



## Research article

# The lived experiences of postgraduate female students at the University of Kwazulu Natal, Durban, South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

Gender and educational equality have been extensively debated by scholars in South Africa, researchers have failed to capitalize on why enthusiastic postgraduate female students have a higher dropout rate than their male counterparts. This study has capitalized on this vacuity, via a phenomenological lens, to examine the challenges experienced by female postgraduate students at University of KwaZulu-Natal. This study presents the lived experiences of ten female postgraduate honours students from University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2017. The study sought to research the learner's impetus to pursue postgraduate studies and the limitations eminent during the process. The ostensive constraints acknowledged by participants have seeped in socio-cultural beliefs rooted in traditional and religious affirmations, financial impediments and balancing their educational pursuit with traditional role expectations within their gendered familial domain. This study advances the requirement to critique the socio-cultural principles that impede females' succession in postgraduate studies while simultaneously engaging in discourse on the concealed practices in higher educational institutions separating students based on gender.

## 1. Introduction

Education in South Africa is no longer a privilege reserved for an elite few. It is a constitutional right for all irrespective of race, gender, and ethnicity. Section 29 (1) of the South African Constitution, Act 108 1996, did not only emphasises the right to basic education, but it also recognises the right to further education, "which the state through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Subsequently, the government through reformative policies strives to meet the mounting demand for quality higher education, specifically amongst the historically marginalized. This has become significant against the backdrop that access to higher education as elucidated by UNESCO (2004), necessitates upholding unbiased inclusion built on excellence, competence, effort, and fortitude.

While education used to be an exclusive privilege of the elite, it is gaining prominence on the international policy agenda as a tool for social justice and economic development (UNESCO, 2004). Morley (2011) argued that it is important that higher education adopt a structured approach that will raise aspiration and widen participation. The more

accessible higher education becomes, the effective the strategies and policies targeted at addressing social and economic inequalities within nations.

The development of higher education in South Africa is shaped by both international development and local imperatives. Dison et al. (2008) argued that globalization and the activities of international agencies have a significant impact on the nature and development of education across various parts of the globe. For example, Carnoy et al. (1999) noted that the International Monetary Fund structural adjustment policy cut public sector spending, and this subsequently led to a reduction in governments' funding of education across most countries. Furthermore, globalization through neo-liberal economic policies has positioned education as an essential tool for social mobility. The value of higher education is linked to its roles in enhancing national economic competitiveness (Lebeau, 2008; Singh, 2001). Some of the factors discussed thus far are peculiar global exigencies affecting education across the globe. It, however, does not trivialize the presence of local peculiarities. The next section discusses some of the internal factors that have shaped education in South Africa.

One of the most debated factors that shaped education and is shaping

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the reformation agenda of education in South Africa is apartheid. Researchers are concerned with the impact of apartheid on the structure of education in democratic South Africa. The fundamental flaws of an apartheid society necessitate the re-examination of a racially classified unequal education system. Amidst the transformation agenda in democratic South Africa; educational policies, funding, structural redress, capacity building, and equity are all fundamental issues that need to be addressed (Banga-Chhokar, 2010). The unique racialized experiences of South Africa combined with a necessity to address the apertures generated by apartheid and a global reformative gender agenda provides the impetus for a study of this nature. The call for restructuring higher education with a focus on racial and gender equity has become a priority for key stakeholders in South Africa. Odhav (2009) expounded that, despite the transition from apartheid to democracy, higher education institutions continue to face copious challenges. The demographics of most universities postgraduate education programs are evidence that women are still a minority in higher education. The underrepresentation of women in postgraduate education is often linked to various socio-cultural stereotypes. World Bank (1998) noted that some socio-cultural factors place women far below men in educational attainment, social status, and vocational operations; some of these socio-cultural factors include pressure for marriage and childbearing at certain ages, domesticating women's responsibility.

