexual politics of schooling. Importantly, patriarchy, “the combination of social, economic and cultural systems which ensures male supremacy” (Coote & Campbell, 1982: 32) was introduced as an underlying factor for discriminatory practices towards women. In 1963, Betty Friedan published her exposé “The feminine mystique,” giving a voice

to the discontent and confusion that many American women experienced in being shunted into a homemaking position after graduating from higher education. In this book, Friedan explores the roots of the shift in women's roles away from essential workforce during the Second World War (Penn, 1995).

Where as the first wave of feminism was, in general, propelled by white, middle-class women, the second wave drew in women of colour and developing nations, seeking sisterhood, solidarity and claiming "women struggle is class struggle" (Thompson, 2002). Feminists spoke of women as a social class and claimed that race, class and gender oppressions are all related (Morley, 2005; Thompson, 2002). This encouraged black women to start their own movement.

Collins (1989) explains that the black feminist movement emerged in response to the liberation movement and women's movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women, who felt that they were being racially oppressed in the women's movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation movement, the black feminist movement was formed. Black women who participated in the feminist movement during the 1960s often experienced racism. Racism in general took the form of exclusion, for instance, black women were not invited to participate in conferences which were specifically about black women or third-world women (Flax, 1987). In most of the women's writings, the experiences of white, middle-class women were described as universal "women experiences" these largely ignored the differences between black and white women's experiences with regard to race and class (King, 1988).

Black feminist writers focused on developing not only theories that would address the simultaneity of racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism in their lives (hooks, 2000), but also a critical, feminist consciousness, while creating dialogue that directly addressed their experiences and connected them to a larger political world (Collins, 2000).

Although African women in the 1970s protested against similar grievances to those of women in Europe and the USA, they did not consider themselves to be feminists (Berger, 2008). They viewed feminism as a Western phenomenon that had very little to do with the liberation movements and/or struggles of African women. African women continued to protest against laws that they deemed to be oppressive towards them, for example, South African black women during this era were fighting for the right to vote and to be treated as equals to white people. The protests in South Africa led to students' questioning the quality of their education and not attending lectures which, in turn, affected the academic life of

young black students who joined the protests against the apartheid reign (Bunting, 1994). Black women organised and focused on a national struggle for freedom rather than a specific feminist struggle (SAHO, 2014).

In most parts of the world, black people specially struggled to enter higher education, and there were still separate colleges and universities for black and white people (Bunting, 1994; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009). The end of 1980 marked the end of the second wave of feminism and the dawn of the third wave.

### **2.1.3 The third wave of feminism**

The third wave of feminism took root in the early 1990s. The movement arose as a response to the perceived failures of the second wave (Rubin & Nemeroff, 2001) and to the backlash against initiatives and movements that were created by the second wave. The third wave endeavoured to challenge the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity which were described as an over-emphasis of the experiences of white, middle-class women (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). This movement placed a greater focus on individual achievements, support against domestic violence and the eradication of sexual harassment. Political and social issues that came to the fore were domestic violence, access to education, rape, and the politics of globalisation, because these were the major issues that women seemed to be facing worldwide at the time (Newman, 1991).

This era gave rise to international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) to address issues of gender, rights of women and educational access for women. A 1993 Commonwealth study showed that women in sub-Saharan Africa did not take part in the decision making of policies because of limited access to higher education, dual stress from personal and professional life, cultural stereotypes and men's resistance against the appointment of women in managerial positions. These issues were to be addressed by increasing women's access to higher education and by ensuring that countries created policies that promoted gender equality. Two years later, the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing affirmed that the world views gender issues as important to developmental processes. Some of the issues that were discussed were "inequality of access to education, unequal participation in the power structure in society and inadequate recommendation of women's rights" (UNESCO, 1998: 5). The UNESCO 1996 report indicated a rapid growth towards global development and a knowledge-intensive society. The report spoke to issues of "learning society throughout life," which we now call "lifelong learning."



The topic of women and girls' education also received attention. In 1998, a UN conference titled *Higher education and women: issues and perspective* was held in Paris, with the issues of demand for access to higher education once again on the agenda. At that time, however, access to university had already increased in many countries. Thus, a new matter was that of graduate unemployment, which many countries were still battling to combat. By 2000, women's access to higher education remained a key debate, despite the great increase in women's accessing higher education, from only 8% of women enrolled in higher education in 1970 to 28% in 2009 (UNESCO, 2006; 2012). Africa had less than 10% of the female population enrolled in higher education in 2009. Regarding women's representation in higher education, South Africa is one of the countries doing well in Africa, with 58% of enrolled students who are female (CHE, 2012).

The post-1994 South Africa implemented new legislation that promoted gender equality. The next section will give an overview of South African legislation on gender, higher education and employment.

## **2.2 South African policy and legislation on gender and higher education**

After 1994, South African policies and legislation changed to be more inclusive to all its citizens.

The South African Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996: 1247) states that:

Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law. The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

This created room for higher-education policies to ensure that all people are considered at all universities despite their race and gender. In addition, some individual higher-education policies incorporate equity for all.

The South African Higher Education White Paper 3 of 1997 added to the Constitution's objective. The vision of this Paper is to promote the equality of fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education while, at the same time, eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress of the past. This Paper

(1997:7) attempts to address inequalities by ensuring “fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them” and explaining that people should not be discriminated against, based on their race and gender specifically, with regard to entering or succeeding in higher education. The new White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (DHET, 2013:27) expands on the previous Paper by paying special attention to “providing people with high-level skills for the labour market.” In this regard, the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2013 (MWCPD, 2013) speaks of higher-education gender issues. This Bill addresses issues of discriminatory patriarchal attitudes facing women (students and employees), eliminating gender prejudice and issues of access for women. As mentioned in chapter 1, due to apartheid, black people and white women encountered discriminatory labour practices before 1994. The following section gives an overview of the Employment Equity Act.

### Employment Equity Act of 1998

The South African Labour Act has with it the Employment Equity Act which promotes fair labour practices for all South Africans.

The purpose of this Act is to achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce (Department of Labour, 1998: 7).

This Act stipulates that all people should be treated equally in the workplace regardless of their race and gender. The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2013 (MWCPD, 2013) indicate the need for gender mainstreaming in the workplace by ensuring equality for all and non-discriminatory practices at all times. South Africa, thus, has a number of policies to ensure equality both at higher education and the workplace. The next section will discuss access to higher education and the experiences of black women within higher-education institutions.

## **2.3 Access to higher education and experiences of black women in high education**

Access to higher education has been a recurring debate internationally for some time. A study conducted by Harper et al. (2009) evaluating access and equality of African American

students in higher education shows that, despite the many policies in place (including affirmative action policies), African American students still struggle to access higher education. Those students who succeed in enrolling at a university explain that they are not equally treated, as their white peers are viewed as intellectually superior. Similar findings emerged from a UK study (Sanusi, 2012) where black students, especially females, felt that they had to prove themselves to a greater extent than their white and male colleagues had to. According to Sanusi (2012), the students she interviewed studied with the aim to be employed but, because of their race and the universities they attended, they felt they would probably not be employed. Others explained that they chose to attend a better university and enrol in a course they did not particularly like because it would create better opportunities for them.

Gardener and Holly (2012) indicate that the first generation of black women students in the USA experienced many challenges, one being financial support from their families. The students' parents were reluctant to pay for PhD studies, because they did not see the importance thereof. The students in that study explained that they felt detached from their families and that the lack of support had a significant impact on their academic success. Okkolin's (2012) study of Tanzanian women studying towards their master's degree shows that school environment, family environment, and personal motivation and characteristics influenced the educational well-being of her participants. These factors helped the women to pursue their studies until the master's level despite challenges such as financial problems and gender prejudice.

The international literature gives evidence that access to education for women is still a problem, despite all the policies that have been put into place. Black women who make it into higher education are most times made to feel inferior. The studies demonstrate that support from the institutions and the women's families, as well as personal motivation, have helped most black students to succeed in their studies. The next section will focus on the South African context of access and experiences of black women in higher education.

### **2.3.1 South African context**

Access for women and black people in South African higher education institutions is increasing steadily. In 1990, women accounted for 46.7% of students enrolled in higher education, of which 39% were black (HESA, 2014). By 2011, the numbers of black students enrolled in higher education had increased to 80% (HESA, 2014). Women currently make up

64% of the student enrolled in higher education, of these women, 72% are black of all people enrolled in higher education (CHE, 2012; DHET, 2013).

The White Paper for Post-school and Education and Training (DHET, 2013) makes us aware that an increase in enrolment does not necessarily mean equality and that discrimination, patriarchy, racism and sexism are still dominant in South African universities. Moreover, black students continue to be marginalised in previously white universities, and female students are still experiencing harassment on university campuses (DHET, 2013). In this regard, higher education institutions have made headlines during the past few years: The University of the Free State racial saga in 2008, where four white boys allegedly made black cleaners drink their urine while video-recording the incident; the University of Pretoria's allegation of staff racism in 2013; and, in the same year the sexual harassment case at Wits University (Joubert, 2013; Sehoole, 2012). These cases demonstrate that national policy intentions are not relayed to institutions, that there is a need to develop and implement gender equality policies in higher education institutions and that more research is needed on students' experiences in these institutions to understand and uproot such behaviour.

Strydom and Mentz (2010) conducted a study on student success experiences through student engagement at seven South African universities. The findings indicated that black students (59%) felt that they had to work harder than what their lecturers expected compared with only 45% of white students who expressed the same sentiments. The study further showed that more females than males interact with diverse peers at their institutions. Black women are the least likely to interact with their lecturers and staff members at the university, which is a negative factor because no student-lecturer relationship can develop – an important element in increasing student success (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Moreover, black students, especially females, reported to be receiving support from the campus environment to ensure their success. However, Daniels and Damons (2011) obtained different results. Using narratives of black women from Stellenbosch University, the authors aimed to understand the experiences of black women at this previously white university. While the focus of the study was primarily on gender, the women's narratives mainly identified race as a challenge. The authors describe that their participants were constantly referred to as “products of the quota system” and were told that they were not intellectually as strong as white students at the university. This, inevitably, led the students to question their self-worth. The students also explained the need for “perseverance and problem solving” in trying to deal with racial inequalities and cultural differences (Daniels & Damons, 2011:166). The study found that students from interracial high schools struggled to adjust to

this university because they were constantly reminded of their race. The students said that the university had a strong Afrikaans culture, which they struggled to adjust to. Moreover, the fact that there were still black-only residences at the university gave evidence of the ongoing racial segregation.

Similarly, a study by Magano (2011) indicated that, for black women to succeed in postgraduate studies, they need self-motivation and a good relationship with their supervisor. Magano demonstrated that, during their studies, women are faced with many challenges. The first woman she interviewed struggled with family problems, leading to her divorcing her husband. The second woman dropped out because she thought she was not a good mother to her child who started taking drugs, while the last woman experienced the death of her husband and friend. Magano recommended counselling services at universities to ensure the success of women and better relationships between supervisor and students. One of the women in the study expressed that her supervisor was very supportive and she was able to cope with her husband's and friend's death while still pursuing her master's degree.

London, Kalula and Xaba (2009) concurs that black students, especially women, experience racial and gender discrimination while at university. Their study investigated trainee specialists' experiences at University of Cape Town (UCT) and the results showed that most black students described UCT as "unwelcoming" (London et al, 2009: 11). Moreover, the gender and racial representation (51 white; 33 black; 58 male and 31 female) highlights the underrepresentation of women and black registrations at UCT. As black women still express feelings of dissatisfaction, more needs to be done to understand the dynamics of gender and racial experiences of black women in South African universities.

Although South Africa has more black women in higher education than previously, these women are still exposed to discriminatory practices. Studies show that self-motivation and institutional support can help black women to progress within higher education, but research has also proven that institutions are not giving the required support to these women to ensure their optimal performance. I will now look at the transition from higher education to the workplace as most graduates seek employment after completing their studies.

## **2.4 Transition from higher education to the workplace**

I found a limited amount of literature on black women's transitioning from higher education. Research in this area tends to focus on the importance of higher education for graduates

and black graduates' transitioning to the workplace. The international literature revealed that black women in the UK are less likely to be considered for employment.

While more young people are remaining in higher education than in the past, they still want to be hired after graduating (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Katz-Gerro & Yaish, 2003). The growing enrolment and demand for higher education has sparked debates in many countries about the relationship between higher education and the labour market (Bhorat, 2000; CHEC, 2013; World Bank, 2012). Studies point to education as being directly related to job attainment and economic development (Haleman, 2004; Harvey, 2003; Oketch, McCowan & Schendel, 2013).

Formal education has become the main determinant of securing a good job in all parts of the world (Katz-Gerro & Yaish, 2003). In countries such as France, entry-level jobs for unskilled and uneducated people are rare (Bagnall, 2000). The same results are found in most developed countries, with graduates having better chances of employment. Katz-Gerro and Yaish (2003) in their study of the transition from higher education to the workplace in Israel, found not only a correlation between higher education and obtaining employment, but that there is higher career satisfaction among graduates. Allen and Van der Velden (2007) found in their study that 88% of graduates from UK higher education institutions look for jobs after graduating, with most of them being able to find employment. In addition, 22% of graduates attained a job without searching for it. Similarly, Salas-Velasco (2006) explains that graduates who search for jobs more intensely and had job experience while at university are most likely to obtain employment. Parental education was listed as one of the factors that contribute to preparing students for the workplace, because more educated parents can share their experiences, which is relevant for their children seeking jobs. However, the study shows that personal characteristics are also important in attaining a job, with male students being more favoured than female.

Harvey (2003) found that most UK employers want higher education institutions to provide them with graduates who have the skills required for the workplace and skills concerning specific jobs. Therefore, graduates who had job experience during their time at university were most likely to attain a job after graduating. Similarly, a study conducted by Allen and Van der Velden (2007) showed that graduates from Germany, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Australia attributed their easy attainment of a job to work experience during their studies. According to Sanusi (2012), black graduates in the UK are three times more likely to be unemployed than white graduates within six months of graduation and, should

they find employment, black graduates are expected to earn up to 9% less than whites for the same work.

The next section focuses on the South African context of the transition from higher education to the workplace.

#### **2.4.1 South African context**

South Africa has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, with 25% of people being either unemployed or informally employed (Altbeker & Storme, 2013). At the same time, the South African economy is in need of educated workers. Bhorat (2000) explains that only 44 jobs are created for every 100 people seeking employment and graduates are 95% more likely to be employed than those without higher education qualifications. Altbeker and Storme (2013) concur by stating that 6.7% of black graduates are more likely to be unemployed than 2% of white graduates. The reason for black people's struggle to find jobs might be related to their attending universities which are seen as less favourable by the employer (Altbeker & Storme, 2013). The top five universities in the country have 51.4% black student enrolment, while the bottom five have 99% black student enrolment.

A study conducted by Griesel and Parker (2009) on graduate attributes argues that South African higher education institutions do not want to produce graduates for employment purposes only, but graduates who will also meet economic and societal demands. The results from this study showed that graduates have most of the attributes that are required to work, which include computer literacy, proficiency in English and the ability to use new information. However, the graduates scored very low when it came to written communication and oral presentation. The study indicated that students do not meet employers' expectations with regard to planning and executing tasks independently, but that they understood diversity and practices in the changing workplace. Furthermore, graduates were found to be proactive problem-solvers. The study also indicated that employers prefer students from previously white universities. A 2011 study by the Centre for Development Enterprise (CDE) revealed that most employers prefer whites because they come from universities that are perceived as academically strong, while the majority of black students attend universities that are not as academically strong.

However, while most of the studies on the transition from higher education to the workplace focus on the employability of the students, there is little information on their personal lives after university. Specifically, there is a lack of research in how women in particular cope with

life challenges and how, if in any way, higher education has equipped them with the opportunities to do so. I, therefore, had to gain insight into the skills or attributes that the women have gained in higher education in order for me to evaluate whether these skills and attributes have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in the workplace. In trying to understand whether higher education really does empower women to succeed in the workplace, the next section will review literature on the experiences of women, in particular black women, in the workplace.

## **2.5 Women graduates in the workplace**

The International Bill of Human Rights (UN, 2012) states that, all people have the right to work. However, it has not been easy for women, especially black women, as they have been doubly oppressed because of their gender and race. The fact that the workplace has traditionally been male dominated does not make it easy for women to penetrate nor to reach management positions. Since 1990, UNESCO (1998) has provided global strategies in an attempt to increase women's access to the workplace. According to the International Labour Rights Forum (2013), women make up 40% of people in the workplace worldwide. However, a majority of women still hold junior positions.

A study by Bruce (2006) pointed to the fact that most black women in the UK experience more harassment in the workplace than men and all other races. This impairs their performance and sometimes leads to their leaving their jobs. Gender and race stereotypes in management positions remain a major problem, because white males are still deemed to be the best managers, whereas women are deemed to have less satisfactory management abilities (Riedle, 2006). In this regard, a study conducted by Powell, Butterfield and Parent (2002) revealed a change in the thinking of management graduates from a university in England: they believe that a good manager could have both feminine and masculine leadership qualities. However, most male and female participants in the study said they would rather have male managers than female.

Dozier (2012) explains that black American women with degrees are most likely to lose their jobs at times of recession in America which he attributes to the historical racial discrimination against black women. He indicates that black women are still at the bottom of the organisational chain, despite their social class or qualifications. The author elaborates that these women's gender and race count more than their education when it comes to promotion in the workplace. According to Armenti (2004), most women in academic careers are expected to play both feminine and masculine roles, depending on the situation. She



explains that the women in her study had to juggle being a mother and an academic, which was not easy. The women blamed themselves rather than the system for the lack of progress in their careers, viewing their situation as an individualistic instead of a general problem for all women academics.

Similarly, Webber and Higginbotham (1995) conducted a mixed-method study to, first, identify structural inequalities in the workplace and, secondly, to explore women's perception of equality, discrimination, rewards and opportunities within the workplace. This study focused specifically on white and black professional-managerial women at the University of Memphis in the USA. The results showed that the majority of the women (57% white and 74% black) believed that women received different treatment in the workplace. More black women (42%) than white women (25%) indicated that they had received discriminatory treatment. Webber and Higginbotham explain that the black women experienced discrimination when it came to promotion opportunities, that they were treated based on stereotypes and that they were continually overlooked despite having worked hard to prove themselves. In addition, the authors found that most women wanted to leave their workplace, but more black women wanted to further their studies in the belief that this would result in better treatment at the workplace. Heslin, Bell & Fletcher (2012) state that the discrimination against minority groups, especially black women, could lead to discouraged workers who do not perform to their full potential. This, in turn, would reflect negatively on this minority group and sustain the stereotype-based view that they are lazy, for example.

The above literature demonstrates that black women graduates, internationally, are still being treated unfairly, regardless of the many strategies by international bodies, such as the UNESCO, World Bank and UN, since the 1960s, to improve the situation. Not much is mentioned, however, about how higher education has equipped women to overcome these discriminatory practices and compete as equals with white women and black males.

The next part will give a South African perspective of black women in the workplace. I will investigate whether the South African literature provides different findings than that of international research.

### **2.5.1 South African context**

Even though women, especially black women, have engaged in liberation movements for decades, the battle for empowerment in South Africa has been fought regarding racial equality, with gender in the background (De La Rey, 1997). Gender only became an

important topic after the new democracy had been established. More so, the Empowerment Equity Act in 1998 created an “institutional structure that provides a legitimate space for women to move into” (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007: 62). Thus, South Africa has seen great progress in regards to increasing access to higher education, working opportunities and creating an inclusive legislation (Mostert, 2009; Martin & Barnard, 2013). Nevertheless, gender transformation and equality in the South African workplace are still lacking (Crafford & Crous, 2009; Du Plessis & Barkhuizen, 2012; Hicks, 2012). The percentage of unemployed women with higher education degrees is 12.3%, while that of males is 7.3% (Altbeker & Storme, 2013). Considering the fact that women constitute the majority percentage of students in higher education institutions, one would expect a similar situation in the workplace. The labour market report of 2013 shows that white males still dominate top positions in the workplace (71.6%), and only 3.6% of black women are in top management. This is supported by Lehohla’s (2012) study indicating that black women in South African still have low-ranking roles even though they have the same qualifications as their white female counterparts and white and black males. Furthermore, sexual harassment and lookism<sup>1</sup> are some of the discriminatory practices that South African women have to deal with in the workplace daily (Mdyogolo, 2013; Wolf, 2013).

South African organisations are still governed by patriarchal systems. April et al. (2007) investigated why there are fewer women in South African top management positions. They interviewed 11 people from the corporate world of which six were women: four self-employed and two working in academia. The sample had more white people than black, which the authors explained as being a representation of the demographics of top management in South Africa. They found that South African organisations followed a traditional male-dominated culture, with women often not being seen as good enough for top management positions. The women in the study attributed their success in organisations to resilience and hard work. This study concluded that women are doubly oppressed by the organisational culture and social culture in their attempt to make it to top management. Women have two roles to play, that of being the employee and that of being the care giver at home, and usually one suffers in an attempt to promote the other. The authors suggest that, for women to reach top management, the roles of both men and women need to change and equality needs to be established both in the household and at the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup>Lookism is prejudice based on personal physical appearance. Wolf (2013) explains that women in the South African workplace experience this regularly.

Martin and Barnard (2013: 9) showed that women in male-dominated fields experience “formal and covert gender discrimination biased organisational practices, as well as physical identity and work life balance needs.” This implies that most women in their study were discriminated against because they were not physically strong enough to do a certain job, or because they had to leave work earlier than their male colleagues to tend to family duties. The authors discovered that these women were more discriminated against than those in female-dominated fields. The organisational cultures in these fields were not always supportive of female workers. Thus, the authors suggested that organisations need to provide women in these fields with “tangible physical support and female-focused policies, visible career opportunities, challenges to entice their personal drive for achievement and different ways of recognising their success” (Martin & Barnard, (2013: 11).

Academia in South Africa is also still dominated by white males (Managa, 2013; Portnoi, 2003; Schulze, 2005). After evaluating life narratives of black women who worked at different South African universities, Mabokela and Magubane (2004) concluded that black females working in academia are treated as subordinates. One of the women in the study mentioned that, being black and not being able to speak Afrikaans, made them feel like outsiders. Their gender and race caused them to be undermined by both their co-workers and the students they taught. According to Managa (2013), gender-based roles are still taken into the workplace to discriminate against women, therefore, to undermine their potential. Schulze (2005), Portnoi (2003) and Managa (2013) all argue that, due to existing organisational culture, women’s contributions are often undervalued not recognised and overly scrutinised because they are not part of the male network. A study by Managa (2013) found that most women report to be dissatisfied in their jobs due to racism, poor salaries and a lack of support from management and the university environment. On the more positive side, women’s personal interest motivated them to work hard to reach their goals in these male-dominated fields (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011).

The South African context seems not to differ much from that of other countries. However, we see that South African organisations continue to adhere to patriarchal systems and that specific social factors contribute, to a certain extent, to the professional lives of women. Similar to studies in the USA, the South African literature shows that black women graduates are still at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy.

My study, therefore, investigates how gender and race enable or constrain the opportunities of black women graduates, including their career development. It differs from the studies described above because it adopts a capabilities perspective to investigate the participants’

view of race and gender as a restriction or constraint of the capabilities they have acquired through higher education. This perspective allows one to study each woman as an individual and to link the experiences of different women. My study not only investigates the skills that women have gained in higher education, but also the opportunities they have within higher education systems and factors that could enhance or prevent them from succeeding and living the lives they value.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the development of feminist movements and their role in the fight for equality both in their personal space and in public, including access to higher education and obtaining challenging jobs. South African policies on gender, higher education and education were explained, showing that South Africa has policies in place to ensure gender equality. The literature on transition from higher education to the workplace, however, shows that black women, both nationally and internationally, are still being discriminated against because of their race and gender. The literature mentioned little about the role of higher education in equipping graduates most of the skills mentioned were aimed at gaining entrance into the workplace, thus, ignoring other qualities that they might need to live a life of their choice. The capabilities approach does not only use statistical information, but also the lived experiences of individuals to evaluate the freedom people have to achieve their goals. Chapter 3 discusses why the capabilities approach framework was found to be best suited for this study.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

The overview of literature in the previous section concluded with the need to study the development of black women in and through higher education from a capabilities perspective. For this reason, the capabilities approach has been chosen to evaluate the life histories of black women graduates. The investigation entailed the exploration of those capabilities the women have attained from higher education and whether these capabilities could be turned into valued functionings. This chapter will present an in-depth account of the capabilities approach and its relevance to this study. The work of the two founding authors of the capabilities approach, Sen and Nussbaum, will be highlighted, after which a description of basic terms related to the capabilities approach will be provided. The focus will then turn to the relationship between capabilities and education, among other things, showing how higher education is important for enhancing women's agency. The relationship between capabilities, gender and education will be explained, as well as how this approach can contribute to the empowerment of women in the higher education system.

### **3.1 An overview of the capabilities approach**

Amartya Sen pioneered the capabilities approach in the 1980s as an approach of welfare economics to provide a framework to understanding poverty (Sen, 1992). The capabilities approach has since been applied to a variety of human development contexts and can be used when dealing with gender inequalities and evaluating the higher education system.

In order to understand the capabilities approach, one needs to grasp the key terms used in this approach: functionings, capabilities and agency, well-being, and conversion factors.