Apartheid institutionalized segregation and inequality among races in South Africa. This resulted in an expansive gap between non-white and white; privilege and wealth was a reserve for white South Africans. Perhaps, it is within this multifarious, segregated arrangement that the predicament of the South African women is located. Beyond apartheid, the underrepresentation of women in higher education is attributed to socio-cultural dominant in patriarchal systems (Ojedele and Oyekan, 2015). Assié-Lumumba (2006) and Aluko (2005), asserted that some cultural and traditional factors were impediments to women's educational success. In 2011, Patricia Johnson studied women's access to higher education in Tanzania and she identified cultural and social influences hinged on traditional notions that women are responsible for caring; however, such practices have reduced women's role to reproductive labour requiring little or non-formal education (Johnson, 2011).

According to Alao (1998), cultural and traditional practices promoting gender stereotypes have produced competition between men and women. Most societies across Africa are patriarchal and this implies that it is generally believed that a woman's role is majorly domesticated and such requires little or no formal education. Aluko (2005), argued that traditional responsibilities placed on women as wives and mothers limit their chances of attaining higher education. Coupled with this, is discriminatory employment policies restricting women directly or indirectly to lower-paying jobs (Aluko, 2005). These are some of the eminent challenges discussed in the literature as an impediment to women's continuous educational pursuits. However, it should be noted that increasing the participation of women in postgraduate education is not without challenges.

With the significant increase in the number of girls enrolled in higher institutions and subsequently the evening of gender disparities in the demographic compositions of most institutions in South Africa (Education Statistics, 2019), it is important to highlight that these efforts continue to be limited and handicapped by various socio-cultural factors (Shackleton et al., 2006). It is therefore observable from the literature that the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of women within societies affect their desires and aspirations for seeking and completing postgraduate education. This, therefore, imply that women who enrol in postgraduate education are daily confronted with various issues and challenges that tend to undermine their efforts. It is therefore important for all stakeholder within the educational sector and society at large to understand that increasing access of women to postgraduate education will require that the challenges they encounter in the process be identified and dealt with to really provide a genuinely equitable platform for women to pursue postgraduate education like their male counterpart. In

this regard, this study sought to understand the challenges women face in pursuing higher education to come up with ways in which some of these issues can be addressed and a more enhanced platform can be given to women in their pursuit of education. As Morley et al. (2009) argued, education is a platform for acquiring information, critiquing dominant knowledge and developing capacity as an active member of society. Considering the enormous contribution of education to the capacity of the individual, it becomes important that addressing gender disparity at all levels of education be engaged as a serious debate to promote inclusiveness and true transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopted an explorative qualitative method. This was designed to identify key concerns affecting the advancement of postgraduate females in higher education. Moreover, the common objective of most qualitative research is to understand human action and behaviour from the subjective perspective of the participants (Ormston et al., 2014). Its narratives are rich and valuable in describing human experiences of any given phenomenon. Crix (2004, 199), refers to qualitative research as a process that "involves an in-depth investigation of knowledge." It is also a phenomenological study because it relied on the lived experiences of these postgraduate students to develop its robust narratives of their challenges. According to Lewis (2015), phenomenology is an approach that allows the researcher to engage the lived experiences of the participants with regard to a specific social issue. This study relied on these very robust participatory approaches to engage female postgraduate students on the challenges they might be experiencing.

The principal instrument employed for data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews. This semi-structured interview schedule guided the interview process that lasted for a maximum time of 60 min and a minimum of 20minutes in some other cases. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) see semi-structured interviews as a one on one conversation without strong elements of formality. This semi-formal approach allowed the researcher to ask questions relating to the research and gave the participants an opportunity to speak about their postgraduate journey without restriction. The interviews were conducted among purposively selected female postgraduate honours students who did not complete their degree within the 'record time'<sup>1</sup> at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit participants amongst the female postgraduate honours students. Picciano (2004), defined a purposive sampling technique as one where a researcher uses his/her own judgment to select a population that reflects an important aspect of the research. Female postgraduate students that were considered suitable were approached based on the subjective selection criteria and the intent of the study. These included the fact that female postgraduate students who have failed to complete their degrees within the university stipulated timeframe was considered the most suitable sample for the study. The sample included ten female honours students that had struggled with the completion of their honours degree. Locating the participants was not problematic due to the familiarity with the academic terrain<sup>2</sup>. Although participants were purposefully selected, their participation in the study was voluntary. The participants were from colleges of the institution and consisted of two Indian and eight black females postgraduate honours students. Of these ten participants, six participants were from the College of Humanities and four were from the College of Health Sciences. Anonymity and confidentiality of all participants were ensured and as such pseudonyms were used in compiling the research report. The ethical approval to conduct this study was provided by the University of

<sup>1</sup> This imply that students who do not complete their degrees within the university stipulated time frame were formed the participants for the study.

<sup>2</sup> All the researcher currently worked as academics within the University of KwaZulu-Natal as at the time the study was conducted.

KwaZulu-Natal's Ethics committee. Furthermore, prior to the interview sessions, the purpose of the study was read out clearly to participants and written informed consent was provided. Participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of the study and were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any point without condition or penalty. Each participant signed a copy of the informed consent.

Thematic content analysis was used to make sense of the transcripts and fieldnotes. According to Bryman (2004, 181), thematic content analysis is "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner." Transcripts from the interviews were organized using the computer software program-Nvivo-, after which recurrent patterns and conceptual issues were identified and developed into themes that formed the basis for the analysis.

### 3. Results and discussion

Daniella Coetzee's (2001) arguments on South African education and the ideology of patriarchy provide a very relevant empirical framework for studying and understanding gender inclusion at South African higher institutions especially women's progression into post-graduate education. Coetzee's arguments highlight that attempts at gender inclusion in education in South Africa has only accommodated women at the surface because of deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies embedded and (re) produce across different social structures within the country. These patriarchal ideologies create a *hypernorm* that puts men in a privileged position at the detriment of women who are often domesticated. Patriarchy is exclusionary and feeds on asymmetric power relations between genders. To maintain this *hyperpower* and continual domination over the *others*, certain strategies and measures are adopted. These include perpetuating norms that domesticate women and perceives them as not needing to be advanced in formal education because they are 'meant to be wives, mothers, nurturers, and caregivers among *others*.' The narratives of participants in this study further reiterate arguments patriarchal ideologies within families and reflected amidst salient practices across institutions within society limits women's life chances.

The analysis of the experiences of the participant's academic journey unveils various reasons as to why females fail to complete postgraduate education at an honours level. These spans through various gender stereotypes discouraging women directly or indirectly from pursuing postgraduate education, financial constraints, and the influence of various social capitals. These factors are discussed in detail in the next section.

#### 3.1. The rationale for a postgraduate degree

The choice of a postgraduate programme as the foci for this study was borne out of a dire need to understand the probable factors for the completion rate at postgraduate levels for female students. According to the Department of Science and Technology (DST) (2005, 4) report, "approximately 70% of all honours students are retained up to their third year after the first enrolment (i.e. have completed or are in the process of completing)". The corresponding attrition rate is 30% (DST, 2005). This pattern has not changed significantly from honours cohorts reported from 2001 to 2007. Of the 70% of postgraduate students that are still in the system after a reasonable period, only two-thirds typically graduate within five years. Thereafter, further increases in completion are marginal. It is clear that a lacuna is created at the very foundation of postgraduate education in South Africa, which affects the progression of female students to a master level. The challenge is that previously disadvantaged sectors are susceptible to late completion of the degree or incomplete degrees. Levinsohn et al. (2014), argued that historically privileged groups remain advantaged, therefore, the need to examine racial colorations in the dissection of social concerns across various

higher education institutions is essential. It is evident that the decisions to register for a postgraduate programme are borne out of either a passion for a course of study or unemployment-induced frustration. This study has revealed that there are two categories of postgraduate students among the participants in this study;

- (a) On the one hand, there are postgraduate students who willingly and unconditionally embarked on their postgraduate studies. These individuals enrolled at this level of study because of the passion they had for the area of study. Only one Indian participant in the study revealed that enrolment was borne out of enthusiasm and passion for furthering her education. Apart from personal commitment, the student also declared parental support as a booster. According to participant Jane:

I have always desired to get a doctorate degree hence I discovered there is the need for me to love education and go beyond just a normal degree. Apart from my personal interest, my parents have been supportive. My parents have been very instrumental in my journey for postgraduate studies. I have a father who always tells me how proud he would be for him to train me to the doctoral level and a mother who wishes her daughter success at all costs. Hence, I wouldn't have any choice than to embrace their very realistic and beneficial goals for my success.