#### *Functionings*

Functionings are the beings and doings which a person has reason to value (Robeyns, 2006; Sen, 1999), for example, having a job, being safe and being happy. A person's combination of chosen functionings and what they are able to do and be is part of their overall capability sets (Robeyns, 2005). Functionings could also be defined as outcomes that a person values. For example, a woman who wants to be a psychologist would value completing her master's degree and registering as a psychologist. However, achievement is not a functioning if it is not valued by a person; for instance, if the woman in the example

was forced to be a psychologist by her father while she wanted to pursue a career in music, she would not view completing her degree as a valued achievement or functioning. Functionings are tied to an understanding of capabilities; thus, functionings and capabilities cannot be separated.

### *Capabilities*

Capabilities are an alternative combination of functionings that a person is able to achieve (Crocker & Robeyns, 2012). Sen (1999) explains capabilities as a range of opportunities that one can choose from. Capabilities provide the opportunity structure and abilities to generate valuable outcomes and can be viewed as freedoms to achieve (Nussbaum, 2000; 2006). While people's combination of functionings represent their actual achievements, their capabilities represent their opportunity freedom; that is, freedom to choose between different alternative combinations of functionings (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006). The ability to turn valued capabilities into functionings (a person's agency) might be influenced by social, cultural or environmental factors, which are seen as conversion factors.

### *Conversion factors*

According to Robeyns (2005, 99), there are three types of conversion factors that could affect people's actualising their capabilities. These are personal conversion factors (e.g. physical condition, sex, reading skills), social conversion factors (policies, social norms, gender, class and race) and environmental conversion factors (geographic location and physical environment). These conversion factors have an impact on the development of a person's capabilities and functionings (Robeyns 2005; Sen, 1999). For example, if a woman is educated, but cannot get a job because of her gender, she has the capabilities to function in the workplace, but she is prohibited from turning her capabilities into valued functionings. Therefore, knowing the capability that a woman has is not sufficient to know which functionings she could achieve (Robeyns, 2005: 99).

### *Agency*

Agency refers to the individual as a member in society with the ability to partake in social, economic and political activities and to act towards the goals they value (Crocker & Robeyns, 2012). Agency is crucial to the assessment of an individual's capabilities, because it focuses on the valued goals of a person, her choices and decisions (Sen, 1999). The agency of a person enables her to achieve her well-being and to contribute to the well-being

of others (Crocker & Robeyns, 2012). Agency can further act as a counter-measure against negative conversion factors, allowing a person to reach her well-being.

### *Well-being*

The capabilities approach “proposes a broad, rich and multi dimensional view of human well-being and pays much attention to the links between material, mental and social wellbeing or to the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of life” (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010:65). In addition, this approach explains that, in order to understand how well a person is doing (well-being), one should look at all aspects of her life and the freedom she has to achieve what she values (Sen, 1993).

## **3.2 Sen’s and Nussbaum’s perspectives of the capabilities approach**

To understand Sen’s perspective of the capabilities approach, we need to define freedom and the aspects of freedom, which relate to the freedom of choosing functionings. Expansion of freedom is viewed as both the primary end and the principal means of development (Sen, 1999). His view of freedom is two-sided it refers to the processes that allow freedom of action, decision and the actual opportunities that people have, given their personal and social circumstances. Freedom is viewed as both the primary end (intrinsic importance) and the principal means (instrumental importance) of development. Development, in this view, refers to the process of expanding human freedoms. The capabilities approach is primarily concerned with the identification of what people have reason to value, and sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and the capabilities to function (Sen, 1993).

Martha Nussbaum (1995; 2003) expanded on the ideas of the capabilities approach. However, her view on this approach is different than Sen’s, because she used it as a foundation for a “partial theory of justice” (Robeyns, 2007:95). Nussbaum (2000) states that we need an approach that is respectful of each person’s struggle for flourishing.

The capabilities of a person depend on a variety of factors which include personal characteristics and social arrangements. Human capabilities make up an important part of individual freedom. A capability set comprises functionings, representing the alternative combinations of beings and doings from which the person can choose (Sen, 1993).

Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (2007) both argue that, in order for a person and society to develop, the emphasis should not be on gross national product (GNP), but instead on the

capabilities that people have. For example, South Africa has one of the highest GNP scores in Africa, yet 26.6% of South Africans are not formally employed (Trade and Economics, 2013). Sen (1999) explains that development can be described as a process of expanding real freedoms but, at the same time, freedoms are not merely the primary ends of development; they are also among the principal means. By this he means that, for a place to develop, people should enjoy and have access to primary freedoms. Primary freedoms include political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen, 1999). These freedoms help to advance the general capabilities of a person. Therefore, development refers to the quality of life with regard to capability expansion, which means the broadening of a set of valuable beings and doings that an individual can achieve (Sen, 2007).

Though Nussbaum and Sen agree on certain perspectives, they differ in some views of the approach. Sen views capabilities as a way to measure a person’s well-being; he does not believe in specifying a set of capabilities against which a person can be measured, because each person and each society is unique (Sen, 2007). Nussbaum does not agree with this notion and argues for a list of ten universal capabilities to serve as threshold requirements for a dignified life and which should be prioritised by governments. Nussbaum’s list of capabilities is presented in table 1 below. She argues that this list is merely a guideline and not a means to an end (Nussbaum, 2011).

**Table 1 Nussbaum’s capability list**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Central human capabilities (2000: 78-80)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✚ Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length, not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living.</li> <li>✚ Bodily Health. Being able to have good health including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.</li> <li>✚ Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.</li> <li>✚ Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.</li> </ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



- ✚ Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)
- ✚ Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)
- ✚ Affiliation.
  - Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)
  - Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species.
- ✚ Other Species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
- ✚ Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- ✚ Control over one's Environment.
  - Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
  - Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

As mentioned previously, this study was framed using both Sen's and Nussbaum's ideas of the capabilities approach. Now that we have an understanding of this approach, I argue that this is the most relevant approach for my study. The capabilities approach focuses on individuals and their experiences in life, while taking societal and environmental factors into account. Most importantly, this approach does not assume that individuals have the same functionings, but it respects human diversity. Because of its diverse nature, other scholars have used the capabilities approach in different developmental areas, such as gender

equality (Robeyns, 2003, 2005; Unterhalter, 2005), education (Walker, 2006, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2012), disability (Mitra, 2006), human development (Alkire, 2010) and reducing poverty (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). However, this study was mainly concerned with research on capabilities and gender, and capability and education in higher education specifically. I will now discuss how the capabilities approach is implemented in higher education.

### **3.3 Education and capabilities**

As a capability generator, higher education could be viewed as a stepping-stone to promote valued functionings and freedoms. This section explores the relationship between capabilities and higher education.

Education policies are based on different frameworks, for example, the human capital approach states that education is important for the economic growth of a country (Barrett & Tikly, 2012). Education in this approach is all about the financial benefits that one should receive after being educated and graduates' contribute to the economic growth of countries (Barrett & Tikly, 2011). This approach focuses on the instrumental economic benefits of education while disregarding the injustices that occur within higher education and beyond (Robeyns, 2006; Unterhalter, 2009). The capabilities approach expands on the human capital approach by focusing not only on the economic benefits of education, but also on the intrinsic and instrumental value that education offers in expanding people's freedoms (Nussbaum, 2011). The capabilities approach also expands on the right-to-education model, which states that every person, irrespective of race or gender, has the right to education, including the right to advance to higher education. Although this approach seems noble in theory, it does not work well in practice. Robeyns (2006a, 80) explains that "men and women are granted rights, but once the rights are granted, no further claims for social change can be made." The capabilities approach emphasises the individual in the education system and ensures the implementation of human rights (Nussbaum, 2011). Furthermore, this approach is concerned not only with the rights of people, but also with what matters intrinsically and instrumentally to a person (Robeyn, 2006a).

According to Dreze and Sen (1999), education can be valuable to personal freedom in five ways. First, for its intrinsic importance which is to increase a person's freedom education can be regarded as an important tool, secondly the instrumental personal rules which explain that education also improves one's well-being and opens the door to more opportunities. If one is educated, one can get a job which, in turn, brings in income and improves the person's freedom to choose what to do. The freedoms that come with

education need not be economic only; one might also learn to be self-confident. Thirdly, instrumental social goals refer to the fact that education, especially higher education, provides one with skills to participate in social discussions and add value to social matters. While instrumental process roles, on the other hand, refer to the fact that schooling is not merely about formal education, they also broaden children's spectrums of life and opportunities. It expands the students' knowledge about the world. Lastly, empowerment distributive roles refer to greater literacy and education of the marginalised group can improve their knowledge, thus, helping them to fight against oppression and ensuring equality in political and social aspects.

These freedoms are not only valuable to the person receiving education, but also to the larger society of which the person forms a part. When people from poor homes are educated, they can provide financial benefits to their family and, at the same time, be involved in current affairs.

Walker (2005) explains that higher education is important for identity formation and specifically for making meaningful decisions. According to Wilson-Strydom (2012: 99), there are two ways in which the capabilities approach can be used in higher education: first, to evaluate one's "capability to participate in education" and, secondly, to evaluate "how being educated can play a role in one's development of other capabilities, such as getting employed." In order to understand the role of being educated in the development of an individual's capabilities, we first need to determine those capabilities with which higher education should equip an individual. Scholars (Nussbaum, 2011; Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2012) have generated an ideal theoretical frame of these essential capabilities.

Nussbaum (2011) highlights three capabilities that are essential for good education. Education should, first, enhance critical thinking, meaning that people should not merely accept what they are told, but challenge it in pursuit of better understanding. Secondly, educated people should not simply see themselves as citizens of a region or group, but also as a human being bound to all other beings by ties of recognition and concern. For example, education should provide women with knowledge about their nation and the world around them. Thirdly, Nussbaum argues that education should equip people with narrative knowledge, in other words, the ability to be empathetic towards others. She suggests that using arts and drama can be a great way to teach these skills.

Walker (2006), on the other hand, draws upon Robeyns' (2005) criteria of identifying capabilities to compile an ideal theoretical list of higher-education capabilities. Walker's

(2006: 128) list consists of eight capabilities: Practical reason; education resilience; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition, social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional integrity; and bodily integrity. If one could acquire all these capabilities at university, one would have the functionings to participate in activities that empower lives and the freedom to choose what we want to be. Education is said to develop other human capabilities and which could be converted into functionings which could, in turn, provide a foundation for other capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011; Unterhalter, 2005). My study uses Walker's and Nussbaum's capabilities as a framework to determine whether the participants gained some of the essential capabilities mentioned and how they have been able to turn the capabilities into valued functionings after they had completed their studies.

As mentioned above, education is important for the expansion of capabilities. Therefore, higher education is particularly important in expanding women's opportunity set, which should allow them to be treated as equals to men (Robeyns, 2006b). The next sections discuss gendered issues which affect women with and beyond higher education.

### **3.4 Education, gender and capabilities**

This section investigates the way in which the capabilities approach can be applied in education to ensure gender equality; not only in higher education, but in life thereafter. The previous section showed how education could enhance one's capability and agency; however, gender can be a conversion factor to prevent women from actualising their capabilities (Welch, 2002). In her paper on women's capabilities and social justice, Nussbaum (2002:45) explains that women are still less advantaged than men in all aspects of life:

They are much less likely than men to be literate, and still less likely to have pre-professional or technical education. Should they attempt to enter the workplace they face greater obstacles, including intimidation from family and sexual discrimination in hiring.

Robeyns (2010) adds that gender stereotypes continue to put women at a disadvantage in many areas of life. However, Nussbaum (2002) explains that human capabilities and functionings can help overcome inequalities between genders. Her list of capabilities can be used to measure whether a person has basic capabilities to function (Nussbaum, 1995). For example, a woman's right to work does not only fulfill the capability to work, but also that of

good nutrition and a healthy life for her and her children. Nussbaum's list of capabilities can be seen as basic capabilities which each person should have, and deprivation of these capabilities means that a person has a capability deprivation.

Although she does not contest Nussbaum's list of capabilities, Robeyns (2005) agrees with Sen that a list should be content specific and not universal. Robeyns (2005:73) formulated her list of 14 gender-equality capabilities (presented in table 2) which is more suitable for the assessment of gender inequality in Western societies, according to her.

**Table 2: Robeyns' capability list**

**Robeyns' capabilities for gender inequality assessment**

1. Life and physical health: being able to born and to live a healthy life. In Western countries gender difference in the expectancy at birth, with a higher life expectancy for women than men. It is caused by the biological intrinsic difference between genders, with no relevance.
2. Mental well-being: related both to mental and psychological activity, it shows that women are suffering more often than men of mental disturbs, as anxiety and depression.
3. Bodily integrity and safety: every kind of violence that could injure a person in its integrity. In this capabilities there is an evident gender dimension since women are suffering sexual violence (usually victims of their household) more than men, which are most frequently victims of physical violence.
4. Social relations: creating and maintaining social ties. Men and women have different behaviour: men have extensive social network, that they use to get advantage in economic and public life; while women invest in informal network and social support.
5. Political empowerment: political activity has historically been seen as a male activity, in the recent decades women appeared in the political arena, but now they are still few.there are inequality also in the behaviour required in their activity to female politicians, because they have to conform their behaviour to the masculine one.
6. Education and knowledge: in Western countries there is no gender inequality in the access to formal basic education. The gender inequality is in the approach of the household to children's higher education. Actually this difference is made up also by class background and by the gendered character of school, colleges and university.
7. Domestic work and nonmarket care: this is about housework and cares of children and elderly. It shows high gender inequality, since it seems that this kind of care belongs quite exclusively to women.
8. Paid work and other projects: this capability refers to all the activity outside to housework. In the working sphere women takes few and worse place, while in the artistic one there are not great differences between gender.
9. Shelter and environment: it refers to the decision power and the freedom of action that people have in their environment more than to the environment in itself.
10. Mobility: as instrumental capability that enables people to be independent. Its gender relevance is in the relation to other activities (e.g. caring children) that creates a kind

of indirect gender inequity (women that usually travel with pushchairs can have difficulties in using public transports).

11. Leisure activities: it refers to the free time. The real gender difference is not in the number of hours people spend in leisure activities, but in the way they enjoy it according to their gender.
12. Time autonomy: is the capability to allocate daily time between work, domestic and care activity and leisure activity. Many feminist underlined that the unequal division of labour becomes a disadvantage for women, because, even if the time men and women spent in those activity is the same, women have many responsibilities and that generates more stress for them.
13. Being respected and treated with dignity: feminist affirmed that women are devalued and that they frequently are treated as sexual object otherwise they are belittled because doing homework.
14. Religion: it goes beside the freedom to practice or not a religion or to became religious leaders. Moreover the author focuses her attention on the influence that religious context could have on the developing of other capabilities.

Similarly, in her study on high school girls in South Africa, Walker (2007) argues for capabilities that are ideal for gender equality in education. Although they were generated from interviews with school-level girls, these capabilities might be relevant to adult women because most females experience discriminatory practices despite their age. After interviewing girls from different schools, Walker (2007: 189-190) constructed the following capabilities: autonomy, knowledge, social relations, respect and recognition, aspiration, bodily integrity and bodily health, and emotional integrity and emotions.

Using the capability approach, Okkolin (2012) interviewed 10 highly educated women in Tanzania, with the aim to determine the factors that constrain or enable these women to reach their highest level of education. She evaluated the achievement of their educational well-being and freedom to exercise their agency. The results revealed that the women's autonomy to make decisions is limited, as most women made decisions (valued choices) concerning their education only at master's level. Before then they had followed the education system and/or the expectations of their families. In addition, the results indicated that family environment, together with school environment and personal motivation influenced the achievement of well-being and agency. Thus, the study showed that high levels of education enhance women's agency freedom, which allows them to live a life they have reason to value.

The above-mentioned study demonstrates how education can enhance the capabilities of women to be agents of their own lives. Owing to the fact that this approach emphasises issues of choice and decision making, higher education should provide women with autonomy and empowerment (Robeyns, 2003; Unterhalter, 2007). The next section focuses on how the capabilities approach can contribute to the empowerment of women graduates.

### **3.5 Empowerment**

The capabilities approach acknowledges individuality in a person's life context, assuming that each individual has different values, priorities or conditions according to which they live. The notion of the capabilities approach in gender empowerment is about creating space for personal choices (Unterhalter, 2005) and allowing individuals to function in the way they find valuable while, at the same time, reflecting critically on the cause of gender inequalities and acting towards changing these inequalities. This section will explain the notion of empowerment and past efforts that have been made to empower women.

Empowerment is described as a process of recognition, capacity building and action. According to the World Bank (2012), empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes. However, some authors claim that the full meaning of empowerment should include cognitive, psychological, political and economic components (Kabeer, 2012; Stromquist, 2006).

Cognitive components of empowerment are viewed as the ability of women to realise their strengths and acknowledge their weakness. A woman needs to understand herself and her sexuality as well as be able to question cultural norms. Another important aspect of cognitive empowerment is the knowledge of the legal rights of women and of gender laws.

The psychological dimension refers to the development of self-esteem. Most women do not believe in themselves, because they have been socialised into believing that their only worth is being a homemaker (Sonya, 2010). Psychological empowerment seeks to eliminate this mind set. Self-confidence is an intrinsically developed trait and women should be provided with the opportunity to develop it by, for instance, involving them in projects that have a positive impact in their lives.

Economic resources also increase women's empowerment. For instance, a woman who is abused by her husband and is earning an income is more likely to leave him than the one

who is fully dependent on her husband (Kabeer, 2012). Having a job increases a woman's economic independence, thus, making her more self-reliant. Nevertheless, having economic benefits is not sufficient; knowing how to turn these resources into usable functionings is vital for empowerment.

The last component of empowerment, according to Stromquist (2006), is political empowerment. The awareness of power inequalities and the ability to analyse the environment in political and social terms can be recognized as components of political empowerment. Empowerment, therefore, involves individual awareness and collective action as important aspects in achieving social transformation.

In an attempt to evaluate the empowerment of women, Kabeer (2012) employed Sen's capabilities approach. She states that empowerment consists of choices regarding access to resources, agency in decision making and achievement of valued outcomes. In her assessment of empowerment regarding gender and education, Kabeer (2012) provides three measurement options: first, measuring access, retention and achievement in schooling; secondly, measuring agency in how decision making regarding education is perceived in households, schooling, education ministry or local authority and, thirdly, measuring achievements that follow from education. An understanding of these options enables one to determine whether black women are empowered or have achieved valued capabilities that they can turn into functionings throughout their lives.

According to Unterhalter (2005), education is essential for all people, but especially for women and girls. This is true because not only is higher education an entry point to other opportunities, but education achievements for most women can also have a ripple effect within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty (Monkman, 2011). Educated women are likely to recognise the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves (Murphy-Graham, 2012). Education also helps women and girls to know their rights and to gain the confidence to claim their rights. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) includes aims to bridge the gender gaps and to ensure that all women are empowered (Unterhalter, 2005). One of the MDG aims is to ensure that both genders receive equality in education, to increase women's share of wage employment in non-agricultural sectors and to increase the proportion of seating held by women in national parliaments.



## **Conclusion**

The capabilities approach can be applied as a framework to understand what people are capable of being and doing. Therefore, it explains that people have different capabilities, functionings and agency. Educational opportunities and gender equality could increase a person's capabilities to function in the competitive world we live in. Education should enhance women's agency, in other words, allow them to be critical decision makers and give them the freedom to choose the lives they value.

In this study, the capabilities approach was used to explore the experiences of black women and their path through higher education and beyond. The emphasis of the study was on identifying what the women value, the conversion factors that might have prevented them from reaching their valued goals, and their agency to reach their goals. I argue that, by using the capabilities approach, one can provide an understanding as to which capabilities are enhanced in higher education to ensure black women's success beyond higher education. The next chapter will discuss the methodology and methods used to explore the experiences of nine black women graduates in higher education and beyond.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss why a qualitative approach was seen as suitable for this study. This is followed by a discussion on the importance and relevance of feminist methodology to the study, after which the narrative method and the sampling technique are explained. The chapter further describes the ethical considerations relevant to the study, how the data were collected and analysed, as well as the trustworthiness of this study. Before a discussion of the methodological issues, the aim of the study and research questions which guided the methodology are provided.

### **4.1 Research aim and questions**

#### *Aim*

The aim of this study was to investigate the course of life of South African black women graduates after having completed higher education and how or in what way their higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally. This study was framed by the following research questions:

#### *Research questions*

1. What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates with regard to choosing good professional and personal lives?
2. How does gender and race enable or constrain black women graduates' capability for work, including their career development over time?
3. Do black women graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

In order to answer the research questions, the study followed a qualitative approach, a feminist methodology, and the narrative and life-history methods.

## **4.2 Research approach**

This study used an interpretivist paradigm, because this paradigm is concerned with people's everyday experiences and perceptions about life (Sarantakos, 2005) and the individual understands of the world. As mentioned previously, this study sought to explore the life histories of black women graduates and gain deeper understanding of the lives of these women. Because I also attempted to ascertain the capabilities and functionings that these women possess, this framework was deemed to be the most suitable, because it uses small samples to understand people's lives and lived experiences (Hancock, 1998).

The process of interpretivist research is concerned with understanding the social and cultural contexts which underlie various behavioural patterns and it mostly explores the "why" question. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001: 270), "the main goal of using this approach is to describe and understand as well as to explain human behaviour." This study attempted to understand what black women value. A qualitative approach collects rich descriptive data (Maree, 2007) and, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not seek to generalise the findings but to provide deep understanding of the topic instead (O'Leary, 2010). Nine participants were interviewed in this study in order to gain such understanding of their lives.

The study also employed feminist methodology. Feminist research actively seeks to remove the power imbalance between the researcher and the subject (Cooks & Fonow, 2005; DeVault, 1990; Edwards, 1990). It often begins with the standpoints and experiences of women, is mostly politically motivated and plays a major role in changing social inequality. Feminists usually follow a qualitative approach, because it allows them to understand the lives of women by interviewing them and gaining their perspective of a specific phenomenon (Boeku-Betts, 1994).

### **4.2.1 Feminist methodology**

Feminist methodology was seen to be most suitable for this study. Research is a process that involves an on going series of decisions and choices. Cooks and Fonow (2005) posit that "the aim for methodology is to describe and analyse research methods, throwing light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their presuppositions and consequences, relating their potentialities to the twilight zone at the frontiers of knowledge." In this regard, feminist methodology seeks to describe, explain and justify the techniques used in research. Feminist theorists such as Karen Brown demonstrate that feminist methods are adaptable.

She gives an example of her research in Haiti: although she initially used formal structured questions for her interviews, she had to change them to semi-structured questions and adopt a more informal approach (Fiorenza, Brown, Gilkes, Hunt & Barstow, 1985).

Some of the research methods that are used by feminists include case studies, ethnography and participatory research (Cooks & Fonow, 2005). However, there is no one method that is specific in feminist research; the method used is determined by the research topic. Hence, in this study, I used the life-history method.

The next section will discuss what is meant by feminist research in order to provide a deeper understanding of feminist methodology.

### *Features that shape and define feminist research*

First, the unequal power relationship between the researcher and the subject is restructured to validate the viewpoint of the participant. The aim is to remove or reduce the hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant (Cooks & Fonow, 2005). Changing research terminology from one of hierarchy to one of equality is the first step. Many authors mention the use of “participant” as a preferred term instead of the “subject” or “researched.” However, addressing the imbalance in power relations between researcher and participant is more than simply changing the language of research. Changing the power relationship would entail involving the participants at all levels of the research process (Cooks & Fonow, 2005). In this study, I tried to make sure the participants were satisfied and comfortable during the interview and I made a conscious decision not to dominate the interview but to listen and observe as much as possible.

In research, the essential starting point is for the researcher to regard participants as experts of their own life experiences. This is because as part of the social world, participants are critical thinkers hence are conscious and aware of social relationships that influence as well as impact on their daily lives. As Ralph (1988: 139) indicates, it is important that feminist researchers recognise and identify the women engaged, as participants are “often actively working to change the conditions of their oppression.” Maintaining the originality and authenticity of how the participants give meaning to their experiences is also part of what constitutes changing the power imbalance in feminist research (Edwards, 1990). Edwards claims that feminist methodology gave her the flexibility to be able to relate to women in their comfort zone. In the current study, all the interviews were conducted at the participants’ location of choice.

It is common for women researchers to bring their life experiences and history into the role of a researcher and the research process. For feminist researchers, the researcher could either be an insider or outsider to the environment and topic under study. Firstly, as an insider she has good understanding of the dynamics that inform the situation under investigation. As such, the researcher being affiliated with the context might lower the inequality issue between herself and the participants because participants could feel comfortable with someone who is in the similar situation (Matsumoto, 1996). Secondly, as an outsider, the feminist researcher could also be able to change the imbalances of power relations with the participants. This is due to the fact that women tend to critically assess and make realities of their own lives when explaining their experiences and feeling with an outsider (Boeku-Betts, 1994). Striving for balance and equality between researcher and participant entails negotiating the often blurry insider/outsider relationship between the two parties (Matsumoto, 1996).

The location of the researcher is also vital. As women, both researcher and participant share a common location in the social world based on their gender and can communicate according to this similarity. However, the location of the researcher as different from the participant can also have consequences on the research process (Matsumoto, 1996). Bringing feminist concerns into research entails recognising the differences between women. According to Matsumoto (1996), gender similarities might not be relevant in all social locations. For some participants, factors other than gender could play a more important role in their experiences. The race, class or orientation of the interviewer might affect the participant in some way and is an important issue that feminist research addresses. As Edwards (1990: 483) notes, race can be a barrier for women seeking to do research “outside” their own race, where finding participants willing to take part in the research could prove difficult. Although the participants and I were black and graduates, we all came from different backgrounds and experiences. However, it seemed as if the younger participants could relate better to me as they assumed we shared similar experiences.

Addressing inequality in the research relationship is more than simply acknowledging different social locations. It is also taking an active role in negotiating across these differences with the participants (DeVault, 1990). Some participants were more willing to talk than others whom I had to probe to find out more information. Some of the women also observed that it was good for them to reflect on their past and share their life experiences with someone who is of a different age group than them. However, some women assumed that I shared the same problems with them because I was black, which was, at times, a

challenge. In such instances, I had to probe for more information from them on issues that they assumed to be common knowledge for all black women, for example, gender dynamics in families.

In part, a feminist commitment to societal change involves a commitment to the participants of the research. Identifying the connections between individual experience and social relations can facilitate personal analysis and transformation. Empowerment is established when one has education about issues and the knowledge that one's individual experiences are part of a larger social structure (Cooks & Fonow, 2005). By conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with black women graduates, my study addressed social issues such as gender and racial issues within the higher education environment, workplace and the home.

Finally, it is not sufficient to simply add women to the research equation. Feminist research is not simply having women engaged as researchers; nor is it about studying gender as a category or including women as a variable in research (Weston, 1988). Feminist research is about taking women's locations and standpoints in the world as the basis for research, where "research will proceed from a perspective that values women's experiences, ideas and needs rather than assuming we should be more like men" (Weston, 1988: 89).

Another important factor is reflexivity, which can be defined as "the tendency of feminists to reflect on, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research project (Pillow, 2010:271). Pillow (2010) explains that reflexivity in feminist research is about doing things differently at every step of the research project. The researcher must be aware that knowledge is produced at every part of the research, from the literature review to the analysis and writing up of the results. Thus, the researcher has to be reflexive at all times during the research project.

Self-reflexivity should be associated within self-disclosure (Pillow, 2010). The researcher must disclose as much as possible about the research procedure, which will not only indicate reflexivity, but also contribute to the validity of the study. A study by Peer (2005) serves as an example. She interviewed male inmates who had raped or assaulted women and, despite her feelings about these men, she tried to minimise her subjectivity at all times. She wrote down her feelings about the interviews so she could reflect and not let them cloud her judgment. In the same way, feminist researchers must reflect on their experiences while conducting the study. Keeping a diary can help to reflect on the day's work and the emotions observed in the interview or focus group session. Although I did not keep a diary for this study, I did reflect after each interview and made notes of some issues,

such as creating rapport between me and the participants whom I did not know. This practice proved helpful because the rapport improved in the second interview after having reflected on the first one.

The methodological choices I made for the study were grounded in a feminist perspective which:

- recognises the participants as the experts and authorities on their own experiences as the starting point to research;
- is concerned with the accuracy of the research in depicting women's lives and experiences; and
- Sees the potential of the research to help women in their daily lives and provide information that is needed for this aspect.

Keeping these three points in mind throughout the research process helped me to answer all the research questions mentioned earlier.

Having discussed why the qualitative approach and feminist methodology were seen as best suitable for this study, I will now discuss the research method and relevant ethical considerations.

### **4.3 Research method**

In order to answer the above questions a life-history design was used. Maree (2007: 72) explains that "a life history is particularly appropriate for individual research because it gives an opportunity for an individual aspect of the problem to be studied in depth." In this case, it was to understand the professional and personal lives of black women graduates while, at the same time, exploring whether these women have the freedom to achieve that which they value. This method, according to Goodson and Sikes (2001), seeks to answer the "why", "how", "what is it like" and "what does it mean to you" questions.

Somekh and Lewin (2005) view a life history as a life story or oral history with additional dimensions, which include analysis of the social, political, historical and economic context of the individual. Furthermore, a life history and a narrative create a thick descriptive context and generate ideas (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2012) while providing a deeper understanding of the individual. Although it does not provide the absolute truth, a life history does give a perspective of what is taking place in an individual's life (Miller, 2000). Because feminist

theorists have shown that black women have been silenced for a long time, the voices of selected black women graduates will be heard in this research.

The main aim of the life-history method, as stated by Goodson and Sikes (2001), is to understand the stories of women against the background of society, in this case, gender equality and social justice. Goodson and Sikes (2001) elaborate that narratives and life histories focus mainly on how individuals choose to shape their lives. All people live different lives; the life-history method draws on both the differences and the similarities of participants' experience.

The advantage of the life-history method is that it allows the researcher optimum understanding instead of generalisation (O'Leary, 2010). On the other hand, the fact that findings from life histories cannot be generalised is a criticism of this research design. The critics question the trustworthiness of this method, arguing that life-history informants could alter truths about their lives in trying to impress the interviewer (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Furthermore, the researcher could bring bias into the situation by virtue of her personal and social experiences. In this regard, Goodson and Sikes (2001:25) state that "all human knowledge and experiences as expressed through verbal accounts is in essence biased." Maree (2007) argues that this bias can be minimised if the researcher is always reflective and aware that there will be some sort of bias in the study. With regard to the question of generalisation, Denscombe (1998:37) claims that "the extent to which research findings from life history can be generalised to other cases depends on how far the narrative example is similar to the one being compared with." Trustworthiness of life histories should be considered to be more important than generalisability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This implies that the researcher should provide truthful results that portray a story of her participants. In this study, findings cannot be generalised to all black women graduates. Nevertheless, the study provides in-depth understanding of individual lives, which could enhance our understanding of the capabilities that women gain through higher education.

The life-history method, according to Miller (2000), follows three approaches, namely the realist approach, the neo-positivist approach and the narrative approach. This study used the narrative approach, because the research did not attempt to test a hypothesis but to obtain a deeper understanding about women graduates. The narrative approach "bases itself fundamentally upon the on-going development of the respondents' point of view during story telling" (Miller, 2000: 12). Thus, the interviewer must be a good listener and make sure she is attentive at all times. Narratives present participants' lives through the present, through which the past and the future are also seen. In this sense, the participants narrate



their lives looking back at their past experiences. Their present life is highly influential in the way they see their past and future.

Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) define “narrative” as a “qualitative research design in which stories are used to describe action.” Bathmark and Harnett (2012) explain that narratives are not simply stories, but life histories of the people being interviewed. Life histories pay attention to the social relational power or social change. When people tell their life stories we can begin to understand social issues happening in our societies. Stories are human attempts to progress to situations, clarifications and the revealing of incomplete situations. Humans can explain their experiences while telling a story, in this case, a story about lives mainly in higher education and the market. These are not merely stories but, in fact, life histories and reflections of the participants with regard to their experiences, opportunities, resources and aspirations in life.

Narratives are built on individuals’ understanding of the different periods and qualities of their life experiences (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Individuals live their lives in a way that can be understood narratively, because they are communicating and narrating their experiences constantly. Life histories and narratives also complement each other: Narratives focus on making meaning of experiences, while life histories draw on individual experiences to create broader contextual meaning. What makes life histories unique is the connection of life history events to social events (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). As De Vault (1990: 102) suggests, “the personal becomes political,” implying that a person’s life history is part of the social or political world.

Life histories are best used to explore the phenomenology of everyday experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 287). Thus, this was the ideal method to understand the background of black women, the type of education they received and the effect that their gender had on their lives. The participants’ university lives and years after having completed their degrees were a main focus of their life histories. The participants in this research were afforded the chance to explain what they value and whether gender, race and other social factors hindered the actualisation of their capabilities.

#### **4.4 Participants and sampling**

O’Leary (2010) posits that, because qualitative research seeks to find narratives that are rich in data, fewer participants are needed to provide the data. Goodson and Sikes (2001) concur by saying that life-history research does not need many participants, but a small sample that

will provide rich data. In addition, due to the nature of data collection, it takes time to set up interviews, and data analysis is also more time consuming than quantitative analysis. The study population of my study comprised nine women graduates most of who were employed. These women have all graduated from several South African higher education institutions between five and ten years ago. The women's ages varied, as the main criteria were attendance of higher education and a minimum of a first degree. The women came from different socio-economic backgrounds and have gone through different levels of education.

Life-history studies seldom use random sampling because its aim is not usually to generalise. Therefore, this study applied purposive sampling which is defined as the process of "selecting participants according to pre-selected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (Maree, 2007: 5). Participants were selected according to their race, level of study and geographical positioning. Through an acquaintance, I was put into contact with two of my participants, after which I applied snowball sampling to access other participants. Snowballing, according to Goodson and Sikes (2001), is a process where one interview participant refers the researcher to a friend or colleague who might be interested in taking part in the study. One limitation of using this method of sampling is that, because of informal networks often being limited to similar work and social fields, most of the participants in this study graduated in the social sciences. Below is a table of the participants' biographical data.

**Table 3: Participants' information**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Family background</b>                      | <b>Marital status</b> | <b>Children</b> | <b>Degree obtained</b>                                            | <b>High school education</b>      | <b>Job</b>                      | <b>University</b>                         |
|-------------|------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Fifi        | 24         | Sesotho          | Working middle-class family with both parents | Single                | None            | Architecture                                                      | Private school                    | Self-employed                   | Previously white                          |
| Thuli       | 26         | Sesotho          | Middle-class family with single mother        | Single                | None            | Honours in Social Sciences                                        | Government high school in Lesotho | Lecturer                        | Previously Afrikaans                      |
| Thabelo     | 31         | Sesotho          | Middle-class family with two parents          | Divorced              | None            | B degree in Marketing                                             | Model C                           | Unemployed                      | Previously Afrikaans                      |
| Aya         | 43         | IsiZulu          | Middle-class family with two parents          | Married               | One             | B degree in Social Work                                           | Township                          | Wellness manager                | Previously black                          |
| Mpho        | 26         | Sesotho          | Higher-class family with two parents          | Single                | One             | Master's in Clinical Psychology                                   | Private school                    | Community clinical psychologist | Previously Afrikaans                      |
| Xoli        | 26         | IsiXhosa         | Lower-class family with single mother         | Single                | None            | Honours in Political Science                                      | Pre-1994 Bantu education          | Researcher                      | Previously Afrikaans                      |
| Nezi        | 38         | IsiXhosa         | Middle-class family with single mother        | Married               | One             | Honours in Social Sciences (psychology and industrial psychology) | Pre-1994 Bantu education          | House wife                      | Previously black/<br>Previously Afrikaans |

|      |    |                     |                                              |         |      |                                 |                             |                                                        |                                           |
|------|----|---------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Lebo | 28 | Sesotho/<br>IsiZulu | Middle-class<br>family with<br>single mother | Married | One  | Journalism                      | Private/model C             | House<br>warden and<br>student<br>assistant<br>officer | Previously Afrikaans                      |
| Mary | 27 | Sesotho             | Middle-class<br>family with<br>single mother | Single  | None | Honours degree<br>in Psychology | Pre-1994 Bantu<br>education | Wellness<br>officer                                    | Previously black/<br>Previously Afrikaans |

#### 4.4.1 Pilot study

The main reason for conducting a pilot interview was to determine whether the interview questions addressed the research questions adequately. Under observation from one of my supervisors, I conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed one black female graduate. Though I was confident about the interview questions, I soon realised they were not answering the research questions. They were too broad and did not allow the participant to give sufficient detail about her experiences. Feedback from the participant included that I “jumped” to ask about her university life before asking about her past, which played a vital role in her decision to come to university. Thus, this pilot study proved to be very helpful. I adjusted the interview questions to suit the research questions. The modified research questions were more specific, but not leading questions. This pilot study not only showed me that the questions needed adjustment, but also improved my interviewing skills. In life-history research, the researcher needs to be a good interviewer who can, for instance, establish a calm environment between the participant and the researcher. The pilot study gave me the opportunity to practise meeting these requirements. The table below shows some results that emerged from the pilot study.

**Table 4: Results from pilot study**

| Key dimensions | University                                                                                                                                                                   | Labour market                                                                           |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Capabilities   | Critical thinking. Reading and writing skills. Confidence.                                                                                                                   | Stand up for self. Confidence, self-awareness.                                          |
| Race           | Only in honours year did she feel race was an issue when one lecturer treated black students differently by always criticising their work and never being satisfied with it. | No racial problems in the labour market.                                                |
| Gender         | All genders treated the same; gender was not an issue at all.                                                                                                                | Her first job was male dominated. They tried to belittle her, but she did not allow it. |

This initial insight helped me to group my research questions into the main categories of the main themes of my study; thus, ensuring that all elements of the research questions were answered. I will now discuss ethical issues that were taken into consideration before and during data collection.

## **4.5 Ethics**

A prerequisite of this research was ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State. The following ethical practices were implemented.

### *Informed consent*

I contacted the referred participants via email or text messages in order to seek permission to interview them. At this stage, an information sheet about the study was emailed to the potential participants. On the day of the first interview, I presented the participants with a letter of consent, which described the research purpose and process. After reading this letter, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions to clarify aspects regarding the research. All the participants were still willing to take part in the research and they signed a consent form. The participants were reminded once again that they could withdraw at any time during the process if they wished to do so.

### *Protection from harm*

According to Maree (2007), the researcher must ensure that participants are not exposed to any physical or psychological harm. Before conducting the study, I ensured that questions were not biased, were not leading and were not offensive in anyway. During the study, I strived to be honest, sympathetic and respectful towards the participants.

### *Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity*

At the beginning of the interviews, I assured the participants that pseudonyms will be used throughout and that I will present the data they provided to me honestly and within context. All the information of and responses from the participants were stored in a secure computer. The privacy of the participants was ensured by using pseudonyms for all participants. The names of the institutions that the participants attended would not be mentioned in the results, as permission was not granted by the universities to do so.

The next section discusses how the data were collected and analysed.

#### **4.6 Data collection and analysis**

Narratives seek to describe the meanings of essential themes in the life world of individuals. The main task in interviewing is to understand the contextual meaning of what the interviewees say (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Babbie and Mouton (2001) explain that research interviews seek deeper understanding of an individual's life. Interviews are particularly useful for revealing the story behind a participant's experiences.

Considering the aim and objectives of the current study, a survey or observation could not have been used because participants needed to personally relate details and experiences about their past, present and possible future lives. Observation only might have omitted some important factors and would have lacked personal evidence of the participants' life. Life-history interviews are not solely about collecting facts or reports, but about "constructing a language practice place where life history is put together by the participants' conversation" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005: 156). This implies that the researcher needs to construct a life story of the participants from what they tell her about their lives. As Bloom and Crabtree (2006: 315) state, "[t]he individual in-depth interview allows the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matter." In order for the research questions to be fully answered, the researcher needs to understand both the social and personal details of the participants' lives (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Though in-depth interviews have been criticised for being time consuming, the rich data that are gathered override this criticism. In order to obtain the most useful data from these women, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews, according to Bloom and Crabtree (2006), are either flexibly worded or a mix of more and less structured questions. The biographical questions are more structured and fixed usually, while other questions are more flexible, yet still guided to ensure that relevant data are gathered.

Because semi structured are not too open, and yet not rigid, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to gather general information about participants as well as about individual perspectives. In the current study, my main interest was the participants' point of view about their experiences of higher education and which valuable opportunities were available to them for their development and well-being after higher education. The interviewees were encouraged to express themselves as much as possible and give as much information as they possibly could. This gave insight into what the participants saw as

relevant instead of my suggesting factors in a top-down approach. Nevertheless, the researcher should keep the interviewees on track, which proved to be a difficult task in this study, since some of the participants remembered a great deal of events and detail which diverted the interviews. An advantage of interviews is that the researcher is able to probe the participant when she is not providing sufficient information about a subject or when she raises a relevant point that the researcher has not considered previously. All the interviews in this study were conducted at the location of choice of the participants and mostly during working hours. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours each and all the interviews took place during September and October 2013. Afterwards, all the interviews were voice recorded with permission and the recordings were transferred to a computer after the interview. Below is the research interview schedule.

**Table 5: Schedule of interviews**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Date of interview</b> | <b>Time of interview</b> | <b>Duration of interview</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Xoli        | 12/09/2013               | 12:00                    | 82 min                       |
| Nezi        | 19/09/2013               | 8:30                     | 49 min                       |
| Mpho        | 01/10/2013               | 13:00                    | 70 min                       |
| Thuli       | 02/10/2013               | 12:00                    | 45 min                       |
| Fifi        | 06/10/2013               | 9:00                     | 52 min                       |
| Thabelo     | 07/10/2013               | 14:00                    | 54 min                       |
| Lineo       | 19/10/2013               | 8:00                     | 59 min                       |
| Mary        | 22/10/2013               | 20:00                    | 50 min                       |
| Aya         | 28/10/2013               | 13:00                    | 55 min                       |

After all the interviews had been conducted, all the recorded data were transcribed, at which point the pseudonyms were allocated. The transcription process was completed by the end of December 2013, after which the transcribed data were analysed by means of content analysis.

#### **4.7 Data analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research is a process of working with a data set, organising it, breaking it into manageable pieces, synthesising it, searching and discovering the most



pertinent patterns and determining what the data are actually telling the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Maree, 2007). In short, data analysis is a process of transforming data into findings in a manner that reduces the volume of collected raw information. Thus, data analysis is the process of making sense of and interpreting the data that the researcher collected. Content analysis, specifically, interprets the stories told by participants. It examines the data from different angles in an attempt to uncover different themes (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). All the key themes (capabilities, gender, race and agency) in this study were highlighted in the transcripts and the data were divided according to these themes. The data were further divided into themes according to life stages and experiences associated with those stages. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, my supervisor and I analysed one transcript and compared our findings to ensure their similarity in finding to ensure trustworthiness of finding be presented.

#### **4.8 Trustworthiness**

Different scholars use different terms when referring to concepts that deal with the trustworthiness of research data. This section discusses the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the study, which all contribute to ensuring its trustworthiness.

First, credibility means that the researcher has provided a true picture of what she has seen or heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this regard, I recorded the findings to ensure all the stories were captured. Secondly, dependability refers to the extent to which the researcher can account for every change that occurred in the study and to be honest about the change(s) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The ideal plan was to interview 10 women in my study but, due to data saturation and time constraints, only nine women were interviewed. Lastly, confirmability pertains to the extent to which the results can be confirmed by others. To ensure that my interview questions could answer my research question, my supervisor together with colleagues (MA and PhD students at the centre) analysed and gave input regarding my questions. Furthermore, one transcript was checked by my supervisor, as mentioned above.

#### **Conclusion**

The focus of this section has been on research questions, the research design, sampling methods, data collection and analysis that were employed in this study. Consideration was also given to the trustworthiness and ethical issues in order to confirm the credibility of the study. An interpretative paradigm was selected for this study, in which the feminist

perspective and the life-history narrative method was incorporated. My choice of interviews was explained as the preferred tool for data collection from nine black women graduates from South African universities.

The following chapter discusses the findings which emerged from the study and presents a contextual discussion on the meaning and implications of the findings according to the capabilities approach.

## CHAPTER 5: BIOGRAPHIES

### Introduction

The narratives of the women are used to voice their life experiences, and their biographies will be presented first to give an overview of their lives. This chapter gives lengthy biographies to give the reader a clear picture of whom the participants are and their experience. In this section, I provide the biographies of all nine participants. They tell their life stories, which include their families, schooling, experiences within the workplace and the influence of gender and race on these experiences.

### 5.1 Xoli

Xoli, aged 26, grew up with her mother and two sisters in a one-bedroom house. Her mother was a secretary at a law firm in a small town in the Eastern Cape. *We were classified as middle class but most of the time I find myself struggling with that term because I'm not sure what middle class is.*

Xoli said this because her mother earned very little, yet she states that they never lacked food or clothing. Her mother would make sure they were well looked after. Her mother passed away when she was in Grade 11. Xoli failed that year and had to repeat the grade. She does not ascribe her failing to her mother's passing, though she feels it might have played a role. This situation opened up her eyes and made her find a reason to live. *You see, as painful as death is, but I won't say that, I think the death of my mom was a blessing in disguise, and I know it sounds horrible what I am saying but after her death I somehow got a clear perspective of what I want in life.*

Xoli's older sister, who was 28 at that time and engaged to be married, looked after them. She explains that her sister did not have to look after them; there was no signed contract that she had to take care of them, but her sister did it anyway. Xoli says she is grateful to have such an amazing sister and brother-in-law, because they sacrificed a great deal, especially at the beginning of their marriage, to take care of Xoli and her twin sister.

Xoli went to a rural school with only black people. She explains that her primary school education was very good, and the teachers were always there for the students. *It was like a*

*private school*, she adds. High school, on the other hand, was the complete opposite: *Basically some teachers were committed, some were not, I mean you had to push yourself most of the time*. She goes further to explain that she received good education, but certainly not of the standard of private schools. Xoli then decided to further her studies. She explains that she could have played *the victim card* and stayed at home doing nothing with her life and everyone would have understood because of her mother's death, but she wanted to *make a life for herself*. Since her sisters went to university, she thought that was the route to take. She completed a one-year bridging course at a college affiliated with the university because she did not have matric exemption. While at the college, she took an introductory course in political science and decided to study political science full time the next year. She went to university in the Free State because it was closer to home. She applied for a government bursary, which she received. The bursary paid for her fees and accommodation until she completed her first degree.

Her interest in political science started when she was young. She explains: *At the same time I was very political minded because my mom was a very political person she used to tell me all the stories about the freedom charter and about her life, being a comrade. I fell in love with politics. Xoli went on to explain that, at a young age, a political party lobbied her. She also believed her race had a big influence in her choosing to study political science.*

*I think with that influence that I had and being from the Eastern Cape ... people from the Eastern Cape, I believe they are quite politically inclined and they are quite aware of race, I mean in South African in general. I mean, I grew up HATING Afrikaans and I always say I never hated the people that spoke the language but I hated the language. It is the language of the oppressor. So because of that I decided politics would allow me to address things that had to do with race.*

Xoli shows great passion when she discusses racial influences as well as when she mentions that her gender did play a role, as there were not many girls from where she comes from that actually made it to university.

When asked what skills Xoli learned from her three years at university, her answer was that, in the classroom setup, she only learned new terms and terminology. She states that she had great mentors who challenged her, gave her material to read and that she grew a great deal. The mentors taught her about racial aspects: *I am a recovering racist*. She goes on to say that her mentors taught her how to engage in different dialogues, to engage intellectually and to get out of her comfort zone. *I knew there was no justice or there were social ills within*

*the communities but they taught me how to engage with those and how to become a constructivist. I was a Marxist.*

Although Xoli says she did not learn much from the class, she still feels that attending university was a great decision because she met the people who mentored and continue to mentor her. Higher education put her into contact with amazing professors and students who had a positive influence in her life, she explains. After completing her first degree, Xoli decided to enrol for a postgraduate diploma in governance and political transformation. To her, this did not turn out to be a very wise choice: *It is boring the hell out of me, because it is not challenging.* To Xoli, the content of this degree was not up to standard. *I would say it is a quick scam of making money, but I mean I would not be that ruthless. I think it is a programme that needs to be reviewed and make it a better curriculum.*

Xoli not only grew academically, but socially too. When she came to university, she lived in a black residence<sup>2</sup> with 170 women and she had to interact with them, which was something she was not used to. She explains that university helped her deal with her sexuality: *I hate using the word “closeted” but I guess I had not dealt with my own sexuality at the time... I am an openly gay soul.* Xoli mentions that the interactions she had with her friends and mentors made it easy for her to be herself. The university community was supportive of her sexuality, which was very liberating to her. The social relations allowed her to discover herself, learn more about different languages, different backgrounds which, according to her, made her a better person. She was involved in several leadership roles at her residence and the university, and claims that some of the qualities that she learned from these positions included being humble, being a good listener, and serving people at all times.

While Xoli was in her second year of study, she was offered a job as a student assistant at the university's department of political science. The job assisted her a great deal financially and took some pressure off her sister to provide for her. She explains that many job offers came after that. She also worked for the new rector of the university, who was appointed to bring about transformation at the university. Xoli also worked with the rector on different projects. After completing her studies, a research department at the university offered her a job, which she accepted and was still holding at the time of the interview. *Finding a job was never a battle for me,* she explains. When asked whether her education played a role in her

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<sup>2</sup> Black people and white people did not stay in the same residences; there were residences for black and white students because of racial discrimination practices that had stemmed from the apartheid system.

acquiring her job she states: *It is my personality. My education has nothing to do with me being employed, it's just my personality, which sometimes it poses so many questions in my head, whether it is really about the education, formal education, because we know there is informal education. Does the formal matter more than the informal one, because I think, for me, I grew up from the informal one.* Xoli elaborates that a degree does not necessarily mean that you know your field of study and that you are ready for the workplace.