- (b) On the other hand, there are a set of postgraduate students who enrolled in postgraduate programmes based on previous experience with unemployment. These individuals are the majority. Six of the eight black female participant's decision to embark on postgraduate studies was borne out of frustration as a result of unemployment. In the past decade, graduate unemployment has been on increase in South Africa. With one of the highest number of unemployed graduates in the face of skills shortages. Oluwajodu et al. (2015) reported that unemployment amongst young South Africans is unacceptably high and is increasing. Younger black people are likely to experience unemployment compared to young white people. Unemployment in South Africa has race-related implications with a higher number of black youth being affected (Oluwajodu et al., 2015; Levinsohn et al., 2014). According to 'Thobile':

Having stayed at home for more than two years I realised I had to do something. So, I won't say I willingly enrolled for a postgraduate programme. I did because I could not get a job. My thinking is that a postgraduate degree could be an added advantage when searching for a job in the future.

Further substantiating unemployment as a motivation for postgraduate studies, 'Lwazi' noted that:

A postgraduate degree will give me more opportunities than an ordinary degree that is very common. The thing with our country is that so many people have degrees, so it becomes very difficult and competitive for you to get a job. You need to get additional qualifications and skills that make you unique to the employer and reduce potential competitors.

Hence, it is observable that enrollment for a postgraduate degree could be strongly motivated by any of the factors discussed above. However, it became evident that the completion and drop-out ratios among postgraduate students may be affected by the initial motivation for the study. Students who are passionate about advancing their academic careers are often more motivated to get through the challenges of a postgraduate degree.

### 3.2. Gender stereotypes and their implication for female's higher education pursuit

The role of gender-based challenges within the institution and how social responsibilities aligned with the female gender impedes or fosters the pursuit of higher education is one that became very important during this study. This section also examines how black female postgraduate students cope with gender stereotypes and their impact on the perceived completion of their studies. It was identified that gender stereotypes were perceived contrarily by participants. The questions administered engaged stereotypes in three categories; 1) stereotypes that existed within the university; 2) Stereotypes that are enshrined within the normative casing of society towards the postgraduate education of a woman; and 3) Stereotypes relating to the capability and capacity of women. The study revealed no specific discrimination against women within the institution; as all participants said they did not face any gender-based challenges. According to Nonku, "There is no apparent gender-based discrimination in the university. Men are not placed above women. So, I do not think there are gender-based challenges. I think both males and females are given equal opportunities." Five of the participants, however, were concerned that disciplines were gendered, certain disciplines were dominated by men and others by women. According to 'Sne': "I think we do have equal opportunities. However, I think disciplines are gendered. It's like some courses are for men and others for women." It was apparent that the socio-cultural expectations of women within the larger society could be a contributing factor to the gender demographics of various courses within the university.

Eight participants noted that there were discriminating socio-cultural expectations influencing women's education which impeded the early completion of a postgraduate degree, according to 'Seko': "... I think the social pressure of marriage could impede women's pursuit of education." This was also corroborated by 'Watu': "While there seems to be no specific gendered experience within the University, it is prevalent within the larger society." Narratives and lived experiences by the participants are quite similar to the submissions of the [World Bank \(1998\)](#) report. According to the report, socio-cultural stereotypes have the tendency to influence educational attainment and limit women's progression within the educational sector. Aside from the subjugation of women's role culturally, contemporary institutional demographics reveal that more women enroll in administrative-managerial disciplines that cannot be divorced from the socio-cultural responsibilities performed by women ([Harris et al., 2009](#)). Similarly, 'Abongile' noted that the explanations for the poor representation of females at the postgraduate level and their inability to complete their degrees can be linked to gender roles within society.