Xoli worked as a senior research assistant. She explains that when she was hired her duties were mainly administrative in nature. However, she soon discovered she did not like it because she enjoyed having a direct impact on people's lives. Xoli adds that, due to the mediocre undergraduate programme she completed, she did not have the skills to do academic writing. It was a nightmare for her to write and the frustration of not being able to perform made her physically ill. She then moved to do qualitative research, which she found more interesting. *But I still say I am not a researcher.* She says that she does not like academic writing and prefer working directly with people, although she was very grateful for her job. She has learned a great deal from this job, which she believes would help her in the future because she wanted to work for a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

Xoli has not experienced direct racism, though she mentions that, in South Africa, there would always be racial problems due to the country's past. She states that there were people who had problems with race, but they would always treat her well because of who she was affiliated with (her director and the rector of the university). She says in all the places she had worked her gender and sexuality did not make her any different from other people. *People have to respect me as a person, as a female and also my sexual identity or my sexual orientation, people should not see me as less of a person because I am gay.* She draws a connection between her race and sexual orientation, explaining that it makes her wonder how she would be treated when she were to leave the university. South Africa has a long way to go, she argues, when it comes to issues of race, gender and sexuality.

Xoli's future plans are to be a photographer and film maker. I'm planning to go study next year, film and photography and use them as a tool to understand pedagogies of social ills and to address social issues. Xoli understands that she cannot eradicate those social ills, but she wants to tell the stories of the people who have been silenced. When asked what she gained from her years in higher education and work Xoli answers: I am a more constructive being, I'm a student for life, I am a listener, I'm a critical thinker, scholar at heart, I think I am more wiser now, but my quest for education remains with me.

## 5.2 Lebo

Lebo (28) was born in QwaQwa, a rural area of the Free State province. Both her parents were teachers in QwaQwa, but her father passed away when she was two. Lebo has two older siblings, a brother and a sister. Since her mother was a single parent and had to educate her children, she held two to three jobs at the same time. *Well, my mother is quite rich I can say, but I would say I come from a middle-class background.* Lebo explains that her mother had to pay for both her siblings' university fees at the same time, and then Lebo's fees; thus, they never lived a lavish life.

Lebo went to boarding school at the age of seven, because her mother used to travel a great deal. She had no problem with being at boarding school from such a young age, as it taught her independence. Lebo went to privileged schools; she received some private schooling and attended previously white/Afrikaans schools (former Model C schools). *I went to at least nine different schools between Pietermaritzburg and the Free State.* Lebo attributes the changing of schools to her mother's wanting the best education for her. She mentions that most people like her mother, who work in the public sector and see that public schools are not performing, take their children to better schools because they can afford it: *Academics unfortunately work in the public sector and schools are not performing as they would like to see them. So they do not use those opportunities as challenges but rather, they can afford to take their children to better schools.*

Lebo grew up in diverse environments and she was the only black child at an Afrikaans school in Bethlehem, a town in the Free State province, in 1995. *I was called kaffir by one of the kids at school.* Lebo explains that she did not know what the word meant – her mother had to explain it to her. She states that that made her stronger and made her learn Afrikaans so she could understand what the other learners were saying about her. When asked what influences boarding school had on her life, she answers: *I was exposed to different sporting codes, different areas of education. Instead of science I did drama, so those were a bit of the privileges and of course in the private schooling you get special attention. I think we were five girls in a class; you get that whole issue of student–teacher ratio.* Lebo was grateful to her mother for putting her through this education system as she felt she was at an advantage when it came to English and Afrikaans languages and exposure in life.

According to Lebo, she did not have a say in whether she would attend university. *It was chosen for me, I had no choice,* adding that it was her mother's choice because it was her vision and mission to get her children through university. Lebo wanted to go to Cape Town

or Johannesburg, but her mother told her she would only pay for her to attend a specific university in the Free State, first because she did not trust her to go study far from home and, secondly, she worked for the education department in the Free State. Lebo studied BA Theatre Arts for six months, after which her mother suggested she change courses. *Six months later my mother said, Nana, you know, let's change to something that will get you a job in three years.* Therefore, Lebo changed her degree to BA Communications, majoring in Journalism and Afrikaans. She chose this degree because she loved communicating with people and she considered herself a socialite: *I thrive on communication.* She admits that she gained a great deal of knowledge from her degree, which helped her to communicate with different people, to write academically and develop her group-working abilities. In her second year, Lebo applied for a job as a student assistant at the department of Afrikaans to earn extra money. This job did not only bring monetary benefits, but also provided her with great work experience. She was offered a part-time job at one of the biggest Afrikaans newspapers in the country and the experience improved her Afrikaans academic writing skills. She states that, while she was still studying, she just attended class and wrote examinations to pass. *I think back then it was more about, yes, attending and getting a pass grade. Honestly speaking, God's hand over anything was above me, because I was a party animal. It was those days you would party until Sunday and you were writing a test on Monday.* Lebo mentions that she had one or two fails in her academic year, but she still worked hard to make sure she passed because she knew her mother worked hard to pay for her fees. The fact that her older siblings were educated was another motivation for Lebo to work hard as she did not want to be the only one without a degree. *I even signed a contract with her (her mother) that, hey, you only had funds available up until three years, so you do it in record time.* Lebo says this contract helped her; she was able to push herself, though she had to do an extra year. When asked whether she thought she would be where she is today had she not come to university, Lebo explains:

Well, you know, in hindsight I would say obviously the paper helps, the certificate helps that you have completed so many hours. Ah, but so I am a bit afraid of answering that question because one wouldn't have known about what is out there, one wouldn't have seen that this job requires this and this and this, so I think getting the paper also makes it valid, you know. It is like driving without a licence. You can drive but you have no backing and the paper backs you up a lot. That is the important thing. Yes, I did not learn how to Google at varsity but certainly I learned how to use a computer to its maximum, because I started working in the department early, because I had mentors through lecturing staff that would say, hey, we see the talent, so try this and this. Because I got academic advising to say, hey, maybe you



should try this as well. So I think all the extra activities only enhanced what one already has. But certainly I don't know if I would have gotten let's say the same job or become a journalist if I did not have the paper, so ja, it does help.

Lebo stayed in a previously black residence at the university. She says that it was easy to fit in because of her boarding school background. It was also easy for her to balance the residence activities and her academics, as she had been doing for many years. She explains that staying in a residence, one had to do sport and other activities such as charity work. She elaborates that *hostel life did not really affect my academics but rather taught me how to multi-task*. Lebo held a leadership position at her residence and, although she feels she got that position due to her popularity, it taught her how to be a leader. *I think popularity got me that position more than actual leadership. I was then able to improve by getting training in my term in this position.*

After Lebo's stint at the newspaper, she worked at the university as a residence head, including duties such as ensuring that all the students are well take care of and day-to-day running of the residence. In addition, she worked as a tutor coordinator. She explains that her communication skills came in handy at job interviews, plus she had an added advantage in that she was fluent in both English and Afrikaans, as the university has dual means of communication. *A degree in communications helped as well because those are actually things that are spoken about within the literature, within the work to say, how you prepare for an interview and so on.* She accredits the job she got to her degree, saying her degree and mentors fully prepared her for the labour market.

Lebo indicates that her race had nothing to do with her acquiring a job, explaining that her qualification got her the job. According to her, black people are at an advantage because they write their matric exams in a second language and that helps them excel in more than one language. *We are kind of ten steps further than a student currently doing their degree in their mother tongue. We are still at an advantage, it depends how we want to see a glass as half empty or half full.* She explains that, as a black person in South Africa, she can read and write in more than three languages, which puts her at an advantage when it comes to applying for work.

On the other hand, she thinks her gender was an added advantage to getting a job. *I think our country decides that for us now, they will say in a certain sector so many women need to be hired.* Affirmative action is a hot topic, though she still feels that her skills also spoke for themselves. Lebo further states that women are better speakers than men: *I was at an*

*advantage because women are better speakers, and so that interview you just, knock out of the water, poor males would have to compete with that.* According to her, academia is a patriarchal environment. *I mean, you look at the number of males employed by a university versus women, let's not even go into the colour thing or the race thing ... in the structures of management, there is a woman here and there.* Lebo feels that there are more white males in the management of the university, and black woman are still the minority. Although she has never been treated badly at the workplace (the university) because of her gender, she sometimes feels ill-treated within her culture. She argues by using an example *Mosali o tswaratipakabohaleng*, directly translated to *a woman holds the knife by the blade*, which means that a woman must be strong and endure whatever pain might come her way. *I think it's one of those things, I'm growing up and I am seeing the realities of being a woman in my Basotho culture and I might not like it that, even within my Christian culture, I'm not liking it very much how women are always wrong, the prescription for the women more than for the man.*

Lebo grew up in a more Western culture, and being married and having to be a traditional Mosotho wife would never suit her. She argues that she is more Afrikaans than Mosotho, as she grew up within the Afrikaans culture at her schools. *I don't believe in some of the Basotho cultural ceremonies and I just relate better with Afrikaans people.* She says it does matter what form of education you have when it comes to cultural norms because most of the elder people in the families are not educated and, as women, you cannot question the elders as it is considered to be disrespectful. With all that said Lebo states that she and her husband live a different life at home because they are still young. Her husband helps with the house work and babysitting of their daughter. She still goes out with her friends, because of her social personality. According to her, her husband understands, because he is educated (lawyer) and he sees the importance of his wife being who she values to be, supporting her through it.

In ten years' time, Lebo would like to have pursued her drama career part time and have her postgraduate degree in higher education. She also says they are planning to have a second child by then. Moreover, she wants something flexible, because she does not want to work a regular nine-to-five job. *I have always wanted to be a teacher, so that's another option that I want to delve into in life; I'm just not sure of working for government (lack of resources), that's my only problem.*

When asked what she gained through higher education and work, Lebo answers: Implement ideas, receive positive or negative critique...any type of training, academic advising and critical thinking, writing and research skills as well as good communication.

### 5.3 Fifi

Fifi is the youngest participant, aged 24. She was born into a middle-class family in the Free State, the eldest of three children. She attended a boarding school in KwaZulu Natal from Grade 1. This primary school was a former Model C school (government schools that only accepted white learners under apartheid, which have since evolved to include all races and is primarily funded by parents and alumni). She used to cry all the time when she went to school, until she realised there was no point and made peace with it. *I became mature at a young age.* Fifi says she was independent and preferred doing things for herself. She went to a private girls' high school in Durban and considers the education she received there as *the best ...we were exposed to different activities, I played guitar and violin.* They used to go to museums to understand the practical side of what they were doing in class and she took part in many sports such as hockey, netball, squash and badminton. She later discovered how privileged she was to have gone to a school that did not limit her in any way. Going to university was not really a choice, her parents expected her to go to a higher education institution, she says. They told her that she has to go do something with her life.

She decided to go to a university in Cape Town to study architecture. When asked why this university, she states *it was said to be the best university in South Africa that offered what I wanted to study.* Her parents paid her fees and in her second year she received a bursary that covered her expenses until she completed her degree. She studied architecture because she always loved buildings and history; buildings always fascinated her. She recalls that she had a choice between architecture, interior design and engineering, but she chose architecture because it had a bit of the other two fields. It was a difficult transition from high school to university: *In high school everyone was nice, people were friendly, then you get to university and it is the total opposite.* She says university taught her what real life is, that not everyone cares about you. *In university you need to adjust fast or you will miss a lot.* It took her a while to adjust, because in high school they had a clear schedule. *In high school I knew what I would do at a certain time months before that time.* The university programme was not as rigid as the high school one, and a great deal of self-discipline was required. *I think my lecturers were not well prepared.* Fifi says that they did not have study guides and

their lecturers would tell them to buy some of the material they needed after lunch break, which caused financial inconvenience. *We didn't always have money to go buy those things.*

In her second year, Fifi's mother thought she was on drugs because of all the money she would ask for. She says that, despite all the shortcomings, she received the best education, although they did more theory than practical work. *The students from tech have more practical than us ... however ... because we know the theory behind what we are doing; it is easy for us to do the correct things as we understand why certain things need to be done.*

Fifi admits that architecture is a male-dominated field and she was reminded of that every time she went on site. When we went for our practical I was treated differently and had to dress in a certain way and the men at the construction site would make comments about my body...I had to act strong and masculine. She agrees that there were certain things that her male colleagues could do, such as lifting cement bags, which she could not do, but does not see this as a reason to be treated differently. Fifi also experienced other forms of discrimination. When I was doing my final presentation, one of the panel members stopped me and said I am very fluent in English for a black person. This shocked her, and she found it insulting: It was not an English exam but rather design exam. At that time, she realised that there are racial stereotypes in her department, that maybe black people were not expected to do as well as their white colleagues.

Fifi grew a great deal socially during her studies. She recalled that higher education exposed her to different backgrounds. *I was a bit snobbish when I got to university but I was quickly humbled.* She met people from very poor backgrounds who gave her life-changing advice. She learned through these encounters that one needs to respect all people to be successful in life.

After obtaining her degree, Fifi completed an internship with a small architecture firm in Cape Town. She loved this job, because it exposed her to the practical side of what she had studied. She feels her race and gender had nothing to do with her getting a job, because the company she worked for was too small for such issues. She explains that, as an architect, you need to act strong and masculine at all times, or you will be considered as weak. *One has to act masculine and rough to be taken seriously in this industry.* She further mentions that, as a young black girl, it was not easy to go on site and try to manage older black men, as they see this as disrespectful. Fifi was expected to speak Xhosa by the construction men, although she is Sotho: *If you are black you must speak Xhosa to them or they say terrible things about you.* When asked how she dealt with such situations, she replies, *I took it in my*

*stride, and carried on with my job.* She states that there was nothing she could do; if she complained, she would be seen as weak.

Fifi tells that she was good at her job, despite what people would say behind her back, they knew she would produce good work, whether she was female or not. After her one-year internship, Fifi decided to start her own marketing company, with her father being her main sponsor. Some of the interpersonal skills she learned through her degree helped her in the business field, but because she did not study marketing, there were many things she needed to consult marketing experts for. She still did architecture on the side. At the time we met, she was busy designing a house for a client. When asked whether she thought she would be where she is today without higher education she answers yes, explaining that with architecture one can join a company, work while learning the practical job, then write external exams, which she thinks is better, because of the experience gained early in one's career. She explains that most things she learned at university could be learned directly from an architecture firm.

She comes from a matriarchal family where everyone is treated the same. *I have learned to be a strong woman from my mother and aunts.* They did not let their gender, race or culture restrain them from getting what they wanted, and now they are successful. Fifi says she does what her parents want her to do when she is at home: *They are my investors, everyone will do everything to please the investors, and even people in big companies do it.*

In five years' time, Fifi would love to see her company flourishing, and she also wants to go back to school to complete her postgraduate studies in architecture. Fifi says that, after all the years at school and work, she sees herself as a *critical thinker, more analytical, I have better people skills and in general I have grown to be a wiser woman with great ambitions.*

## **5.4 Thuli**

Thuli is a single, 26-year-old university lecturer. She grew up in a small town in Lesotho in a middle-class family. Her mother was a single parent with three children. Thuli is the second-born child, with an older sister and a younger brother. She attended government schools in Lesotho, and considers her primary school education to have been very good. *I think my foundation I had at my primary school gave me more skills I have learning-wise, than my high school. I think I went to my high school well equipped from my primary school.* Her high school was one of the best girls' schools in Lesotho and she learned a great deal, especially

because she was staying in the school's boarding house. She explains that being away from home at such a young age helped her to learn responsibility.

Thuli completed high school in 2004, after which she decided to go to university, which was less of a choice and more of an expectation from her mother. She continues to say: *Growing up with family members that have been to varsity and looking at their lives, it kind of gave me that idea that whether I like it or not I need to get formal education so that I get a life that I am hoping to get one day.* Thuli wanted to study psychology, but the university she was planning to attend did not offer it. In order for her to pursue a degree in psychology in South Africa, she had to do a bridging course, which her mother would not pay for, so she opted to go to the University of Lesotho for a year. She enrolled in 2005 for her first year in sociology. In 2006, Thuli went to a university in Bloemfontein to study BSocSc, majoring in psychology and anthropology. Psychology was her first choice because she loves people and her intention was to be a clinical psychologist, however, the course was not quite what she expected. *But then when you do psychology you realise it is not exactly what you thought it was,* explaining that the requirements to become a clinical psychologist are almost unreachable. *You end up doing something else that is still related to psychology, since their requirements are crazy.*<sup>3</sup> Thuli sees undergraduate studies as an introduction to university and she does not think she gained much from her undergraduate years.

I think with undergrad ... was an intro into varsity, I think with your undergrad you have ideas that after this, I am going to get a job, like this is definitely what I want to be. Then I think you realise that there are so many things out there, you realise that having a degree does not mean you have a job for instance. I learned what I wanted was not psychology. I think your skills development starts with your honours, and obviously with your master's and your PhD. I think that is when you actually learn. I think that with your undergrad it is just an introduction, you are trying to figure out who you are and where you are going.

Thuli states that the selection process for the honours programme was not easy: To be honest, I got through the first selection and in the second selection they said they want a certain number of black people and certain number of white people and stuff, because that is what they do with their selection. And I got in through my aunt, she kind of helped me out,

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<sup>3</sup> She explains that one needs to go through a selection process. This selection process is divided into two stages: first, one submits a written application and, secondly, if one were selected, one would undergo an oral interview after which only five or less students are selected.

but obviously I had to prove myself, like during the year, I had to work hard, that is what was going to keep me in the honours programme. A few months into her honours degree, she realised she was not coping with the workload while she was also keeping a job. She decided to transfer to a distance-learning university to continue her degree part time. I ended up deciding to do the rest of my modules with a long distance university that gave me time to be able to work as well as study. Like I said, the reason I decided to study with (that university) is because I could see I couldn't handle, you understand. It is about being able to make choices like that. And being honest with you and saying, ok I am not coping with and making the changes I had to make. Thuli made this choice because she wanted to work while studying and still have a social life.

Though Thuli thinks that her undergraduate years were not really that valuable, she has a different perspective concerning her honours year. She learned a great deal from her honours year, much of which she could use in the labour market. She completed her honours in psychological counselling, which helped her to know how to deal with people in trauma situations. Her honours year also opened up her eyes to different possibilities and careers to pursue, such as social development, which were closely related to psychology. However, she would still be able to do what she loves, which is to help people. *I think it is all about balance, being able to like, balance your work.*

Thuli gained self-confidence from her interactions with other students at university. She became more vocal about what she thought, instead of shying away. Thuli says had she not gone to higher education, she would not be where she is life, explaining that she needed her qualification to get her job. When asked what she thinks she learned from higher education she says: *I always say education is not just about books and stuff. It gives you so much more, ways of thinking, being able to sell yourself and stuff. I would not be able to stand in front of people, you know. It gives you so much more than the education itself, so I wouldn't have all those skills had I not come to university.*

After completing her honours degree, Thuli applied for an internship to gain practical experience. She explains that only three black people were selected to go to the interview and she knew that only one would make it. *Even with the interview itself I felt I was definitely black...They had three black students there, you could obviously feel that they wanted one black student for integration...I think if they had a choice they would have a panel of white students only. But like, what do you do, you can't get there and complain if you want the internship.* She felt intimidated and a bit undermined during the panel interview but, in the end, she claims that anthropology helped her get the internship: *As a black person you*

*always need to bring something extra, and I was the only one who did anthropology.* Thuli told the panel that, because she studied anthropology, she understands different cultures and respects people's belief systems.

She got the internship and worked very hard. Her main tasks were to administer psychometric tests and help with trauma counselling at childcare centres. *That is what made me want to do more of the community work, social development and then the psychology.* She realised that she could change people's lives if she studied social development and combined it with her honours in psychology. When her internship ended, she was selected the second best intern because of her hard work. When asked how hard or easy it was for her to get a job after completing her internship, Thuli explains that it was quite easy. When she was still an undergraduate, she was offered a tutoring job at the department of anthropology because of her good grades. She worked as a tutor until she completed her undergraduate degree and was promoted to be a lecturer's assistant throughout her honours and internship years. She was then promoted again to junior lecturer. She explains that, during her time working these jobs, she learned a great deal. She did more research in her job than she actually did while studying. *We only got the basic things; we did not do a lot of practical work that is needed in the field. However, the little I did actually helped me when I had to do the things practically... When I had to analyse my data I still sometimes went to my text book to see what exactly I was doing.* She met great people who guided her in her job and life. Although Thuli liked her job, she wanted to leave and follow her passion of working in the community.

Since then, she had been applying for jobs and was only called for two interviews. She did not get the one job, because she did not have a driver's licence, which was one of the main requirements. She says her being a foreigner must have played a role in her struggle to get a job in South Africa. She does not want to go back to Lesotho, because she feels she will not grow professionally. At the time of the interview, she had just received South African citizenship and thought her luck would change.

Thuli says she has never been treated badly because of her race or gender, with the exception of her internship interview. When asked what she thinks we could do to increase the number of black women in internships, she answers: *I don't think it's something that will change, honestly, I think you deal with it. If I had gone to the interview and tried to say that this is unfair or tried to go report to whomever, I would not have gotten the internship or I would have gotten it, but then would have created a situation that is not very nice to work in. Therefore, for me I think everything is a challenge ... I left all the black mentality stuff outside*



*and I did my work.* Thuli defines *black mentality* as *self-pity*, adding that black women think they will not be treated the same because of their race instead of working hard to prove themselves.

When it comes to family, Thuli says that women and men should know their roles. Men are the heads of the home; their job should be to do the *handy jobs*, like her mother told her: let the man be the man and fix things in the house. *Number one is to be a nurturing person, the caring and whatever. I think as a woman you can work and take care of the family, I have seen with me, you understand. Easily done, there are so many women doing it, now there is no reason why you should focus on your career and say, ok now you want to be this career woman and you cannot take care of your family...I think with the career stuff it is still the pride of a woman, it is still nice to go back home to a well-functioning family as well, but then leave home and go to a properly built career as well.* She says that, as a black woman, she has the freedom to be herself and pursue her dreams.

Thuli wants to go back to school to do her honours in social development, stating that her mother does not understand why she wants to pursue another honours degree. In order for her to get where she wants in life, she needs to do it. She hopes to get a sponsorship to pay for her fees. In five years' time, Thuli would like to be working for one of the top NGOs in the world while pursuing her PhD.

## **5.5 Mpho**

Mpho (26) is a single mother with a three-year-old daughter. She is a clinical psychologist. She grew up in a small town in the Free State called Welkom. Mpho is the second born and has an older brother and two younger siblings. She grew up with both parents; her dad had recently passed away when I met with her. She comes from an upper-class family, she says. Both her parents had gone to university. Her father was a lawyer and her mother has a BCom degree. *My father owned a law firm and we lived a very privileged life.* Mpho went to a private girls' school, which later amalgamated with a boys' school; she attended this school from Grade 1 until she matriculated in 2004. *I think it's the very top of education; it equipped me for university, especially language-wise. I think we were taught very good English and*

*that just made that difference when it comes to university. Some people think it is a myth when teachers say IEB<sup>4</sup> helps but it actually did help. I easily got into Medicine.*

Mpho explains that going to university was not a choice, but something that was instilled in her and all her siblings. Both her parents were educated and they expected nothing less from their children. Her father used to say: *In my house there is no gap year, no relaxing, no, no. You gap in varsity.* She decided to go to a university in Bloemfontein because their medical faculty has a very good reputation. She decided to study Medicine because she always wanted to reach out to people and, at the same time, be successful. *I remember back in my day, success meant being a doctor.* She studied Medicine for two and a half years, but then decided that Medicine was not what she wanted to do. She liked working with people and helping them, and she soon realised that, with Medicine, all you do is *pushing people*, implying that doctors see about fifty patients a day, which means very little contact with her patients in order to touch their lives.

She changed her degree to Psychology. She was told it would not be easy and that she had to study until master's level, although she might not be selected for masters immediately. *When I dropped from Medicine I knew I would get in immediately. I just told myself it is not an option.* Mpho had the support from her family and close friends, because they understood that psychology was her calling. She completed a BSocSc degree, with Psychology being one of her majors. Mpho says she also learned a great deal from her elective modules, for example, how to communicate well in communication science, which helped her in her career as a clinical psychologist. However, she realised that one cannot work as a psychologist with only undergraduate psychology. *If I had ended at undergraduate I would have learned about the theories of psychology, I would have learned about Freud and Erikson, I would have definitely learned the theories in psychology, that's about it. I would have learned Stats that is in 3rd year, which I later used in my research.*

In her last year of BSocSc, Mpho fell pregnant. She was advised by her mother not to do her honours, but she applied and was accepted. *I actually went to varsity two weeks after I gave birth, to register for honours.* Owing to her supportive family, Mpho was able to make it through her honours. The first two months after she gave birth, Mpho lived with her father and her child in Bloemfontein, with a stay-in nanny. Thereafter, Mpho's mother took the child

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<sup>4</sup> IEB stands for Independent Examination Board – IEB examinations are written by private schools in South Africa.

and nanny back to Welkom. *If it had not been for my mom I would have failed.* She laughs, saying she would not have managed to raise a child and pass psychology honours. The honours schedule was difficult; they did ten modules that year. *So I went through honours going home every weekend, which was two hours away ...which adversely affected my marks.* Mpho explains that she could have done better, but she was able to pass and qualify for the master's selection the following year.

Master's was like a train track, it runs you over and it leaves you there and you must just like wake and say yes I can do it. It is a lot of work, it is difficult, but it teaches you everything. I learned how to become a clinical psychologist at master's level. They equipped me with not only the therapeutic skills, but also theoretical knowledge and theoretical background... I must also learn how to ask the questions, I cannot just ask questions haphazardly. Master's really, that is where I learned a lot, and research... I was prepared or equipped for my career.

Mpho says that, through her master's years, she still drove two hours almost every weekend to see her daughter. She considers her hard work and determination, plus God's grace, to have been playing a big role in helping her pass her master's degree with a mark (65+) that qualified her to enrol for a PhD in future. However, Mpho's master's experience was not always pleasant, particularly because of racial discrimination in her class. The non-Afrikaans-speaking students were often not taken into consideration, as the lecturers would speak in Afrikaans although it was an English class. She felt that she was treated differently because she was black and that she was expected to fail. *The expectation that you don't know what you are doing, it was there; subtle, but it was there, I mean, I also had altercations with some of the lecturers, because I was outspoken about it.* Mpho adds that she sometimes felt that she was selected for master's because of her race, *to pretend as if there is racial integration ... Getting into my master's, definitely my race played a role... they needed a black person...I had been the best black.* Because she was one of the best black students from her honours year, she argues that her marks had something to do with her getting into master's, although race played a bigger role. Having received such treatment, Mpho sent an email to the rector of the university explaining the situation in her department. She says the rector probably did something, because the following year there was more than three black students enrolled for the degree.

Mpho also grew on a social level due to her experiences at university. My social life was awesome, I enjoyed it doing BSocSc from medicine and actually having a social life and getting to know people. Did not have to always have my head buried in books. She was part

of the leadership in her residence and in the psychology department. She learned to get along with different people, to deal with and respect people with different views from hers.

For Mpho, getting a job was not difficult because there are not many of clinical psychologists. Mpho compares her master's degree to medicine: *Clinical psychology or psychology, it's like becoming a doctor; it's like a health profession straight after you get a job.* After obtaining her degree, she completed a one-year internship at a psychiatric complex, after which she did her community service year at a clinic in a Bloemfontein township. At the time of our meeting, she was still working at this clinic. She loved it there because she was valued: *Here I am with my people, (laugh) here my people are like 'thank you for coming because there is a shortage of black clinical psychologists.'* She feels respected as a person and as a young black woman in her workplace. She thinks the older people respect her more because not many black women have achieved what she has.

Although Mpho feels that she has freedom in her workplace, she does not feel quite the same about her family life: *In my family I can be who I want to be to a certain extent.* She recalls that, as a black girl, one is expected by the family to do certain things, such as sweeping the yard. From a young age, she had a problem with this. *Black parents take you to private school, you get these lovely accents, these big English words and on the flip side they want you to be culturally sensitive, is 'BLACK'.* For Mpho it has always been a struggle to balance the two. She explains that her high school and higher education made her question and want to understand why things need to be done a certain way, and in her culture that was disrespectful. Her parents had also come to accept and respect that there were things she would not do. When asked if she thinks black women graduates have the freedom to be who they want, Mpho replied: *I will draw inference from my patients. My patients are very, they are basically on a low socio-economic level and shame, they don't have as much freedom I think, because you know, as women, depending on the man, the power is with the man. The situation changes if you are a woman and you have your own money. I still believe though that, as a successful black woman earning enough money, you are independent, and self-reliant, the basics should remain humble. I draw back on being a Christian first. Because the Bible then says women respect your husbands and husband love your wife.*

Mpho believes that patriarchy should remain, because our society disintegrates as soon as we shift from that system. She believes this will solve the issue of absent fathers. She says fathers are not there for the children, because they feel they are not needed, as the woman can do it alone. *If we step it up and we go out and we go back to the man being the head, I*

*think society will be a much better place. In addition, we need men to be strong, hey, in order to have a patriarchal society, we need strong men. We need men who are actually going to step up and that is not going to be easy because a lot of them feel intimidated by women. But I think our society is disintegrated because we shifted to a more matriarchal system, I think we need to go back, really.*

With all this said, Mpho still believes that women should be educated because education is important and South Africa needs both women and men for the economy to grow. *But she must know her place and her place when she gets out: she is the CEO at the company not at home. When she is at home the man is the CEO, he is the boss, and he takes care of her needs.* Nevertheless, she believes in women's rights and that women should not be oppressed by men, but *we shouldn't put them in people's faces*; women should respect men and they will get the same treatment.

When asked where she sees herself in five years' time, Mpho says: I will have my PhD, I will be married, and I will probably be expecting my second born, who will be a boy. I will be happily married; I will be very successful in my private practice, a very successful business woman, mother, wife and most importantly, a child of God. Mpho says her hard work and determination will get her to achieve her goals, except the husband one, which she is trusting God to take care of. She says she wants to give her child the best education possible and that means she needs to work extra hard. Mpho states that, throughout her years at university and work, she has learned that respect is the most important thing, that if you respect others, you will get the same type of respect from them, despite their age or economic status.

## **5.6 Nezi**

Nezi is 39 years old, married and has one son. She grew up in a small town in the Eastern Cape and is the firstborn of three children. Her father passed away when she was still young. Her mother was a nurse and the main breadwinner and made sure her children were well provided for. Nezi went through the Bantu education system, a system that was designed to provide inferior and underfunded schooling for black people before 1994. Her primary school foundation was good. Her grandfather was the principal of her school, so she had to work extra hard to achieve good marks. She explains that her English teacher instilled good English values in her, how to spell and use correct grammar. The quality of her high school education was of the same level as that of the primary school although, in her matric year, there were many disruptions that distracted her education. *I had to push myself*

*because when I was doing matric (1992), it was the time when the (education) strikes started, so from June until October there were no classes, so I had to push myself to study, yes. And I passed my matric first time around.*

After completing matric, Nezi decided to go to university because everyone in her family had received some sort of higher education. She went to a previously black university (in Bloemfontein). Her decision to go to that university was influenced by the fact that it was closest to her hometown. In addition, during 1993, it was still difficult for black people to enter previously white universities. Her mother was the one who was supporting her financially and paid for her fees until she completed her honours.

Nezi studied a BA degree, majoring in Psychology. To her, coming to university was a huge transition because she had never been independent when she was staying at home. *It was quite a challenge for me, but through it all I told myself I have to push, because I told myself I want to get my education, so there is no other way, the only way is to push.* Assignments were a big challenge for her as she felt unprepared. She overcame this obstacle by asking for help from her lecturers and friends, but still struggled with the transition. Nezi states that she learned a great deal from university, such as communication, interpersonal skills and group work, especially during her undergraduate years. Since Nezi comes from a conservative background, she never had male friends before she went to university. Only when she went to university did she realise that it was harmless to have male friends. *In high school, I had two friends... When I came to university I started having more friends, both girls and boys.* Nezi says that, had she not done her postgraduate degrees, she would not have gained in-depth knowledge about psychology and communication skills and become a wiser person.

After completing her first degree, Nezi enrolled for honours at another university still in Bloemfontein. She explains the transition as follows: *Again very challenging you know, from the black university coming to mixing with other cultures and other races and the workload, because within that period of a year, we had to do ten modules, we had to study and focus and then you forget about the other things.* Nezi says that the programme was difficult and she had less time to spend with her family. She feels that her presentation skills improved during her honours year and, because they spent a great deal of time working with the community, she learned to listen and understand people. Also, while doing her honours, Nezi met her husband, who was a qualified clinical psychologist working at a psychiatric complex. He used to help her with her studies and was a great support to her during this

time. Although Nezi worked hard and passed all her subjects, her marks were not high enough to qualify her for a master's.

After she had completed her honours, she started looking for a job. She was hired as a consultant at the national lottery office the next year, in 1998. Nezi says higher education equipped her to do her job. She had to deal with retailers and shop owners, who were often difficult to work with; however, her interpersonal skills helped her. Since Nezi had to deal with people from diverse cultures in her honours year, it was easy for her when she got to the workplace. Nezi got married in the year 2000 and soon fell pregnant. *In 2001 I did a computer programme just to equip myself, to know what is happening out there in terms of technology and in 2001 I had a child, so I was home, until 2003.* She explains that she decided to stay at home to look after her child since it was her firstborn, and her husband supported her decision. *We had a nanny, but I felt I had to be there as a mother, to learn, to be their hands on.* She decided that she would go back to work when her child goes to pre-school.

In 2003, Nezi went back to university to study industrial psychology, for which her husband paid. She had to take some undergraduate modules before she could continue with honours. She explains that her having a child and being a wife did not affect her academics as her husband was supportive and they had a nanny to take care of the child.

After completing her honours in industrial psychology, Nezi applied for a job at a government department and was hired. All my previous jobs were in the private sector and so in the private sector you have set deadlines, you know, you have to do your work; nobody had to push you from behind. So when I came into the public sector, I was like, oooh, this is how things are done. I did not know how the government worked, so I got exposure. She explains that government, for her, was less organised and she was never sure what she had to do exactly, but still she did her best to work in such situations. She soon moved from government because if one had nothing to offer one's superior, one would stay in one position for a long time. When asked what she meant by that statement, this was her answer:

Sexual pleasures... one of the reasons that I decided let me leave, you ask yourself so many things, what is the point of me waking up in the morning, what's the point of being in an institution where you feel you are not valued, where you feel whatever input you do its just temporarily and when it gets to the time for one to be placed, permanently or to be promoted it doesn't happen. You will find that you go through the interviews, already they know who

their favourite candidate is and in a way in the government I have asked myself so many questions, I have asked myself, what is the point of going to school? If you apply in a government department, if they like you it does not matter what qualifications you have, you will go, they give you this job. You sit behind the desk you know nothing. As long as they have an interest in you, so you ask yourself, what is this world coming to?

Nezi then decided to stay at home and continue her studies. Because she had always dreamed of becoming a clinical psychologist, Nezi upgraded her honours marks. At the time we met, she had just been rejected for her master's, even though her marks were good and she thought she had everything she needed. *I was hurt, but I will not give up, because my child is older now, I can go to other universities outside Bloemfontein. Next year I am going to apply to other places.*

Nezi elaborates that, being a black woman, has been both an advantage and a disadvantage. Apart from her qualifications, she reckons she landed her first job because of her race and gender: *In the interviews, they stated that they are looking for more females, because even at work we were more females and less males...as well because we were more blacks than whites.* She sees her race and gender as an advantage because they landed her a good job, together with the required qualifications. However, *in the government I would not say being a black woman is an advantage. It is being who you are, and what are you willing to sacrifice and what are you willing to offer to them, then it gives you an advantage, but if you are just like, this is me, it's either you take it or you leave it.* She further explains that sometimes women are not hired, even though they have the qualifications to do the job, because they are not willing to give sexual pleasures.

Nezi says that her husband is always there for her and she knows he supports all her decisions. Because she is a Christian, she does not have to partake in all the cultural rituals (e.g. ancestral ceremonies) that are performed in her husband's family. Her husband supports her decision not to take part in the cultural rituals. Although she does not work, Nezi affirms she and her husband are equal in the family. She runs the household because she is not working, but she also uses the services of a domestic helper.

In five years' time, Nezi would like to have grown as a woman, and spiritually. I would like to see myself as a clinical psychologist, seeing our son grow up to be a teenager, growing old and still together with my husband and my family. Moreover, spending time with my friends, because all of us have little children, we do not have much time for each other. I think in five



years' time, you know, socialising more. For now, Nezi says she will work hard to be accepted to the clinical psychology programme.

## 5.7 Mary

Mary is a 26-year-old lady from a middle-class family. She grew up in QwaQwa and her mother was single parent working at the local university. Mary is the second born of four children. Both her brothers dropped out of high school before completing matric, whereas her sister completed an honours degree in Science. Mary went to a township school until she completed high school. *I went to the best school ever.*

She explains that education always came first in her family. *My mom would tell me, you know what, if you don't go to school you won't get anywhere.* With those words in mind, Mary decided to go to university after high school. Most of Mary's friends headed off to study in Pretoria, but she decided to stay in QwaQwa because her mother was working at the university and her fees would be waived by the university. Mary completed a BA degree because she did not want to do anything with Mathematics or Science. *The first year they wanted to register me for Science and I said, you know what, if it involves Mathematics I don't want it. Then they were like, you have to choose from BA, that is why I choose Psychology and Sociology.* She describes the lecturers as good and the curriculum as strong, depending on the lecturer. The QwaQwa campus formed part of the main campus of the university and people always compared these campuses. *The main campus people were said to know more than us.*

After three years, when she thought she had completed her degree, she was told she did not have enough credits. *No one advised us and I was not aware that the computer module I did was not going to count for my graduation points.* She had to take an extra module and only graduated the following year. During her three years, she realised that she would like to be a psychologist. *After my degree I wanted to quit, I did not want to study further but there was that thing that said let me just study further.*

She continued to doing her honours degree in Psychology at the main campus in Bloemfontein. She explains that the transition was not easy, but her younger sister helped her a great deal as she was in Bloemfontein at that time. During this period, she really learned about Psychology. She compares undergraduate studies to a little box of knowledge and honours as expanding that knowledge six times. *It was a bit difficult, more especially when you don't know how to answer some of the questions, especially how the lecturer*

wants you to answer those types of questions. So sometimes, you try to use your own common sense, but it does not help, so you have to apply. Most of her lecturers were very helpful and always encouraged her to consult them if she needed any help. She passed all her modules except one. She also learned a great deal from her classmates because they had to complete many group work activities. *You learn a lot from people, you may think you are the only one who has difficulties, but when you listen to other people you are like, we are all the same. But the fact that we were communicating with other people, we share ideas and we even had small group to discuss our difficulties and especially how to prepare for the exams, for assignments and everything.* Her honours year was the worst year. She considered throwing in the towel, but her mother and sister would encourage her to carry on. *I am very grateful to my mother for always being there for me.* Owing to her obtaining distinctions in some of her honours modules, she was offered an assistant job at a research centre. The following year, Mary had only one module to complete.

She applied for a student assistant job at another department at the university, went for the interview and was hired. She worked there for one year. The experience from this job was good and she met her master's supervisor while she worked there. *He encouraged me to do my master's in higher education.* At the time we met, she was still busy with her master's part time. Mary states that the black student assistants were not treated the same at her job at the university. *I would say most black people worked harder than white people, white people would get preferences. They would get laptops and go work at home, but as black people, we were not allowed to. It is one of the few reasons why I resigned. I do not want to be treated differently, just because of my skin; we should all be treated the same whether you are white, black or woman or man. But we were treated differently.*

According to Mary, there was no point in going to speak to someone or report the racial discrimination because the management was white. She applied for an internship at a government department. She was hired as an intern for four months, after which she applied for a permanent post as a wellness officer. She explains that her hard work got her where she is. *I am a hard worker, I love challenges and if I want to bring the improvements, I will just put them on the table and see how we can implement that. I think my hard work, dedication; my passion got me where I am now.*

Mary states that her psychology honours prepared her for the workplace, because she now has good presentation skills and applies the theories she learned about human behaviour. Mary explains that, at her department, they try to empower women and teach them how to be great leaders. *Our department now is trying to balance the gender thing ...I realised last*

*year when I attended this woman thing ... Women something, something ...it is a workshop only for women, especially those in high positions. Even though I am at a lower position, I was invited ... most people who are in high positions are men, so people do not have that trust for women, so they are trying to balance that. So hopefully they will get there. At her department, there were only black people and mostly women, so there was no gender or racial discrimination. When asked about sexual favours in exchange for promotion, for example that apparently occurred at some government departments Mary says she knows nothing about that, explaining that she does not believe in doing that: *I do believe qualification and hard work will get me there, I don't have to sleep with anybody just to see my potential. So I don't understand why women do that.* Mary says she is doing her master's to improve her knowledge, not to be promoted, because in government one's qualification does not really matter.*

Mary attests that going to university made a huge difference in her life. In comparison to her brothers, she can think more critically and make wiser decisions. *When you go to university you learn a lot, you can imagine if I was at home after the matric and doing nothing. Right now, they need you to have a degree, even though they still include the Grade 12s. The degree to me is like a Grade 12, so honours will be the degree in the future. I do not think I would be here, and just to apply some of the things I learned from my honours degree. So I do not think I would be able to do the job. Especially because in the master's they teach you how to do research, the questionnaires and everything, I would not know all those things.* When asked where she sees herself in five years' time, Mary answers: *It's either being a manager of employment and wellness or assistance director because the support I got from my supervisor, she is the deputy director, so I am working hand in hand with her and she believes in me, that I could do this. Being a manager or assistance manager, I just have to be ambitious.*

## **5.8 Thabelo**

Thabelo is a 31-year-old divorced woman. An only child, she was born in Johannesburg, but moved to Lesotho when she was three. Her mother was a nurse and her father, with only primary school education, did handy man jobs. She describes her family as middle class and states that she attended private schools in Lesotho. When she was in Grade 9, she moved to live in South Africa with her mother's family and went to a township school for only one year. The following year she moved to a previous Module C school in Bloemfontein where she completed high school.

Thabelo describes herself as a very smart person. She decided to go to university because she wanted to get a good job and felt that that was the only route to get there. Her family also played a role in her decision to go to university: *My dad unfortunately came from an ignorant family, so he never did much at school. He probably wrote the old Standard 6. My mom was a nurse and I could see the difference, you know, between someone who is educated and someone who is not. Secondly, they really pushed me to go to school and they encouraged me a lot.* Thabelo decided to go to a university in Bloemfontein because it was the closest to her home and the university advertised at her school. *My school was one of the schools that feed into that university.* She wanted to study Biotechnology because she excelled in Biology, but unfortunately she failed Mathematics. She was then advised to take commerce subjects, and she felt that that is where she belonged. *I did my BCom marketing and during that time I realised that I excelled in Advertising, Marketing, Communications and all those subjects. I just decided that this is the stream that I will do my postgraduate.*

Thabelo enjoyed her course to the extent that, when she had an option to choose five subjects out of ten, she would do all ten. *There was a point when I did about 24 subjects in my second year and I still managed to get a distinction for some of my subjects.* In her first year at university, Thabelo learned how to type and use a computer. She says she was hardly in class, because her social life was more important. She found her curriculum to be very efficient, although there was one lecturer she had a problem with and stopped going to her class. *I feel she was not equipped herself ...she was doing her master's at the time and she could not really relate to the subject.* She recalls that, with her first degree, she knew a bit about advertising, marketing and communications, although she was still not ready for the labour market. *Towards the end of my third year I thought if I was to be called for a job right now, if I were to sit in an office right now, what would I do, where would I start? So I thought, you know, I know nothing, so I better study further.*

She then enrolled for a master's degree in Corporate Communication. Because the master's degree stretched over two years, she did not have to do an honours degree. Although the masters' degree proved to be a great deal of work, she felt ready to work after the first year. *I was much more intelligent and it was easy for me to grasp the work.* She explains her education empowered her and helped her improve her skills. *As a child I learned that I had been business-minded my whole life. I think I was ten, or even younger, when I started selling ice blocks, that's what we called them at that time. Then I just sold with an empty mind, you understand. Now I sell much, much better with what I learned over my years at varsity. I am able to do discriminating pricing now. Recently, I sold bags and I did not have to*

*go around telling people that I sell, I sell through just placing an ad on the internet. I just designed a PDF document magazine and just distributed it and that's part of what I learned from varsity, because I had Internet Marketing as a subject. There is a bit that I learned from all of my subjects. I am able to put them together and run my informal business.*

Thabelo stayed in a university residence for three years, but was expelled for fighting with another girl after they came back from a party. She does not feel that she benefited socially from university. Instead, she gained more socially during her high school years in Lesotho, because school was very diverse. *There were people from different countries and of different races and we all interacted.* When she was at university, she stayed in a predominantly black residence and hardly interacted with people from other races.

Thabelo applied for an internship while she was busy with her master's. She explains that it was easy to get an internship, because she knew the right people. *I had already made connections in government then, friends that I partied with, who were much, much older and were in high positions, so it was not very difficult for me to go into government and luckily at that time, it was shortly before the 2010 World Cup, so my research was focused on tourism in 2010.* She argues that her research topic added more value to her getting the internship. It was easy for Thabelo to understand her work; however, she realised that what she was taught at university, was different from what was expected in the workplace. *What you feel is sufficient when you leave school, is actually not that sufficient. For instance, you leave varsity as, let's say, a qualified marketing specialist; you get to government at a communication post and no-one is going to ask you to draft a marketing plan or advertising plan like you would be asked at your practical at varsity. Instead you are going to have a press release to draft, but the nice thing is, if you start with your internship then they teach you how to do these things, because when I started I had never seen a press release before, I didn't even know there was something like that, and with time I got to master it.*

Owing to her hard work, Thabelo was offered a contract job at the same department as a communications officer. While working there, she had personal problems with her boss. She says he perceived her as a threat because she was pursuing her master's degree. She only realised later that he was trying to push her hard because he saw she had the potential to perform better. *He managed to realise my potential and probably, being a master's student, he expected me to excel far more than I thought I was doing.* Thabelo adds that her boss treated the male colleagues better than the females. Her boss did not have a son and was trying to groom a male colleague to be like the son he never had. *He loved him so much; no matter what he did he was still his son. I don't think it's really discrimination; it can happen*

*anywhere, it can happen in church where it is not really about gender based discrimination in the workplace.*

Regarding race, Thabelo has never been treated differently; in fact, she got along well with the white people at her workplace. She mentioned that attending a multi-racial school probably helped her. *You could still pick up that if there were other black people they did not get along so well... And what I picked up was that it was because of the prejudice that black people also had in themselves and I must say black people are also very racist, they are very racist.* She explains that it is easy for black people to play the race card while they themselves are treating white people badly.

Because of the discord with her boss, Thabelo resigned and applied for other jobs. She also got married during this period of transition. Thabelo says that what set her apart from other people at the interviews was that she had a master's degree and others mostly only had diplomas. She secured a job at a Further Education and Training college in Limpopo for seven months, which she describes as the best job she has ever had. She says she loves teaching and it felt good to see her students pass, knowing that she has played a role in their knowledge base. When asked why she left teaching for the position of communications manager at a legal firm, she explains that it was a bigger challenge. At the legal firm, she managed thirteen offices spread over two provinces. She needed to be strong-willed because that kind of job had many hurdles she needed to overcome – she needed all she had ever learned: *Everything that you could have learned in your past jobs and at varsity, you need a lot of networking skills because you meet a lot of people from very high ranks, you need to have a very high level of confidence.*

Thabelo attributes her good work ethic and knowledge to her master's degree and hard work. However, she says being a black woman has also benefitted her in obtaining jobs. *I believe it has also given me an opportunity, because what happens is, EE, employment equity right. When you use Employment Equity policies for recruitment, the moment they do short listing, they start giving you points from there, so women just from being women, you get ten points already and you have already beaten a man. Therefore, if you have exactly the same qualifications, a driver's licence and everything else is the same, you definitely ten points higher just for being a woman. I think it is an extra ten points for being a black woman.*

Thabelo prefers having white bosses than black, explaining that black bosses, especially women, are very hostile towards their subordinates. *Black women, especially generations that are, let me say two generations before us, power, management and fat pay cheques*

*come as a mystery to them.* She argues that because they grew up in an era where black people, especially women, were not able to achieve, they abuse their power when they reach the top. Women in management do not teach upcoming black professionals and are not good role models. Thabelo feels that the government has done a great deal to empower women in the workplace. *Women are really penetrating at a very high rate. Our government has really, really presented good opportunities for women. They have set up nice great forums to empower women and there are no more barriers for women at entry level.*

In 2012, Thabelo got divorced. This affected her performance at work because she had to deal with many personal issues. She resigned from her job in 2013 to recover, because she could see she was not performing to her full potential. She and her husband came from different backgrounds: he was from a traditional family and she was not. In addition, she was more educated than he was, and that caused complications in the relationship, because she earned more than he did. *One thing that we fought about was that he wanted to lead me and then his inability to provide made him feel inferior...I still prefer a man to head the family but he must be the main provider.* Thabelo says she tried her best to be a good wife, but she had to get out of the marriage because her husband was emotionally abusing her. Thabelo says she will definitely get married again and realises not all men are bad. She will learn from her mistakes and choose carefully next time.

Thabelo would like to be a deputy director at a government department and was applying for these positions when we met. She would also like to open a school that will include children with disabilities. She plans to run the management part of the school and appoint remedial teachers. She explains that she has a passion for helping students. A PhD is also on the cards. *The reason why I am going to do my doctoral studies is one, the title and the status and two, it's going to help me draft a proposal, a good proposal, for sponsors and whoever will be in the chain of approving my funds, my building. I don't know my whole idea. Therefore, that proposal will be sufficient to get funding and everything that is necessary for funding sponsorship and so forth.*

In five years' time, Thabelo wants to have achieved the following: I will be a director, either director or deputy director of communications, probably at provincial level. I don't want to take up something that has too much responsibility because I know myself ... I am not a grounded person, I touch on this and that, if I got too many responsibilities it means I won't be able to attend to other areas of my life. I will also be doctor by then and I probably would have started my school by then.