I feel that the social responsibilities and expectations of marriage could affect women's education. As a woman, there is pressure on you when you are getting married. This usually puts an unnecessary burden on those who respect traditions and culture, and this may affect completion and progression. It is prevalent in our society that as a woman you need to be married before a certain age. This is what I am going through as I speak to you. It's killing.

The influence of various socio-cultural responsibilities and expectations continues to affect female's pursuit of postgraduate education as another participant 'Rebecca' corroborated:

No gender-based challenges within the university. But this is Africa and girls are expected to get married and have babies at a certain age... it is like a custom. It is taboo for a 25-year-old not to be married. It becomes problematic when all your friends are married, and you are the only one pursuing some degrees. Society pities you for not getting married at a certain age.

The reasons why some women face grave challenges in their completion according to 'Nqobile' is deeply engraved in socio-cultural

expectations. She opined that:

I may be wrong, but I think ..... for women getting older, you need to get married, you need to have children, all these are what society tells you that you need to do that's why I think females pull out. They have family responsibilities, children, and family. So, more men progress because they don't have such responsibilities like getting pregnant, having children, and taking care of them.

The responses above, indicate that all participants agreed there are no internal gender-based challenges at the University of KwaZulu-Natal; believing there are equal opportunities to learn and complete their degrees. However, three other participants noted that while there were no specific cases of gender stereotypes, disciplines within the institution reflect divisions along gender lines; men dominate some disciplines while others are dominated by women. Furthermore, the recurrent issue for four participants in the fact that social responsibility or gender roles are one of the factors limiting females' pursuit and progression in higher education. Females believe society has defined when to get married and non-conforming behavior is considered deviant. Therefore, the need to conform to societal norms pressurizes women to abandon the pursuit of education in pursuit of marriage and family. Social responsibility is prioritized over an educational pursuit. Lwazi mentioned that: "friends feel pity for them hearing they had plans to pursue a Ph.D. and even come up with assertions that 'no man will want to marry a woman with a Ph.D.'" The constant strife between traditional responsibilities expected from women and advancement in postgraduate education is a core area of interest that should be properly managed for women to partake fully in advancing their educational goals. Social stigmatization of higher education for women is reinforced via stereotypes hinged on the social roles of women, which are detrimental to their success at a postgraduate level ([Assié-Lumumba; 2006](#); [Aluko, 2005](#); [Johnson, 2011](#)).

### 3.3. Financial constraints as an impediment to the completion of higher education

The experience of a South African woman pursuing a postgraduate degree is complex and divergent. Though there seems to be a positive attitude towards educating the girl child, the extent to which they should be invested in varies and is dependent on various factors-finance, opportunity, commitment to education and support. By examining participants' families' perceptions of education, it has been established that families largely desire education for their girl children, however, the cost of securing education becomes challenging as 'Nonku' emphasized;

my parent's value education and they use to encourage me and my siblings to take our studies seriously. And they are very proud of me for studying for a postgraduate degree, but the cost of postgraduate education is usually discouraging. You hear them make funny comments like so we're paying this much for you to do four courses in a semester (laughs...).

Furthermore, 'Abongile' noted that the perception of the family cannot be detached from the level of commitment and involvement they put in concerning the education of their children. According to Abongile: "I grew up around those that believe in education and they push you to get educated. My mum believes so much in education and had always planned my future for me." While higher education may be a desired commodity, for many, the cost often scares parents and family members from investing in women. 'Seko' noted that: "Well...my parents wanted me to be educated but I don't think to the point of a postgraduate degree because of the financial implications though later they had to understand." Participants noted that bursary opportunities, grants, and scholarships are among the various avenue they secure financial support. Sne narrated; "I applied for funding several times, when I wanted to proceed to honours, NSFAS was also very helpful in my undergraduate years. Most of my friends could not continue after undergrad because their

parents could not afford it and they did not get any scholarships. But after the period of the funding elapsed and I had not completed my degree, reality set in and I had to struggle to survive" Illustrating the importance of sponsorship platforms or having income source 'Watu' corroborated;

...it is very challenging to secure these scholarships. It is quite painful that only the brightest of us get them and those that are average and cannot compete for these scholarships might have to forfeit their dream of postgraduate education. I have relied on student employment around campus as an opportunity to make ends meet and assist my parents.