## 5.9 Aya

At 41, Aya is the oldest of the participants. She is Mary's supervisor at work. She is a married social worker with one child. She grew up in a small town in the Free State province. She has three siblings and both her parents were teachers. She defines her family as middle class. She was educated in the Bantu education system; nevertheless, compared with the current poor quality of education, she feels that she actually received very good education. She does not attribute good education to the teachers exclusively, but also credits the parents' involvement and students' willingness to learn. *I think the commitment that we had at that time, it was not just being pushed by educators and parents, we also had the initiative to work hard and get more and we knew we didn't have much, I mean we studied during those times when we had to share text books and the like. But we really went the extra mile to try and achieve.*

After completing high school, Aya went to university. Her parents valued education and had both attended universities—it was always her dream to go university one day. She enrolled at a previously black university in the Eastern Cape to pursue a Social Work degree, because *in high school I always wanted to work with people, I always wanted to help people.*

Aya started her four-year Social Work degree in 1991 and completed it in 1994. She explains that when she went to university, her parents put her on a train with her registration money: *I had R5 000 in my suit case; I could not sleep because I did not want anyone to steal it, and I held the suit case close to me for twelve hours.* Aya was not that affected by the environmental change, because some of her friends from high school were there with her. Moreover, she recalls that her curriculum was strenuous and she did not have time to think about family or friends. *In Social Work, we were very much consumed, so much that when we started first year, we had to start with practical, community work. So we were somehow consumed by the work, so we had to adjust to the work that was there. So there was no excuse. There was no time to say you are getting used to university because you would be left behind.* She says some of her lecturers were there to help them after class. However, they could not depend on the lecturers, because the lecturers were just guides and most of the learning depended on the students themselves.

Aya explains that she learned interpersonal relations from her years at university. *I was that person who was very shy, who did not communicate much, but what I have learned is that I can communicate, I spend the whole day with people. I am very comfortable with that. I am no longer shy, I can mingle with people, I really socialise with people, and I don't have a*



problem. Not only did she learn to be more sympathetic and empathetic towards clients, but also to listen to spoken and unspoken language, which are important qualities of a good social worker. According to Aya, white universities were no different from their university. Learners that were from those so-called white universities at that time, we would in most instances meet them when we were doing our practical and we would find that the education that we got from our so-called black universities was so much more advanced from what they had. In her third year, Aya learned to use a computer at one of the community sites, which helped her a great deal when she started working. Her education helped her to be inquisitive, to want to do research and to know more about the world; not just accepting what people say. After completing her degree, Aya went back to her parents' house in the Free State.

Aya explains that it was not easy for her to get a job. She was home for six months before she was hired. She did not mind being at home, as she got to rest and spend time on her CV. She was hired as a social worker at the Department of Social Development in 1995. She recalls the first thing she said when the interview panel asked her why she chose Social Work: it was because of her mother who showed her that looking after people is important. When she entered the workplace, she was appreciative of her university education because some of her colleagues used to struggle to write reports and do the necessary research for the job. *Learning to use a computer was the biggest bonus, because the first thing that was put in front of me at work was a computer.*

Aya says she did not believe in saying she was treated badly at work. In my career I think I have developed a thick skin, I don't believe that I am somehow victimised or treated badly. I think things happen to you if you let them...yes, there were instances that you could see that yes, this is aimed at you, but it all depended on the attitude. If you had an attitude that is positive and you have a way out of this situation that you are currently in, you could make your way through. She explains that, while working at Social Development, she would be given more work than other colleagues, but they all received the same salary. Aya maintains she never complained and just did what she was given to do. After six years, she was promoted to a senior social worker position.

In the year 2000, she gave birth to a daughter. She says that having a baby did not affect her work performance. After ten years of working at the department, Aya resigned because she was getting bored. She then moved to the Department of Education in Bloemfontein. It was completely different, but she learned quickly. *I was also doing cases for the whole district, which is all Free State. I managed, but I don't know how.* After this, she got her

current job of wellness assistant director. She works closely with the director to ensure that the people in their department are satisfied. She is also in charge of the interns and junior wellness officers.

She says that being a black woman has its benefits because most of the management team are men and they are always willing to help her as a woman in management. *I have had colleagues who were the other race who were finding it very difficult to cope at work. Maybe race somehow played a positive role towards me being accepted or me being, how I can put it, being well considered amongst the colleagues, but I don't think race played a very big role.* She explains that Social Work is mainly a female-dominated field, so gender is definitely not an issue. She has learned throughout her years to work hard. *I used to take work home, but not anymore.* She is not getting younger and she needs to spend time with her husband and family when she gets home.

When asked about sexual favours that apparently occurring government, Aya answers: There were some hints that were coming my way, but it all depends on what you want in life. I always say I don't want to live my life with regrets. Had I taken those challenges, maybe I could be very far today. But it depends on who you are and what you want in life. Aya says her values come first and her education and hard work will never disappoint her. As a woman, you need to talk in meetings but also listen to be able to ask questions so you can be taken seriously. Don't just be quiet, she advises.

When we met, Aya had been married for five years. Her daughter was 13 years old. She says her daughter can be whatever she wishes because she does not believe in choosing careers for her. With regard to marital roles, she believes the father should be the head of the house. However, when he is not there, she takes his role because his job requires a great deal of travelling. *As a woman in the house you need to look up to him to say that you are the father of the house, and ask him which direction to take.* According to Aya, this can only be done when both partners respect each other. *I can do whatever I want to do. If you have a husband who lets you do whatever you want to do, who is not standing in your way, then it is not really a hassle. My husband is that kind of person ... I mean he is not restrictive; he is giving me the support when I need it.*

According to her, higher education also played a role in the decisions she took in her family and the schools that her daughter attends. She further states that, had she not gone to university, she would not have been able to have conversations with her husband. *The conversation that we have I don't think I would have matched with him, I don't think I would*

*have managed to sit down with him and have a decent conversation. With the education that I have received, I can reason with the same intellectual ability that he has and come up with discussions that are very clever and intelligent that he can also relate to.*

In five years' time, Aya wants to have gone back to university to complete her honours and master's in Psychology part time. She also wants to be in a senior management position and have empowered herself professionally and personally. She believes that hard work and determination will get her there.

A clear picture of who the participants of this study are has been provided above. The next section focuses on the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides the key findings from the research participants' experiences, as well as insight into the capabilities they gained from higher education, gender and race issues within the workplace and higher education and their agency to achieve their well-being. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the findings and how they relate to the broader context of higher education in South Africa.

### **6.1 FINDINGS**

Flowing from the participants' biographies, the following section will focus on the study's research questions:

- What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates regarding the lives they have reason to value?
- How do gender and race enable or constrain black women graduates' capability for work, including their career development, over time?
- Do black women graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

The first section will identify the capabilities that the women received through higher education. The second section will focus on the gender and racial factors that emerged from the narratives and, finally, the women's sense of agency will be discussed. Following the findings, I will discuss the influence thereof on the development and well-being of the participating women.

#### **6.1.1 Capabilities**

Most of the women either directly or indirectly attributed their success in life to higher education. Some of the capabilities provided by higher education include:

##### ***Cross-cultural exposure***

All the women felt that their social and interpersonal capabilities were enhanced through higher education. Below are some examples:

*I learned a lot about people and different cultures, different languages, different backgrounds, so it made me a better being. (Xoli)*

Xoli and Nezi explained how they developed socially and Mpho shared the same sentiments. Mpho elaborated that being in higher education taught her to accept people from different places and with a different opinion from hers.

*You are going to meet people with different opinions, people with different views, people with different religions, and higher education has thought me how to handle these situations and how to handle such people. (Mpho)*

*I think it is because of the social interaction that I ended up finding myself. I am grateful that I ended up in [this particular residence]. In addition, it made me learn a lot about people and different cultures. (Xoli)*

*In high school I think I had two friends, and when I come to the university I started socialising, because in our background it was not allowed for a female person to have male friends. So when I come to the university I realised it is harmless, it is ok to have male friends, so I started having even more relationships, yes, both girls and boys. (Nezi)*

### **Communication and interpersonal skills**

Most of the women stated that, during their time at a higher education institution, their interpersonal communication skills were developed which, in turn, increased their confidence.

*I learned how to communicate with different people, in different situations ...group work skills, as we did a lot of group work activities. But most they enhanced my communication skills, which I needed most. (Lebo)*

*I learned interpersonal skills to start with. When I came to university I was a little bit reserved, I mean, even asking in class was not easy. But as time went by I had to be in teams where we would be grouped to do assignments, so it opened doors for me, and I have learned that I have communication skills. I have interpersonal skills, where I had to interact with different people from different backgrounds. (Nezi)*

*I think the most basic one is interpersonal relations. When I went to university, I was that person who was very shy, who did not communicate much, but what I have learned is that I*

*can communicate, I spend the whole day with people. I am very comfortable with that. I am no longer shy, I can mingle with people, I really socialise with people, and I do not have a problem. (Aya)*

*I always say education is not just about books and stuff, it gives you so much more, ways of thinking, being able to sell yourself and stuff. I would not be able to stand in front of people, you know, it gives you so much more than the education itself, so I wouldn't have all those skills had I not come to university. (Thuli)*

### ***Knowledge, imagination and critical thinking***

Nussbaum (2000: 87) explains knowledge and imagination as “the ability to make sense, to imagine, think and reason in a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education.” Some of the women explained how they think their knowledge benefited them:

*I have in-depth knowledge, acquiring wisdom; I am interacting with more people I would not be exposed to. They forced me to engage intellectually, they forced me to be out of my comfort zone, I mean they taught me about discomfort, to engage in difficult dialogues to fight with myself. (Xoli)*

*It has allowed me to be open minded and it has allowed me to engage in various situations with various people and has given me the confidence to stand up in front of people. (Nezi)*

*I am a critical thinker, more analytical, I have better people skill and in general I have grown to be a wiser woman with great ambitions. (Fifi)*

In a more pragmatic sense, the women also valued the knowledge gained through their degrees and extra-curricular activities during their time at the higher education institutions, specifically the contribution these made to their employability:

*As a child I learned that I had been business-minded my whole life. I think I was 10, or even younger, when I started selling ice blocks. That is what we called them at that time. Then I just sold with an empty mind, you understand. Now I sell much, much better with what I learned over my years at varsity. I am able to do discriminating pricing now. (Thabelo)*

*It is a lot of work, it is difficult but it teaches you everything. I learned how to become a clinical psychologist at master's level. They equipped me with not only the therapeutic skills but also theoretical knowledge and theoretical background... I must also learn how to ask*

*the questions, I cannot just ask questions haphazardly. Master's really that is where I learned a lot and research... I was prepared or equipped for my career. (Mpho)*

*It was not hard at all because in my second year I did anthropology, and my marks were good so they just approached me and offered me the job. I went through training, they were happy with the training and they gave me the job. (Thuli)*

*I work at health and wellness, so most of the things I apply them in psychology, most of the things I learned in honours, like presentation skills. (Mary)*

### ***Empowerment***

Most of the women explained how they were empowered after having completed their degrees.

*So higher education definitely teaches you determination and to be a go-getter. (Mpho)*

*It led me to that level of encouragement that you can continue to strive and be that person that God has made you to be. (Nezi)*

### ***Respect, dignity and social consciousness***

Since most of the women were from the humanities and work directly with people, it was clear that respect for the self and others was very important. Xoli mentioned what she learned from her leadership position at her residence.

*[To be a] good listener, you know, people should be able to trust you. Of course, by humble I do not mean to let people walk all over you. But you need to respect people and be humble and people will respect you, and people will not fear you. (Xoli)*

Mpho also stated that, as a psychologist, you need to respect people no matter how rich or poor they are.

*Unconditional positive regard for people regardless of who they are. Compassion, respect hey, respect, respect, respect no matter who you are what you are, o Nkhono. (Mpho)*

Even though Fifi works in an engineering department, she explained that being at university thought her to respect each person.

*I was humbled when I got to university...I learned that not everyone is as privileged as I am.*  
(Fifi)

*I have learned that money does not necessarily mean you are happy, and I am a child of the Humanities, so you cannot do it for the money, you do it for the love of the game, you doing it for other people, you find yourself in more of a serving role than always getting, which I am enjoying. I think I enjoy feeling like I am needed and that's what's happening here in my life currently.* (Lebo)

### ***Practical reasoning***

Walker (2006: 128) describes practical reasoning as “being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent and reflective choices.” This is reflected in the responses from the participants.

*Towards the end of my third year I thought if I was be called for a job right now, if I were to sit in an office right now, what would do, where would I start? So I thought, you know what, I know nothing, so I better study further. And ja, my post grad degree helped me because I was very different from other people that I started my internship with.* (Thuli)

*I'm planning to go study next year, film and photography and use them as a tool to understand pedagogies of social ills and to address ... one can never address them ... but try and address them and tell the stories of those who are being silenced.* (Xoli)

### ***Lifelong learning***

All the women wanted to further their studies in the future. Some women explained that they want new knowledge and others that they want to empower themselves.

*In the next five years, I want to have furthered my studies. To be running my own business with students or whatever on a consultative basis. But I don't like the nine to five, I really don't like waking up, I'm not a morning person so I'd like to dictate when I work. I like flexibility, academics does allow that. You know, I live at work and I have an assistant and all this other benefits, so it does help to be in the right company I think, which I definitely think I am.* (Lebo)

*In five years I am hoping that my business would have grown, I want to go back to school and do my honours and master's in architecture.* (Fifi)



*I gave myself three years to study, so now I only have two. I will apply to other universities next year. (Aya)*

*I am a more constructive being, I'm a student for life ... I am a listener, I'm a critical thinker, scholar at heart, I think I am more wiser now but I, you know, the quest for ...education remains with me.(Xoli)*

*I want to have a PhD and running my own practice. (Mpho)*

### **Resilience**

The personal capabilities that have been developed by higher education and identified through the narratives include resilience, which is defined by Lewis, Feilder and Pangallo (2011) as “the sense of recovering or rebounding despite adversity or change.” In this case, resilience refers to the ability of these women to continue with life and educational pursuits through some tough situations. Similarly, educational resilience, “the ability to navigate study, work and life” (Walker 2006: 128), was experienced by some of the women.

*I actually went to varsity two weeks after I gave birth, I had to go register, so I went to go register two weeks after. (Mpho)*

*Like I said the reason I decided to study with (long distance university) is because I could see I couldn't handle, you understand. It is about being able to make choices like that, decisions like that. And being honest with yourself and saying, ok, this I am not copying with and making the changes I had to make. That is why I was like, it's better I do it distance so I am able to work as well, because then, if I was here I would have to quit my job, and I can't quit my job, that's how I support myself, you understand. So I think it's all about the balance and making proper choices. (Thuli)*

Lastly, the development of self-discipline also aided the women in their pursuit of academic, professional and personal success.

*The programme was not as rigid as the high school one, I had to have self-discipline in order to pass and graduate. (Fifi)*

The capabilities identified here will be contextualised further in the discussion section. Next, the influence of gender and race on the women's lives will be discussed. These factors act as positive or negative conversion factors for women to achieve well-being.

### ***Using capabilities gained in HE***

The women explained how they turned the capabilities which they had gained in higher education into useful functionings, especially in the workplace.

*Work definitely, because I have all intentions to work at an NGO area and I mean you cannot work in the NGO if you do not know how to write, or how to analyse or interpret or whatever. You know those skills will come very handy in my life in general, it doesn't matter what area I go to, I will need them. So they are skills that are going to come quite handy. (Xoli)*

Lebo argued that some of the capabilities she acquired while serving on a residence committee are now helping her as a residence head.

*I eventually became part of the residence committee that is why I am working where I am working at residence, so what I learned there is helping me a lot. (Lebo)*

Below, the women explained how the knowledge they gained from the curriculum has helped them.

*That type of job that I was doing was to interact with the retailers, retailer shop owners, business owners, people from different backgrounds, and you had to have diverse skills, a thorough knowledge or idea on how to tackle them. Because some days, you would come to the retailer only to find that today he is not fine with his business and ... then he says, come again. So in a way it helped me how to interact with people on a more personal level and you come down to their level of understanding. (Nezi)*

*I sell much, much better with what I learned over my years at varsity because I am able to do discriminating pricing now. Recently, I sold bags and I didn't have to go around telling people that I sell, I just placed an ad on the internet. I just designed a PDF document magazine, a catalogue which I called at that time and just distributed it and that's part of what I learned from varsity. Because I had Internet Marketing as a subject... but ja, there is a bit that I learned from all of my subjects, I am able to put them together and run my informal business. (Thabelo)*

*During my undergrad, I was just a tutor, but with the years, now I am a lecturing assistant, so that is how I started. (Thuli)*

*Unfortunately, computers were unheard of; I only learned the computer in my third year when I was doing my practical. Though I did not learn much, that experience that I got helped me when I started working. The first thing that was put in front of me when I started working was a computer. If I hadn't learned those skills I was going to find it very hard for me to do my report and submit them in time for courts and the likes. So I am glad I managed to get those skills. The other skills that I think I learned from school are trying to research more. Try to find out, like I am doing now, I am trying to find the trends of the employees that I am working with, which is now absenteeism. There is a lot of that, so now I am going in to try to find out why ... the rate of absenteeism in the department is so high. (Thabelo)*

*I can work with people better and put in long hours which are something I learned while I was doing my degree. (Fifi)*

This section indicated the capabilities that the participants gained in higher education and how they were turned into valuable functionings. The discussion section of this chapter will elaborate on how these capabilities were used. Gender and racial issues that emerged from the interviews are addressed below.

### **6.1.2 Gender**

Gender and race had different influences on the participants' lives and career development. Below are the main themes that emerged from their narratives.

#### ***Gender and respect***

Xoli and Aya claimed that people have to be respected regardless of their gender and, if you respect others, you would most likely be respected in return.

*You see, I never allow that, I never allow that, yes I am female, people have to respect me as a person, as a female and also my sexual identity or my sexual orientation, people should not see me as less of a person because I am gay. (Xoli)*

*Respect people because you will be respected regardless of your gender. (Aya)*

#### ***Gender as a motivation***

Some of the women explained that their gender was a motivation for them to work hard and achieve their goals.

*I think women, as women, we still work hard, we still have to prove ourselves, but because of a society that is still so patriarchal, not just in academics but in most structures where you find that man are cracking the whip (ooohcrrrrr), you know. So to speak, I have seen women come up, have seen women adapt to those situations. We have the ability to adapt, you know, you put me in a shack, I live in a big house, I will be sure that I know where the water is, I mean we communicate as women. Women transform, women do not necessarily transform but are able to survive. I think we have a stronger backbone than men, so whatever situation you throw at an educated woman, I'm sure she'll be able to apply it just as well as an uneducated women or whatever. It depends on the situation and what category she falls. (Lebo)*

### **Gender and the workplace**

When the participants were asked whether they think their gender had contributed to their acquisition of jobs they said:

*No, I don't think my gender added anything, it was my qualification, or maybe being a woman architect played a role, I have never thought of it in that way. (Fifi)*

*When they were recruiting, they did specify in the interviews that they are looking for more females, because even at work we were more females and less males. So in a way it gave me an advantage. (Nezi)*

Some of the women reported that they were treated differently because of gender at their place of work, stating that inappropriate gestures or remarks were passed by their male colleagues. Also, affiliation with management was seen as a safeguard for some of the women.

*The reason people are open to me is because I have a lesbian director, so people really don't have a choice, so for that and because I have always engaged with people who are open minded, it's different. But I don't know when I leave [the university] what is going to happen, I know how people are going to react, I don't know whether I am going to be sexually harassed or whether I am going to be judged or assessed based on my sexual orientation or based on my gender and my race. I don't know. That's the fear that when I leave this place and the university environment what is going to happen. (Xoli)*

*I have seen how the government treat people, if you have nothing to give them, you will stay where you are for the rest of your life, if you understand what I am saying ...sexual pleasures. (Nezi)*

*Aya concurred with Nezi about sexual favours in some government departments. Yes, it does happen, there are those perceptions that so and so is where she is because, I mean she slept her way up. There were some hints that were coming my way, but it all depends on what you want in life because ... I always say I don't want to live my life with regrets. Because had I may be taken those challenges, maybe I could be very far to today. But it depends on who you are and what you want in life. (Aya)*

*Even though sexist remarks were passed about the way I dress, or conducted myself, I still worked hard and showed that it is not about your dress code but rather your skills and ability to perform well. (Fifi)*

*When we went for our practicals I was treated differently and had to dress in a certain way and the men at the construction site would make comments about my body...I had to act strong and masculine. (Fifi)*

The women further stated that male dominance in the workplace was still prevalent.

*Most men are in high positions and women are just there. But when I attended that workshop, it was directors and deputy directors, but at least they are getting there. But I wonder when will that be, when a woman is an HOD or even a premier, I don't know when that will happen because people are doing favours, who knows who to get there. (Mary)*

*One has to act masculine and rough to be taken seriously in this industry. (Fifi)*

*You know, in my department there is more women than men, especially in my section, there is more women than men. So you need to prove yourself amongst the women. There has to be something that you are special with amongst those women. So you have to prove yourself that you know what I want to get there. (Mary)*

*As a female, do not go into a meeting and just keep quiet and walk out after the meeting. Ask questions; ask for clarification, so that people know that this person is listening. (Aya)*

*In academics we are still in a patriarchal environment, I mean you look at the number of males employed by a university versus women, let's not even go into the colour thing or the*

*race thing. But we are still in a patriarchal society, I am very grateful that, you know, in the structures of management there is a woman here and there, because you know, for example, now we have lactation rooms where mothers can actually go with their babies. I couldn't sit three months on maternity leave; I came to work in the first one, two months of giving birth. (Lebo)*

### ***Affirmative action and gender***

As explained in chapter 2, affirmative action has been implemented to ensure equity in the workplace by employing qualified, previously disadvantaged groups, of which black women are a part. Some of the participants attributed part of their job acquisition to affirmative action.

*Well, I think our country decides that for us now. They will say in a certain sector so many women need to be hired, so I was not aware of those things until recently ...It might not be that obvious, but yes ... affirmative action is a hot topic, is something that is a reality, so maybe it could have come in when was hired but I don't think as I think my skills also spoke, but again maybe I was at an advantage because women are better speakers. (Lerato)*

*When they were recruiting, they did specify in the interviews that they are looking for more females, because even at work we were more females and less males. So in a way it gave me an advantage. (Nezi)*

*In terms of work, I will say I have gained, but in terms of studies, yes, I have lost because I told myself by now I was supposed to have my master's, (Nezi)*

Some women also mentioned conscious efforts from their place of work to empower women through programmes.

*Our department now is trying to balance the gender thing ... I realised last year when I attended this woman thing ... Women something, something ...it is a workshop only for women, especially those in high positions. Even though I am at a lower position, I was invited. (Mary)*

### ***Family and gender***

*The first place where a woman is socialised is within her family. This is where she is taught gender roles, namely what a girl should or should not do.*

*I grew up in a very patriarchal family, and everyone is treated the same. I have learned to be a strong woman from my mother and aunts. Their husbands still love and respect them. So I believe both men and women are equal in the family. (Fifi)*

*As a woman, I can do whatever I want to do. As I mentioned, if you have a husband who lets you do whatever you want to do, who is not standing in your way, it is not really a hassle. My husband is that kind of person who will say what you want to do, if you want to do it, go ahead and do it. I mean he is not restrictive; he is giving me the support when I need it. So actually I have all the support I need from him. (Aya)*

*My husband does not restrict me to start with, he always encourages me, like Sweetie, are you sure you want to go back to school? That is the question he asks me: are you sure you want to do this? And when I say yes, then he will say, like go for it, it's fine. So ...as for my marriage, there is no restrictions, I can be anything that God wants me to be. (Nezi)*

*Whether you are a woman or a man you have to wash dishes, you have to clean the house and if it comes to a push we all do the gardening you know, but ... you know brothers, they will tell you that it is a woman's job, we can't do that. I think mama was trying to teach us, you know what; there are no women and men's jobs, we all have to do the same thing. Because she teaches you that you have to do things for yourself, it is not about making mama happy because you washed dishes or you cleaned the house. When you are staying alone obviously you have to wash the dishes and clean the house. She made us all do everything, not to say women should cook. Everyone at home has to cook. (Mary)*

The one participant discussed how women members are treated within their family, showing that, in most instances, they are treated as equals to males, and encouraged by their husbands to fulfil their goals. However, what happens in the family might differ from social roles.

### ***Gender and social roles***

Owing to the fact that women have been oppressed for a long time under a patriarchal system and due to social roles, they were asked about their views and experiences with regard to these social roles. Some of the women stated that they think we should still adhere to the traditional social roles within the family.

*I think we should go back to that, hey, but I think our society disintegrated as soon as we shifted away from patriarchy, I think if we went back there, back to the basics, like I said,*

*things will be much better. Also to let men set up again, because right now we have a problem of absent fathers and absent men...If you interview a 50, 70 year old and she is still married, it's because it's the basics, it's because no matter what happens, the man is the head. It is because even if he gets out of life, she stays on her knees and starts praying for her man, he doesn't do the same. (Mpho)*

*You must be educated, it is very important that you are educated, because if you look at the economic demographics of South Africa right now not a lot of people can survive on one income. You need two incomes, so the woman needs to be educated. But she must know her place and her place when she gets out: she is the CEO at the company not at home. When she is at home, the man is the CEO, he is the boss, she takes off her heels. Or she can go into the bedroom and do a little show for her man (laughs), but her place is still in the kitchen. Whether or not her place is still in the kitchen, and that can mean many things, it doesn't mean, I believe, she does have to physically be in the kitchen, but as long as she makes sure that her family is well taken care of. (Mpho)*

*There are things that are out of our control. I think a man is still a man and a woman is still a woman. We still have our different roles, as long as we respect each other. I think respect is a huge thing, if a man gives you the respect you need, it's even easy to give more than you are supposed to give, so to me respect is the most important thing. I think we still need to understand that a man is a man, a woman is a woman. (Thuli)*

*When Thuli was asked what she meant by a woman is still a woman, she explained: I think obvious number one is to be a nurturing person, the caring and whatever. I think as woman, you can work and take care of the family, I have seen with me, you understand. Easily done, there are so many women doing it now, there is no reason why you should focus on your career and say, ok now you want to be this career woman and you can't take care of your family. If you made a decision to have a family, you should be able to take care of the family. And more than men, we are more the emotional present people so you obviously have to be more emotionally present for your kids. And I think with the career stuff, it is still the pride of a woman, it is still nice to go back home to a well-functioning family as well, but then leave home and go to a properly built career as well. I think we can do that especially now, like, it's doable. (Thuli)*

*Somehow, we still believe that a father is the head of the family. Though you know, like I mentioned, my husband is hardly at home, he is always on the road. When he is not there, I have to take the role. Therefore, as the woman in the house, you need to look up to him to*



*say that, you are the father of the house, and ask him which direction to take. The more you respect him the more you show him that kind of respect, he respects you back. (Aya)*

*That's a bit tricky because one thing that we fought for with my husband was that he wanted to lead me, you understand, and then his inability to provide made him ...it made him feel inferior. Let us say you are in a situation where a man is not so able to provide for his family financially and he wants to head the family, it sort of, it doesn't balance, it doesn't work out. So it is fine, I still prefer a man to head the family, but he must be the main provider. (Thabelo)*

As is evident from the above, some social norms stem from cultural beliefs. Some black families in South Africa are still rooted in their cultural beliefs.

### ***Gender and culture***

Gender is a social construct; therefore, culture will play a role in women's gender identity. Some of the women explained how they sometimes clashed with their families because of different beliefs. Some of them stated that they only did what was asked of them in order to get what they wanted.

*In my family I can be who I want to be to a certain extent, but we clash with my parents, which is also something that is not African. In the African culture you just accept, and I struggle with that. Fortunately, Modimo (God) blessed me with supportive parents and my dad was not a dictator, he was a very diplomatic, so we had an upbringing of freedom of speech, expression and all of that. (Mpho)*

*Thabelo explained why she ended up getting a divorce: Because of domination, we come from different backgrounds. He comes from a very cultural traditional background, our levels of education were very different, I was far more educated than he was, so all of that brought complexities into our marriage. (Thabelo)*

Fifi saw her parents as investors: *They are my investors, everyone will do everything to please the investors, and even people in big companies do it...I am not a Christian but I go to church because that is what they want. (Fifi)*

One cannot separate race and gender, especially in the South African context. Race in this case proved to be both a positive and negative conversion factor.

### 6.1.3. Race

#### *Experiences of race in education*

Although most participants said that race was not a factor while they were studying, others explained that race pushed them to be better people and to understand “the other.”

*You see on a daily basis that race affects our decisions whether we want to acknowledge that or not. Though sometimes we tend to brush that away...you know, the university itself, it pushed me not to be comfortable ...with racial tension that happens around the country.* (Xoli)

*It forced me intellectually to deal with race, to engage in difficult dialogues to fight with myself, you know, because I believe that I am a recovering racist. Because I believe each and every one of us is a recovering racist.* (Xoli)

*I think having been the only black child in a white school; I became exposed to the race conversation quite early. I think I was 10 years old, that's when I asked my mother what a kaffir is; you know, because that is what the kids called me.* (Lebo)

Nezi went to an all-black university first and when she went to a mixed university, she explained her experience as follows: *Very challenging, you know, from the black university coming here to mixing with other cultures and other races.* (Nezi)

*You know if you are in higher education, especially at a place like my university, with all the racism, you know, you have to step it up, you have to be determined. You have to look beyond the fact that the Afrikaans class gets the scope and you do not, you have to pass your test regardless, without the scope.* (Mpho)

Before the selection, we are all called so we can go through the procedure and in the procedure; we are told we supposed to take so many people and unfortunately one or two blacks. Last year we were even told, like this university does not take more blacks in masters' in Psychology. So you sort of wonder as a person, really, is this still happening at this university at this day and age? (Nezi)

Mpho stated that she was expected to fail her master's because she was black.

*Oh yes, expected to fail almost, almost that expectation that you are going to fail. In addition, the expectation of you doesn't know what you are doing, it was there, subtle, but it was there. I mean I also had altercations with some of the lecturers, because I was out spoken about it. Sometimes for instance they would speak Afrikaans and three of us, the white male was from Durban, the Indian girl was also from Durban, they couldn't understand Afrikaans, but they would just speak Afrikaans and we would have to say to them we can't understand. And the Indian girl felt the same, that it is quite clear we are people of colour. And we were just not treated the same. (Mpho)*

*You could tell even with the fact that they had three black students there, you could obviously feel that they wanted one black student but for that, what do they call it, to look like there is that integration that they want both races and stuff, you understand. It wasn't that, I think if they had a choice they would have a panel of white students only. But like, what do you do, you can't get there and complain if you want the internship. (Thuli)*

*When I was doing my final presentation one of the panel members stopped me and said I am very fluent in English for a black person ...it was not an English exam but rather a design exam. (Fifi)*

### ***Race in the workplace***

The women described the racial discrimination they had experienced in the workplace due to, for instance, the South African labour market's still being dominated by white males. The women explained how race could be a positive or negative conversion factor within the workplace.

*Other people have no problem, for example my supervisors and my directors and other people, of course other people will never be comfortable and we looking now at the context of our history, we never lived with the other and people are still battling and learning how to live with the other. And on that note, people will treat you differently sometimes. Yet again it depends who, some of my colleagues see me differently; they see me as a human being like I see them as human beings. However, others are uncomfortable and this because of our divided history. So I think that's that, those people don't know whether to laugh with you or make small conversations because it is uncomfortable, of course, with me also, it happens that I become uncomfortable because I don't know how to react. (Xoli)*

The women who worked in government stated that most of the departments were black dominated. Furthermore, some of the women added that willingness to provide sexual pleasures to management counted more than race.

*You know, in the government I would not say being black is an advantage; it is being who you are, and what are you willing to sacrifice and what are you willing to offer to them, then it gives you an advantage, but if you are just like, this is me, it's either you take it or you leave it. (Nezi)*

When asked whether she thought her race got her jobs Mpho said:

*No, it is my qualification. They need FSPC internship participants who are black, so you are going to need a Sotho-speaking intern. But, as well, you are not going to take a BSocSc without master's for an internship at the FSPC, so it is a little of both. The majority of my patients, 99% are black, once again you are going to take me because of my qualification, but the fact that I am black also plays a part. It would not be wise to bring in English, white or Afrikaans-speaking clinical psychologist here because there is going to be a language barrier, but above all, I have to have a master's degree. (Mpho)*

Thabelo and Thuli explained that even black people can be racist towards white people or other black people.

*There were a lot of white people, but lucky enough we got along probably because of my background, I lived with white people all my life. But you could still tell, you could still pick up that if there were other black people they did not get along so well with other black people. And what I picked up was that it was because of the prejudice that black people also had in themselves and I must say black people are also very racist, they are very racist. (Thabelo)*

*I mean it does play a huge role because they still want to hire their own people, you understand. So like I was saying now, I am a foreigner, I am a woman and then I am black. So there is so much proving yourself to the next person, it does because they just won't want to hire you and then leave their people aside, so you going to have that special thing that are going to make them hire you. (Thuli)*

*Mary and Thuli felt they were being undermined because of their race. Even though they had the same qualifications and sometimes more job experience than their white colleagues, the latter would be considered first when it was time for promotion.*

*At the university I think, yes, because before I resigned, somebody was offered to be head a new student project but the person rejected the offer so they came to me as a second option. So you know you need the money, then I said yes and after a couple of days I resigned. We were treated differently. I would say most black people worked harder than white people, white people, they would get preferences. They would get laptops and go work at home, but as black people, we were not allowed to. That is one of the few reasons why I resigned. I do not want to be treated differently just because of my skin, we should all be treated the same whether you are white, black or woman or man. But we were treated differently. (Mary)*

*I think one thing, like being undermined, like being a woman and black, there is that feeling of being undermined, so you always have to prove yourself a little bit more than the next person. You always have to bring something different to the table than the next person. Like with my internship for instance, I got it because I had done anthropology. (Thuli)*

### ***Race and opportunity***

Some of the women stated that being black helped them to either grow to understand other people or to attain a job. On the other hand, race was deemed as a negative aspect, with some participants not being accepted for certain degrees.

*I think in my career it will help me because there is so few of us, so when I stand up and I say my name is so and so and I have masters' in clinical psychology, people tend to listen. As I said, there is so few of us, so you get that respect and also because I am so young people tend to show up and give the necessary respect, so actually I think being a black woman in my career helps. (Mpho)*

*I think we just think differently, white people are not afraid of like, because I don't want to make it sound like they are put in an advantaged situation. They work hard, well at least the ones I have seen work hard. They just have more access to opportunities, and just the way they present themselves and go outside their boundaries and stuff. (Thuli)*

*I do not look at myself in that way, I have had colleagues who were of the other race who were finding it very difficult to cope. Maybe race somehow played a positive role towards me being accepted, or me being, how I can put it, being well considered amongst the colleagues. But I don't think race played a very big role. (Aya)*

The women's experiences indicated that race is both a positive and negative conversion factor. However, despite some gender and racial obstacles, the women showed great agency to reach their goals.

#### **6.1.4 Agency**

Agency, according to Sen (1999: 19), denotes "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives." In this study, endeavoured to know whether the women made their own choices to be where they are today.

##### ***Did they make their own choices?***

Most of the women did not decide to go university themselves, it was a decision made for them by their families or an expectation that they would enter higher education:

*That was chosen for me, I had no choice. (Lebo)*

*It was a family thing that from high school you have to go and get your higher education. (Nezi)*

*My parents expected me to go to university, especially my dad. Everyone in my family had gone to university. (Fifi)*

*It's just something our parents always instilled in us. My, parents are graduates, my father was a lawyer and my mother has a BCom. So going to university was, you know, when you grow up with something, it's almost like it's not a choice, it's not an option. In my house, there is no gap year, no relaxing, no, no. You gap in varsity. (Mpho)*

*Both my parents went to university, so I think that has always been their dream that I would also go to university. (Aya)*

*Ok, first of all, with our parents, varsity is not an option, you have to go to varsity, but it starts there. Growing up with family members that have been to varsity and looking at their lives, it kind of gave me that idea that whether I like it or not I need to get formal education so that I get a life that I am hoping to get one day. (Thuli)*

*Other participants attributed their choice to go to university to wanting a better life, because they saw higher education as the only route which could guarantee a better life for them.*

*Probably the desire to get a good job one day it was the only route to follow: primary school, high school, and varsity and then you go work...it actually was not a decision; it was fate. (Thabelo)*

*I took a decision and said to myself, I HAVE TO make a life for myself and also, not to be selfish to give my sister the opportunity to live her own life. I had to educate myself, I knew that every day. I went to class every morning, I woke up, I knew that I can't afford to be selfish. I decided it is only a set of or formal education that will ensure that I lived a comfortable life; that is why I decided to come to school. (Xoli)*

Even though most of the women were expected to go to university, they could choose which degree to pursue.

*I decided to study architecture because I loved houses; I have always found buildings interesting. (Fifi)*

*So I decided I want to discuss and engage on difficult issues. So that's why I decided to do political science, because I realised that it's one way that translates who I am. (Xoli)*

Some of the women had a specific goal and made sure they achieved what was valuable to them.

*You see, as painful as death is, I think the death of my mom was a blessing in disguise, and I know it sounds horrible what I am saying, but after her death I somehow got a clear perspective of what I want in life. I mean, I used to wake up every morning and go to school all my life, and I went to school because I was told to go to school. But when my mom passed on, I all of a sudden had a reason for existence. You know, I had to know and take a decision whether I want to live or exist or do I want to survive. And I took a decision that I live and exist and to survive too. And the only way to do that is to be educated. (Xoli)*

*It was quite a challenge for me, but through it all, I told myself I have to push, because I told myself, I decided I'm going to quit Medicine after doing it for two and a half years. I am going to quit Medicine; I am going to study Psychology. I decided that I am going to become a clinical psychologist. They told me it would be difficult, they told me I would have to study until master's level, explained to me that you might not get into master's immediately. But when I dropped from Medicine I knew I would get in immediately. I just told myself it is not an option. (Mpho)*

Mpho and Nezi said they had set goals for themselves and made sure they achieved those goals.

I have given myself three years to really focus and pursue my studies. (Nezi)

Hard work and determination, I write down my goals, I kid you not. (Mpho)

Thuli and Fifi made decisions about their careers despite what people would say. They did what they deemed to be good for their well-being.

*The reason I decided to study with a long distance learning university is because I could see I couldn't handle, you understand. It is about being able to make choices like that, decisions like that. And being honest with you and saying ok, this I am not coping with and making the changes I had to make. That is why I was like, it's better I do it distance so I am able to work as well, because then, if I was here I would have to quit my job, and I can't quit my job, that's how I support myself, you understand. So I think is all about the balance and making proper choices.* (Thuli)

*I decided to quit my job and start my own company.* (Fifi)

The presence of the capabilities and agency is, however, not sufficient for the women to live their valued lives. Conversion factors play a fundamental role, which could aid or constrain the women's agency to convert their capabilities into valued functionings.

### ***Positive conversion factors influencing agency***

Financial support was a positive conversion factor for most of the women because their parents could afford to pay their tuition fees and support them while studying.

*My parents paid for my fees and gave me monthly allowance.* (Mpho)

*I went to university carrying R5000 for my registration...my parents paid for my fees.* (Aya)

*My mother, with the help of my uncle, paid for my fees, than I got a job in order to help. So I had money for food and others things from my job as a tutor.* (Thuli)

*The first year my parents paid for me, from second year I applied for a bursary at the university and the bursary paid for everything including giving me a monthly allowance.* (Fifi)



*I applied for a government bursary, which paid for my fees and accommodation, but my sister still gave me spending money...I got a job, to take the pressure off my sister. (Xoli)*

Mary's mother worked for the university; there she studied free, but her mother still gave her a monthly allowance unit she started working.

Most of the women were involved in university activities and worked at departments at the university while they were studying.

*I got involved in leadership roles in [my residence] from my first year and took part in leadership at the university, though I was not in the SRC. (Xoli)*

*I had mentors through lecturing staff that say, hey; we see the talent, so try this and this. Because I got academic advising to say, hey, maybe you should try this as well. So I think the entire extra-mural activities only enhanced what one already had. (Lebo)*

*I am not going to lie, I don't know how many offers I have had since I started working at my second year at the university, I worked as a tutor, which I never applied for. A lecturer of mine approached me because I was a very good student in class. So he approached me and said he wants me to be a tutor and I was not going to say no to the job. (Xoli)*

*I started my first job at the university at the Afrikaans department as an assistant, as a student assistant. So the fact that you can speak the language obviously is a plus and I didn't have my degree then, so I would say it was quite easy. And I did promotion work here and there, where it was open to everybody who had time available on a Saturday and so on. (Lebo)*

*I was a tutor in varsity, I was also a conference co-donor for the international residence body for conferences, and I did a lot of odd jobs on campus. Then I did the internship, which was a year, and then after I just applied here for a community service side and now I am in a community service clinic, clinical psychologist. (Mpho)*

Mary says that her lecturers were always willing to help and she would go to them when she did not understand something.

*They even said if I don't understand anything I should come to them, and when I went to see them they would explain to me and after seeing them I would understand much better, so the lecturers were very supportive, especially when we contacted them. (Mary)*

Other women added that family support was an important factor that contributed to their success in higher education.

*My husband supported me through my studies, and even though we had a son, someone was there to look after him. (Nezi)*

*Like I said, I have a very close-knit circle of family and friends and they were supportive. (Mpho)*

Mpho and Lebo stated that they were well prepared for higher education.

*The research I did in Grade 11 made me aware that university is not like my school with 200 people...I had already visited the university two years before I come to study, been to an open day and saw the millions of people I could interact with. (Lebo)*

*Also when coming to university some people think it's a myth when teachers say IEB helps but it actually did help. I easily got into Medicine, when I got to varsity and I did it for two and half years, I didn't have to do a bridging course. (Mpho)*

However, the participants also encountered negative factors that hindered them from reaching their goals.

### ***Negative conversion factors***

Gender and race were identified as major conversion factors and will be discussed in detail in the next section. Transition to higher education also proved to be a negative conversion factor for some of the women. One unexpected conversion factor was that of acceptance requirement for master's students.

*You apply for your master's, you do so well and you have this hope that you are going to be selected to come through. However, before the selection we are all called so we can go through the procedure and in the procedure we are told we supposed to take so many people and unfortunately one or two blacks. Last year we were even told that this university does not take more blacks in master's in Psychology. So you sort of wonder as a person, really, is this still happening at this university at this day and age? (Nezi)*

Some of the participants stated similar reasons as Nezi for deciding to do their master's in other fields related to Psychology.

*When you do psychology you realise it is not exactly what you thought it was. With the requirements to start with you end up thinking, well I am doing to branch out...I want to study Human Development. (Thuli)*

*I decided to do my master's in Higher Education, after my honours in Psychology. (Mary)*

Most of the women were not prepared for higher education and they found the transition from high school to higher education a difficult one.

*I did BA majoring in Psychology, it was a huge transition from high school, and I tell you. I was not being exposed to being independent, how to tackle assignments, so it was quite a challenge for me, but through it all, I told myself I have to push. (Nezi)*

*I mean, when you get to university you are given the expectation that the course, in Social Work, we were very much consumed, so much that when we started first year, we had to start with practical community work. We were already involved in community work. So we were some how consumed by the work, so we had to adjust to the work that was there. Therefore, there was no excuse. (Aya)*

*In high school, everyone was nice, people were friendly, then you get to university and it is the total opposite. (Fifi)*

This section identified several capabilities which, according to the participants, were provided to them by higher education. Gender and racial issues were shown to have contributed strongly to these women's sense of identity within social and professional roles. Lastly, the concept of agency was explored, which indicated that the ability of these women to make use of their capabilities is widely influenced by positive and negative conversion factors. The following section discusses these findings in detail.

## **6.2 Discussion**

The previous sections reported the findings of the study by identifying themes in order to address the research questions. The following section provides a discussion of the findings. This sections answers the "so what" question, namely what the findings mean and of what importance they are for this study and the fields of education, gender and capabilities.

### 6.2.1 Capabilities

A list of capabilities from several authors is presented in table 6. I will discuss the different capabilities that have been identified in the findings in comparison with the capabilities from the list. In addition, I will state why the capabilities valued by the women in this study are particularly important in the South African context.

**Table 6: Lists of capabilities**

| <b>Nussbaum's capabilities (2002: 60-61)</b> | <b>Robeyns' gender inequality capabilities (2005: 73-74)</b> | <b>Walker's higher education capabilities (2006: 128-129)</b> | <b>Capabilities acquired in higher education from this study</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Life                                         | Life and physical health                                     | Practical reason                                              | Cross-cultural exposure                                          |
| Bodily health                                | Mental health                                                | Education resilience                                          | Communication and interpersonal skills                           |
| Bodily integrity                             | Bodily integrity and safety                                  | Knowledge and imagination                                     | Knowledge, imagination and critical thinking                     |
| Senses, imagination and thought              | Social relations                                             | Learning disposition                                          | Empowerment                                                      |
| Emotions                                     | Political empowerment                                        | Social relation and network                                   | Respect, dignity and social consciousness                        |
| Practical reasoning                          | Education and knowledge                                      | Respect, dignity and recognition                              | Practical reasoning                                              |
| Affiliation                                  | Domestic work and non-market care                            | Emotional integrity                                           | Lifelong learning                                                |
| Other species                                | Paid work and other projects                                 | Bodily integrity                                              | Resilience                                                       |
| Play                                         | Shelter and environment                                      |                                                               | Bodily integrity                                                 |
| Control over one's environment               | Mobility                                                     |                                                               |                                                                  |
|                                              | Leisure activities                                           |                                                               |                                                                  |

|  |               |  |  |
|--|---------------|--|--|
|  | Time autonomy |  |  |
|  | Respect       |  |  |
|  | Religion      |  |  |

Being educated is vital to the development of capabilities such as critical thinking, practical reasoning and employability (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). The women in the study did not only gain basic capabilities, but their capabilities were enhanced by higher education. The role of South African higher education is not only to prepare graduates for employment, but to produce graduates who meet societal and economic demands (Griesel & Parker, 2009). While in higher education, women should be able to gain knowledge from their subjects and other forms of education.

Nussbaum (2011) argues for a list of central capabilities as a minimum requirement for governments to promote human dignity. She explains that women lack the support for fundamental functioning in most parts of the world and has thus come up with a list that can evaluate the functionings of women and ensure that women can live the lives they value (Nussbaum, 2002). Her list has 10 central capabilities: the first three capabilities (life, bodily integrity and bodily health) refer to the fact that each person should live a full life which would ensure good health choices, freedom of movement and choice without any harm or violation of their dignity (Nussbaum, 2002). In the case of this study, all the women had capabilities of life and bodily health. However, due to harassment in the workplace, bodily integrity was compromised.

Nussbaum (2002) indicates that literacy levels of women worldwide are relatively low. Her capability of senses, imagination and thought implies that all women should be able to do things informed by education and critically think things through, as well as be able to make their own political, religious and life decisions. Nussbaum also argues for practical reasoning, emotion, affiliations, other species, play and control over one's environment as central capabilities that each human should have. As mentioned in chapter 3, all the capabilities are of the same importance and one cannot be substituted for another. Nussbaum (2002: 62) states that all capabilities are related and affecting each other, for example, the "most effective way of promoting women's control over the environment and their effective right to political participation is to promote women literacy."

Although not contesting Nussbaum's list of capabilities, Robeyns formulated a specific list of gender equality capabilities in the Western societies. My study was not conducted in a predominantly Western society, nevertheless, Robeyns' capabilities for gender equality can still be applied to evaluate the capabilities that were found in my study. Robeyns (2005) illustrated the above-mentioned capabilities as centrally important for assessment of gender inequalities. In my study, the women did not explicitly mention the capabilities stated by Robeyns as the capabilities they gained from higher education, yet the data analysis revealed that the women did have most of the capabilities required for gender equality. For instance, all the women had the freedom to choose their religious path. Although not mentioned earlier because of the educational context of the study, shelter and domestic work emerged from the women's narratives. The married women were not restricted by the husbands. All the women in this study had education and knowledge and were able to make well-informed decisions about their lives in most cases. Their married life did not restrict them from leisure time. Lebo mentioned *I still go out with my friends and do things I like*. Robeyns' capability list proved relevant even in a case that is non-Western.

Walker (2007) also formulated an ideal list of gender equality capabilities in education. Walker's (2007) list focuses on gender equality capabilities in schooling for girls at South African schools, as mentioned in chapter 3. While my study focused on women graduates, Walker's capabilities can still be viewed as relevant for this study, as they both investigated gender and the South African context. Walker (2006) further compiled a list of ideal higher education capabilities, as shown above. The list (explained in detail in chapter 3) comprises eight capabilities that should be developed through higher education. The findings of the current study show that most of the women valued and had most of Walker's capabilities for higher education. They were better able to engage in group work, interact with others and think critically during their studies and after completing their degrees.

Thus, from my findings emerged nine capabilities that the women valued and had gained from higher education. Bodily integrity was valued by all women, who explained that they did not believe in sexual favours to progress in the workplace, but in hard work instead. Closely tied to this was the capability for respect, dignity and social consciousness. Respect and dignity not only refer the women's respect for other people, but how they were treated in higher education institutions and the workplace. The findings revealed that these black women felt discriminated against in general within the higher education institutions. These findings are similar to those from a study by Gibeney (2013) in the UK on black women at university. Mpho, for example, mentioned that she was expected to fail because she was

black. This type of discrimination is in contrast to the South African Constitution of 1996, which states that no one should be treated unfairly because of their race. The Higher Education Act of 1999 and the Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2013 are trying to address these discriminations by making provision for the access and equal treatment of all in higher education. The Employment Equity Act of 1998 also states that everyone should be treated equally and with respect in the workplace. Nevertheless, this is not occurring in practice because women in the South Africa workplace are not treated with dignity and respect, according to Mdyogolo (2013) and Wolf (2013). Some women in this study revealed that their male supervisors wanted sexual favours from them. This resulted in the resignation of one of the participants. Although this woman had the capability to function within the workplace, she could not realise this functioning to her full potential. The women also valued social relations. According to Walker (2007), this is the ability to be a friend and take part in group work and activities. The women gained resilience and educational resilience while at higher education. They were able to deal with difficult situations better, for instance, Mpho decided to go back to studying after having a child despite all the challenges that came with being both a new mother and a student.

Cross-cultural capability in this study can be defined as the ability to learn about other people's cultures and respecting the differences and similarities between cultures. South Africa has diverse cultural groups and the women in the study mentioned that, being in higher education, taught them to respect other cultures. The women were better able to relate with people of different cultures and race after completing higher education. Xoli also mentioned that people she met in higher education helped her overcome her racism and increase her understanding of other people. Although the capability for cross-culture does not appear in Walker's, Robeyns' and Nussbaum's lists, it is important for the South African context where people of different cultures need to understand each other and be able to work together. Understanding and respecting individuals, despite their ethnicity or race, can help decrease racial inequalities.

Walker (2006) and Nussbaum (2000) listed practical thinking as one of the critical capabilities for human development. Walker (2006: 128) views practical reasoning as "being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices, being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world, having good judgment." As demonstrated in the findings section, all the women made well-reasoned and informed decisions in their professional lives. While in higher education, the women were challenged to engage in difficult dialogue and later to

acquire knowledge for their personal use Walker explains this as knowledge and imagination. However, this was not always the case with their personal decisions, because they were sometimes influenced by social norms. Oketch et al. (2013) argue that higher education does not seem to be effective in overcoming deeply ingrained social norms. This is evident in this study as most women still made their personal choices in line with their religious or family norms.

Communication and interpersonal skills were valued by all women. They all explained that they became better communicators due to their education and that they were able to communicate with different people and have intellectual conversations with their colleagues and spouses. The older women who came from reserved cultures indicated that going to university helped them interact with different people without being judged, for instance, Nezi stated that she only started having male friends at university as her parents had never allowed it. She had more freedom to choose the life she wanted once she had gone to university. This can also be related to Walker's capability of voice because the women were able to speak out against certain discriminatory practices that occurred in classroom situations and in the selection to master's degree. Closely related to communication was the capability of respect and dignity, respect for all people irrespective of their social class or race. This is in line with Nussbaum's (2002: 60) capability of affiliation, which explains that people should "be able to live with and towards others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings." Most women explained that they were treated with respect both at their workplace and household because they also treated other people with respect. Thus, they valued being respected at all times.

The last two capabilities that emerged from the findings were lifelong learning and empowerment. Lifelong learning is described as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence (European Commission, 2011). This includes learning that takes place at all ages, whether it is formal or informal learning. The lifelong learning capability can be linked with Walker's capability for learning disposition. Walker (2006: 129) explains this capability as "being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning, having confidence in one's ability to learn and being an active inquirer." Lifelong learning creates the opportunity to learn new things or unlearn other things (UNESCO, 2002). It, thus, improves the capability for knowledge, resulting in women who can function well in a changing society.

In this study, all the women explained that they wanted to further their studies in the future. They all recognised the value of being more educated. Weber and Higginbotham's (1995)



study on the perceptions of workplace discrimination showed that most black women had aspirations to further their studies and leave their jobs, but could not because of family obligations. This was the case for two of the women in this study; at the time of the interview, they were being deprived of their capability for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning as mentioned above is comparable to Walker's capability for learning disposition. In South Africa, there is a need for more educated black women, and lifelong learning can increase the chances of women to compete as equals in the workplace and households. All the women in the study said they had been empowered by higher education directly or indirectly. The women explained that they were able to deal with situations better and make decisions about their lives. They were able to gain employment and most of them were living middle-class to upper-class lives.

All these capabilities are stated as important for the employability of people in South Africa. This was revealed in the study conducted by Griesel and Parker (2009) in trying to find what skills the employers want from graduates.

According to Unterhalter (2005), higher education is essential for the development of human capabilities. Murphy-Graham (2012) adds that educated women are most likely to recognise the importance of health care and other basic capabilities. Although capabilities are important, the opportunities do not mean much without support structures to enable agency. Some of these influencing factors or conversion factors that affected the women's ability to act on the capabilities are discussed next.

### **6.2.2 Conversion factors**

As explained in chapter 3, conversion factors influence the way in which people convert their resources into opportunities or capabilities (Robeyns, 2005). Furthermore, conversion factors influence the way in which capabilities are converted into valued functionings. The conversion factors that had an impact in actualising the women's capabilities are explained below.

#### **Personal conversion factors**

Personal conversion factors encompass individual factors that influence the development and the achievement of valued functionings, such as intelligence, health and physical condition (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2009). Internal motivation, ambition, determination and self-discipline were the major conversion factors that ensured the success of the women in the

study. Okkolin's (2012) study on women in management positions in Tanzania showed similar results, indicating that the women who made it to top management were usually ambitious and resilient and they held a positive view of certain events which others might view negatively.

The above mentioned conversion factors help women not only throughout their higher education to overcome other negative conversion factors such as discrimination, but also to persevere in the workplace. Weber and Higginbotham (1995) have shown that black women who succeed in the workplace are those with great ambition and internal motivation to overcome their unequal treatment. While the factors of ability and personal motivation are vital for achieving capabilities in higher education, external factors also impede the capability of women.

### **Social conversion factors**

Social conversion factors include policies, social norms, class and race (Robeyns, 2005). Several positive and negative conversion factors emerged from the data.

#### ***Positive social conversation factors***

### **Family support**

Family support proved to play a big role in the success of the participants throughout their lives. The support from their family encouraged the women to endure tough times. One of the women explained that her mother took care of her daughter while she completed her studies. This finding is confirmed by Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) who indicated that women find it easier to progress through higher education when their family is supportive. However, in some cases, the families put too much pressure on the women to perform. One of the women chose to study Medicine to impress her family only to change to Psychology after having struggled with the former.

### **Socioeconomic factors**

Since most of the women were born into middle-class families, their parents could afford to pay for their university fees. Two of the women were restricted to studying in the Free State because of economical reasons; thus, the freedom of choice was taken away from them. One of the women who came from a low economic background received a government bursary even though it did not cover all her needs, it was sufficient for her basic needs. An

article by Tsiligiris, (2013) shows that most middle-class students struggle to pay their fees. The White Paper for Post-school Education (DHET, 2013:43) addresses issues of the affordability of universities. It explains that “fee-free university education for the poor in South Africa is feasible, but will require significant additional funding of both National Student Financial Scheme and the university system.” This system may increase the students’ freedom to go to a university of their choice without being restricted by finances. Since two of the students were restricted by finances to go to the university they would have preferred.

### ***Negative social conversion factors***

South Africa, like many other countries in world, is still being weighed down by patriarchal structures (Kabweila-Kapasula, 2009). However, attempts are made by means of the South African Constitution, the Gender Policy of 1996 and the Gender Bill of 2013 to establish the equality of women in all aspects of their lives. All the women in the study indicated that they were treated as equals to their male siblings when growing up. This finding differs from those of feminist theorists such as hooks (2000) and Frankel (2008), who showed that gender roles are still very prevalent in socialising children. The finding from my study, thus, points to a some what of a shift from the past when women and girls were primarily expected to be home makers. Interestingly, some of the women, mostly single women, expressed their belief in the value of a patriarchal culture. They held strong views about men being the head of the family and men and women performing different roles in the house. Social influence, mostly from the parents, is one of the main contributors to the single woman’s support of patriarchy. However, married women who expressed their belief in patriarchy did not experience any oppression from their husbands and even noted how their husbands supported them.

### **Environmental conversion factors**

Environmental conversion factors are those conversion factors related to the geographic location and physical environment of the women (Robeyns, 2005).

### ***Positive environmental conversion factors***

The South African Constitution (1996) states that every person has a right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being. All the women stayed in the university residences while pursuing their first degree. The data indicated that the women had support from the residences and it was easy for them to form friendships within these environments.

This environment also provided some of the women with the opportunity to engage in leadership positions. This is in line with the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (MWCPD, 2013: 5) which mentions that women should be in an education environment that “enables [them] to assimilate and develop knowledge, requisite skills and values.”

Entering the labour market was easy for all the women. The fact that six of the nine women worked as student assistants during their time at a higher education institution proved to play a fundamental role in their employment later in their lives. However, even those who did not work while studying did not have difficulty securing a job. These results support evidence by Teal (2011) and Schultz (2004) showing that people with higher education are more easily employed than those with lower education level. In addition, Borat (2000) indicates that, although unemployment has increased in South Africa between 1995 and 2005, people with higher education degrees continue to be more employable. The percentage of black graduates in the workplace has also increased.

Some women explained that their gender and race did not contribute to their job acquisition, while others explained that these issues might have played a role. Six of the women believed that affirmative action on the basis of gender helped them secure a job. The Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998 states that one of the main criteria of employment should be the qualification of a person while, at the same time, employees should hire qualified people from disadvantaged groups, of which women are a part. The Act also contains policies of affirmative action. My study shows that the efforts of affirmative action are slowly paying off, especially for the black educated women I interviewed.

### ***Negative environmental conversion factors***

#### **Gender**

Even though entering the workplace was not a challenge for all the interviewed women, keeping the job and progressing in the workplace did not come with great ease. Fifi explained that her capabilities to perform well at work were always questioned, resulting in her having to work extra hard to prove her competencies. This is similar to Karsten's (2006) findings that women have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to be taken seriously. Three of the women from this study worked at a higher education institution, which they described as being very patriarchal, with only a few females in management positions. A study by Marthur-Helm (2004) also confirmed that the labour market is still very patriarchal.

Results of this study support earlier work by Wolf (2013:11) who indicated that women suffer what he calls lookism from their male managers. This kind of discrimination was experienced more by women in male-dominated fields and those working for the government. Many writers have argued that women in the workplace are being harassed constantly but usually do not take this harassment seriously (Karsten, 2006; Mdyogolo, 2013, Wolf, 2013; Marthur-Helm, 2004). This is also evident in the current data, as Fifi explained that men in the workplace constantly verbally harassed her, but she did not do anything about it. Aya explained that she did not entertain the men who tried to offer her a high position for sexual pleasures, while Nezi quit her job because her hard work was not recognised; instead sexual favours were expected from her. It is clear that, although all the women had the capabilities to function in the workplace, their freedom to work efficiently was taken away from them. None of these women reported this behaviour because they assumed that nothing would change and they would be undermined if they reported such behaviour. Mdyogolo (2013) concurs that women hardly ever report harassment at the workplace and that they make excuses for such behaviour. Nussbaum (2001) refers to this as adaptive preferences to survive in the environment that one works in.

## **Race**

Owing to the past social ills of South Africa, race is viewed primarily as a negative conversation factor as most of the participants were discriminated against. As showed previously, racial discrimination within higher education is not unique to this study. Gibeney (2013) indicated that most of the black participants in his UK study experienced racial discrimination. An article from the University World News by Sehoole (2012: 1) also confirms the problem of racial discrimination in South African higher education institutions. He states that “racial discrimination and sexism were pervasive in many South African institutions.” In my study, the discrimination occurred mostly at master’s level, where students would not be granted access to study even though they met the minimum requirements. This finding goes against one of the main visions of the South African White Paper for Higher Education and Training (2013: 4), namely to create “a post-school system that can assist in building a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.” Some departments within higher education institutions are doing the complete opposite in discriminating against students because of their race, for example, allowing only one or two black students into a master’s program.

According to Statistics South Africa (2013), black women are still the minority group in the workplace. Similar to the findings of Gqola (2004), women who work at higher education institutions agree that white men still occupy the majority of senior positions in the work place. However, in government, there are more black people, but men still occupy most senior positions. Similar to the studies by Weber and Higginbotham (1995), some of the women were still receiving different treatment at work because of their race. They were considered last when it came to promotions and were expected to prove their competence more than their white colleagues. This, however, goes against the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996: 1251) which states that “[e]very one has the right to fair labour practices” and that no one should be treated unfairly because of their race.

Most of the women explained that the capabilities and functionings from higher education were further enhanced in the workplace; thus, allowing them to qualify for a better position in the workplace and to function better in the family. Gender and race proved to be both negative and positive conversion factors. In addition, the women’s agency helped them overcome the negative conversion factors and achieve their well-being.

### **6.2.3 Agency**

Agency is characterised by internally caused behaviour that is freely self-determined (Robeyns, 2005: 81). Thus, if people are agents of their own life, they could make decisions freely and affect their lives in a positive way. Agency is an important part of the capability approach, because it shows how people make their own decisions to reach their valued functionings.

Agency is seen as the freedom to bring about one’s achievements (Sen, 1992). The enhancement of one’s capabilities can expand one’s agency to achieve valued functionings. For example, if one has a capability for lifelong learning, one learns new things; even at times when others do not see the importance. This agency is identified by Griffin (2008) as allowing for an individual to freely deliberate, choose and act on what she views as a good life. Without this agency, it would be a challenge to bring about any actions that are required for a “moral and purposeful life” (Liao, 2010:16). Without agency, therefore, women would not have the choice to lead the kind of lives they value.

The capabilities that the women in my study gained we returned into functionings after they had left higher education to live the life of their choice. The women were able to deal with challenging situations at professional and personal levels in order to reach their goals. Aya and Thuli attributed their success in their personal lives to the capabilities and functionings acquired in higher education. Both said that the choices they made in both their personal and professional lives were influenced by their education. Kabeer (2012) posits that the empowerment of women consists of choices regarding access to resources, agency in decision making and achievement of valued outcomes. In capability terms, we could, therefore, say that women's empowerment consists of capabilities which will turn into functionings through agency and lead to women's achieving their well-being.

Although negative conversion factors such as race and gender prevented them from actualising some of their capabilities, the women showed great resilience and perseverance. All of them made a success of their lives, which points to the fact that their capabilities, agency and positive conversion factors out-weighed the negative conversion factors. Consequently, the women were able to live the lives they value.

#### **6.2.4 Intersectionality**

The study shows gender, race and cultural/religious intersectionality. The conversion factors stems from not only gender but a combination of race and gender. This is seen in many aspects of the women's lives. Within the workplace women are not promoted with easy due to their gender and race, as white people and males are seemingly still be preferred when it comes to promotions. However, the women explained that their race and gender helped them in job attainment, due to affirmative action. Although once they are in the job upward mobility is not easy.

Most women still believed in patriarchy because of religious or cultural reasons. They showed that in the household, the husband is still in charge and head of the house. We see here intersection of religion and gender. The women perform certain duties within the house because it is their duty as women. Although some women explained that it was their choice, one can argue that they have adopted their behaviour/ way of thinking due to social norms.

## **Conclusion**

The voices of black South African women have been silenced for a long time and their challenges have not always been considered. There are now policies in place to ensure that

black women are included in both higher education and the labour market. Yet, there has been a slow increase in the percentage of black women graduates entering the workplace. Even those women who succeed in entering the labour market still suffer racial and gender discrimination at times. It is evident from my study that the efforts of affirmative action are helping some women, although there is still a long way to go.

The data from the study indicated that the interviewed women did indeed gain capabilities from higher education which improved their agency both in their professional and personal lives. However, there were conversion factors within higher education, for example, racial discrimination, which limited the capabilities of the women. Nevertheless, as agents of their own lives, the women mostly overcame such challenges in pursuit of their well-being.

I argue that, if higher education institutions need to better understand and minimise the negative conversion factors that place limits on the extent to which these capabilities can be converted into functionings. They would be able to better deal with challenges that might emerge during the course of their lives. In this way, they would be one step closer to reaching what Robeyns explains as gender equality capabilities, which include respect, political empowerment, domestic work and non-market care and other capabilities.

The next section will conclude the study, giving a summary of the research questions and the limitations of this study.



## **CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a brief overview of the contributions of the previous chapters of the study, followed by the summary of the study's research questions and results. A general conclusion of the study will be drawn and this chapter will end with an overview of the limitations of the study, as well as the recommendations for further studies.

South Africa with its history of discrimination and inequalities entered a new era post 1994 with new legislation being implemented to ensure equality for all citizens. These changes brought about an increase of the number of black women in higher education; yet, this increase did not end discriminatory practices towards black women in higher education. Statistics concur that black women are still the minority in the workplace. In this dissertation, I argue that, by using the capabilities approach as a conceptual framework, one can begin to understand the capabilities with which black women are equipped when they leave higher education and whether these capabilities can be turned into functionings that they can use to reach their well-being. The next section gives a summary of the research questions and the findings that addressed each one.

### **7.1 Summary of research findings**

**Research question 1:** What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates regarding the professional and personal lives they have reason to value?

The findings of the study revealed that all the women gained capabilities that helped them make valued choices. The women were better able to make well-informed choices by investigating both positive and negative conversion factors. Nine developmental opportunities were identified as the capabilities that these women gained from higher education and found valuable in their lives. Nussbaum (2002) indicates the importance of women's literacy in order to ensure that women lead the lives they value. The women explained that having gone through higher education has aided them to be more empathic towards other people and have an interest in the world around them. Lifelong learning was one of the prominent capabilities that emerged from the study, with all the participants stating that they wanted to further their studies. All the women in the study had been able to find employment in less than six months of completing their degrees; this was particularly

interesting as the literature showed that this is not the norm for most black South African women. On the positive side, this might be a sign that the employment equity procedures are beginning to take effect. Owing to their disadvantaged state of womanhood and being black, these women are now foregrounded to increase their labour market representations. Having made use of the opportunities that were provided to them in higher education, the women became involved in leadership positions in higher education, which equipped them with interpersonal skills and other capabilities. The women acquired work experience while studying (e.g. tutoring) to attain the jobs of their choice after completing their studies. The women were able to deal with the challenges of being a mother, wife and employee, attributing this to the educational and social capabilities gained at higher education. One of the women also explained that, had she not gone to higher education, she would not have been able to have stimulating conversations with her husband. This shows that it is not only the capabilities gained in formal settings that women found valuable, but also those from social settings. Therefore, higher education equipped the women with the capabilities that they later turned into valued functionings to lead the lives they value. However, the capabilities they gained in higher education were, at times, not sufficient to overcome deeply ingrained social norms, such as the man being the head of the family and other traditional gender roles. These negative conversion factors limited their capabilities and functionings.

**Research question 2:** How does gender and race enable or constrain black women graduates' capability for work, including their career development, over time?

Gender and race were shown to be both positive and negative conversion factors when it came to career development. The women who wanted to be clinical psychologists commented that their race impeded their reaching that goal. The one woman who managed to be selected for a master's in Clinical Psychology also experienced racial discrimination despite her hard work. This suggests that equality laws are not implemented effectively in some universities.

However, most of the women stated that their race and gender were an advantage when it came to employment. The initiatives of affirmative action put them in a better position than males and white females; yet, the women were, at times, not treated with respect in the workplace and this impaired their abilities to function to their full potential. Aspects of the women's work environment were not conducive to the actualisation of their capabilities. Owing to their race, some of the women would be considered last for promotion and they had to prove themselves more than their white colleagues in order to be recognised. Gender discrimination towards women was also present in the workplace in the form of sexual

gestures made by male colleagues. Some women showed that race did not affect their career development, instead the hard work and determination helped them to grow in their careers.

In conclusion, gender and race in this study did, at times, constrain the women's capabilities for work and career development. However, most of the women showed great agency to achieve what they valued and they worked hard to achieve their valued goals despite the negative conversion factors.

**Research question 3:** Do black women graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

This question was not asked directly, but was derived from the women's stories. All except one woman did not make a choice to go to university, because it was an expectation from their parents or the normal route to take. However, for Xoli, this was a choice she made because she thought higher education would give her a better life. Nonetheless, all women had the freedom to choose what they wanted to study. Although their higher-education journeys differed, they all attributed their success to hard work and determination. The women showed great resilience through difficult situations and made sure they reached their goals. Family support was an important factor in the women's lives and they claimed that their families supported the decisions they made about their lives. For Nezi, quitting her job and being a full-time mother for her child proved fulfilling. Although she had held a good job, she chose to be a stay-at-home mother for three years after which she went back to work. All the married women explained that they have the freedom to be who they wanted to be and that their husbands supported their decisions. At times, cultural norms restricted the women's freedom to express themselves. All the women in the study explained that their hard work and determination were key in reaching their goals. Thus, in this study, black women had the agency to reach their goals. However, they did not always have the freedom to reach their goals due to external factors.

## **7.2 Conclusion**

The capabilities approach has helped me to conceptualise the life stories of these women by identifying the capabilities they acquired in higher education and seeing whether these capabilities could be turned into valued functionings. This addressed the issue of the degree of equality that women experience in the workplace and the contribution of their university education. The findings show that the acquisition of capabilities in higher education was, at

times, impaired because of environmental conversion factors such as using Afrikaans in an English class and racial discriminatory criteria in the selection of master's students. The capabilities that the women identified were applied in the workplace and women were able to function as agents of their own lives both in the workplace and personal life. The women did experience problems in the workplace which hindered their functionings. Nevertheless, the women never gave up and were; at most time, able to overcome those problems in order to reach their goals. Harassment of women in the workplace was a major conversion factor, showing that, in spite of the laws against this kind of discrimination, the implementation at the grass roots is still lacking. This, again, hinders the performance of women and their success in their careers. Seeing that the women in the study were able to do well and reach most of their goals, one could say that the capabilities and expansion of agency that they acquired through higher education helped them to deal with social problems better and come, a step closer to achieving their well-being.

The limitations of this study will be discussed next, followed by the recommendations for further studies.

### **7.3 Limitations**

The findings of this study should be considered with the following limitations:

- 1) Most participants studied and worked in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which are dominated by females. Only one participant was from a male-dominated field of study.
- 2) The women in the study were working in the public sector, with one woman being self-employed. Thus, this study does not show the perspectives of people working in the private, corporate sector.
- 3) If resources and time had allowed, women from a wider range of fields would have been interviewed. Because this was life-history research, the findings cannot be generalised to all black women graduates. However, this study brings out the voices of black women graduates and shows the need for more studies regarding the capabilities that black women graduates need in order to live a life they value.

### **7.4 Recommendations and further research areas**

The following recommendations for further research are based on the findings of this study:

- A longitudinal study that tracks the course of life of women after they have completed higher education to determine whether they are leading the lives they value. In this way, one could determine whether higher education has equipped them with the capabilities and agency to compete in the world around them despite many challenges they might come across.
- Research on higher education and gender studies, especially in the African region, to investigate how women are experiencing higher education both as students and employees.

#### Recommendations for practice

There is a need for the effective implementation of the rich legislations that South Africa has in place in order to ensure equality for all. All higher-education institutions should implement gender-specific policies to deal with gender issues. The implementation of non-discriminatory practices can bring about the enhancement of women's capability to function as agents in their own lives.

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## **Appendix A: Information sheet**

### **Research title**

Life histories of black women graduates: a capability approach

### **About the study**

This study is conducted as part of a Master's thesis in Higher Education at the University of the Free State.

This study aims to determine the life trajectories of black women graduates and determine how, if in any way, their higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally.

Fifty-seven percent of students enrolled in South African higher education institutes are women; but no statistics were found on black women. Regardless of this great numbers in higher education being women, there are still more men in the labour market.

For the purpose of the study the researcher will interview ten black women graduates who are located in Bloemfontein. These women could be of any age; nonetheless they must have a degree from a higher education institution in South Africa. The interviews will take place in September. The time and date of the interview will be arranged to suit the participants.

The research participants do not have to provide their real name, a pseudonym will be given in order to protect their identity. The participant can withdraw any time during the study. The data will be handled with care and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to data. All the audio recordings will be destroyed once the researcher has completed her study.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Regards

NtebohengMahlaha

[ntebza@gmail.com](mailto:ntebza@gmail.com)

If you agree to the participant research project, please sign on the consent form in order for us to continue with the interview.

Name and surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact details: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate agreement with the following statements.

- I have read the information regarding the project and I understand that I will be participating in a taped interview
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time
- I understand my data will be stored securely and that my anonymity will be preserved
- I consent for my data to be used as part of the research

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU ☺

## Appendix B: Research questions

**Title of study:** Life histories of black women graduates: a capabilities approach

**Aim/s:** This study aims to determine the life trajectories of black women graduates and determine how, if in any way, their higher education has equipped them with the capabilities to succeed both professionally and personally.

Research question 1: What contribution has higher education made to the capabilities and valued functionings of selected black women graduates regarding the professional and personal lives they have reason to value?

Interview questions:

Please tell me about your life before you went to university (where you come from, type of education you received before you came to university, family economic status).

What made you decide to go to university?(What influenced your decision?)

Which university did you go to? What made you decide to go to that university?

Did gender and race influence the decision to go to university X?

What did you study?

What made you choose to study that? Was this your childhood aspiration or was it something different?

If different from the field you chose, why did you venture into the field you ended up studying?

How would you explain your university life?

How were you performing academically? (Can you describe positive experiences? Can you give me examples? Can you describe any negative experiences? Can you give me examples?)

Did you have time for friends and family, and what did you do with your friends? Is there anything you felt you could not do with them because of university?

What about your experiences of co-curricular activities at university?

Which academic/professional skills did you gain from higher education?

Do you think you could have acquired those skills elsewhere had you not gone to university?

What knowledge did you gain? (How important is/has this knowledge been for you?)

Did you learn any social skills at university? Which social skills did you learn in higher education?

Do you think you could have acquired those skills elsewhere had you not gone to university?

What did you do after completing higher education? Is this what you wanted to do?

How prepared were you for the labour market? How did you go about finding a job?

What skills or knowledge did you have/lack?

Research question 2: How does gender and race enable or constrain black woman graduates' capability for work, including their career development, over time?

Interview questions:

Have you worked before?

The highest job position you have attained?

Do you have a job now?

What are the reasons why you are not working?

What is your current job title?

Do you think your gender/race has had an influence on your job title?

Do you think that you are treated equally at work when compared with the opposite sex?

What problem(s) do you think you have encountered in your work place? Would you say these problems are due to your race/gender?

Do you think gender has held you back or given you opportunities, and how?

Do you think race has held you back or given you opportunities, and how?

Do you prefer a male/female boss?

Who is your family mainly supported by?

Would you say the way you were socialised had an influence on your perception of gender roles?

Research question: Do black woman graduates have the agency and freedom to achieve what they value both professionally and personally?

Interview questions:

Are you in the profession that you have always wanted to be?

If not, what was your dream?

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

What will you do to ensure that you achieve these goals?

If you had the freedom to choose, what life would you choose/what would be a good life for you?