Alabi and Durowaiye (2017), opined that various financial platforms have assisted female students in securing postgraduate education in South Africa, however, it is very competitive and cannot meet the needs of all students hence, platforms for student employment should become increasingly important.

The responses speak to the challenges faced when studying for a postgraduate degree because investing in education is challenging. The norm that, a university degree is sufficient to secure employment and assist families financially is slowly eroding in light of free education. However, family members who have historically been denied access to education at all levels do not support educating a girl child to the postgraduate level. Any woman expressing an interest in pursuing a postgraduate degree after the first-degree dependent on family sponsorship is considered inconsiderate, unrealistic and the request will be seen as a futile undertaking. Johnson (2011), explained that socio-cultural expectations of women as caregivers and homemakers have reduced women's roles in the domestic arena. An area wherein skills are developed and learned via the process of socialization and do not require formal training in order to execute them. Alabi and Durowaiye (2017), opined that finance is a major impediment to the completion of higher education among South African post-graduate students, hence, the provisions of such a germane resource are fundamental to the success of women in higher education.

### 3.4. Social capital and success in higher education

Social capital is an important factor not only in the enrolment but progression and completion of postgraduate studies. Social capital is usually used to describe the results of social relationships formed by reciprocal exchanges between members of social, religious, and political organizations, or other social networks (Stone, 2001). Social support consists of 'actual' and 'perceived' support. The actual support is the support an individual receives in terms of what is said, given, and done for the individual. Perceived support is referred to an individual's belief that social support is available; it is generally considered positive or negative and provides what is considered needed by that individual (see Abdullahi et al., 2015, 56). House et al. (1981) outlined four broad types of social support: i) Informational support involving the provision of relevant and adequate information, education, or guidance for use in managing personal health-related problems. ii) Instrumental support is of tangible support. It involves the provision of tangible or real assistance in the form of financial aid, materials goods, labour, time or any direct help. iii) Emotional support involves the provision of empathy, affection, love, trust, encouragement, listening, and love by members of an individual's social network. iv) Appraisal support involves the number of social relationships and individual has with others that have mutual interests. It is also called affiliative support. Social support can be collapsed into institutional and family supports.

Elkind and Sweet (2004) concluded that agents within various social systems-teachers, administrators, custodians, parents, service delivery agents-are crucial in modeling the behaviors of students. It begins with the way they talk, behave, conduct, and encourage students. The feedback students receive from this set of people daily shapes their perception of social issues. 'Rebecca' believes that females have a way of hating on

themselves: "There are no gender-based challenges just that when you need something men are more willing to help than women. Women just have a way of hating on themselves." It is interesting to note how this student feels about what shapes the perceptions of female staff about other women. The support students receive at all levels is important to the accomplishment of their goals and the completion of their programme. These support systems include emotional encouragement given from family and friends, how financial needs are met and the influences that structures surrounding them provide. Student's educational outcome is related to the level of parental involvement and support (Fan and Chen, 2001; Hill and Tyson, 2009). The role of parental involvement with emotional support goes beyond enhancing students' academic performance to regulating their behavior. Parental involvement does not necessarily predict academic achievement, it did, however, predict a decline in problematic behavior (see Mc Cormick et al., 2013). The views of participants on their perception of the emotional support they receive from home and within the university are succinctly discussed. When participants were asked about emotional support from their family in pursuit of a honours degree, 'Nqobile' said: "...it does not exist at home. At home, basically, you just get on with life, it's always been like that. Higher education for me is about passing and getting what you want in life. I am self-motivated." Nqobile's journey is testament to the experiences of several women motivating and encouraging themselves through school, her adventure in the university has been about her personal goals. Her family is not committed to providing emotional support and do not fully understand the role it plays in influencing her success. A follow up into the reasons why the participant concluded that emotional support is nonexistent in her case, the researcher asked about her family's perception of education and 'Nqobile's' response provided deep insight:

...will say because my mum is educated she's more open-minded even though she's not encouraging it, kind of like you have to do what you have to do to get what you want so it's kind of like go to the university, get your degree and go and work, but with the rest of my family members because most of them I will say roughly 80% of my family members are not educated so if you are dealing with those people they are very narrow-minded, they are not open-minded so it's like she's studying. It isn't a big deal for them. Respondent Nqobile

Social capital within and outside the familial setting is important to completing a honours degree among women. Frequently, the value a family places on education determines the extent to which they are supportive and emotionally committed to women in higher education. The norm for an educational journey is to enroll, get a degree and gain meaningful employment to contribute to the family's survival; or take on the financial responsibilities of educating other siblings. When a need or desire for postgraduate education ensues, Beker's (1993) human capital factors become crucial in deciding if a male or female child is the most profitable person to invest in. This choice is guided by who is most likely to succeed, gain meaningful employment and produce a higher economic return for the wealth of the family. In most cases because of the reality of marriage, a woman is most often perceived as a temporary member of the kin that will migrate with time into another home via marriage, hence, it is not wise to invest much in her education. The pursuit of postgraduate education for a female is peculiar in a highly patriarchal society where the expectations of women remain largely unchanged 'Abongile' stated:

females pursuing postgraduate degrees to PhD levels are considered strange; in fact, friends feel pity for them because they believe at a particular age you are expected to be married and with this degree, getting a spouse will be difficult ... I feel the social responsibilities and expectations of marriage and all affect women's education. For girls at home they will ask you after you are 25...whom are you going to marry? So, it's prevalent, you have the feeling that you need to be a married woman before an educated woman at a certain age. Respondent Abongile.

'Jane' corroborates the fact that social responsibilities cannot be isolated from the experiences of being a woman:

...This is Africa and girls are expected to get married and have babies...it's like a custom. A woman more than 25 that is not married becomes more like a challenge. The social pressure is still very dominant. Sometimes it's like shocking all your friends are married and they feel sorry for you and pity you for not been married so marriage has more benefits for them than getting educated.

Patrikakou (2008, 1) identified that parental involvement measured is based on the perception of emotional support from family as follows; "Parent involvement is a crucial force in children's development, learning and success at school and in life. Decades of research in the area of family involvement have time and again supported the simple fact that children of involved parents have a much greater chance of growing into a healthy, knowledgeable and caring adult." The importance of parental involvement through emotional support in children's academic pursuits cannot be overemphasized; the emotional involvement varies as children progress from one level of education to another. The South African situation is however more complex as the dissolution of the family system is on the increase and the traditional perception of 'parent' is being eroded (Ziehl, 2001).

Green et al. (2007) noted that the varying forms of parental involvement start from issues as simple as; "how was school today", to daily checking and signing off homework completion to regular visits to the library, museum, cultural and arts events to participating in program evaluation and other decision-making activities. All the activities are crucial when trying to build a sense of involvement in children at an early stage in their educational journey. Nevertheless, as children progress through life, the expectation they have begins to grow; they tend to value simpler issues and really count these issues as important to how people perceive them. It begins with the attitudes parents display towards their interest in pursuing a higher degree to the regular calls placed to them just to check on how they are faring with schoolwork. These acts of care from family is encouraging, 'Seko' noted; "They think highly of education and encourage myself and my siblings to take our studies seriously. And they are very proud of me for studying for a postgraduate degree." Parental involvement is crucial and important but might not be experienced by every student; Patrikakou (2008) noted that barriers to parental involvement include the following: a) Time and life demands; b) Lack of knowledge of what is expected of them and in what specific ways they can help their children at home and; c) Various factors in the school environment. For parents who have not been emotionally supportive to their children, working towards transformation around the following factors would be very effective.

#### 4. Conclusion

Socio-cultural, patriarchal beliefs and financial constraints are among the greatest impediments to women's successful participation and completion of postgraduate degrees. This reaffirms fundamental views prevalent in the existing literature on key factors impeding women's access and completion of postgraduate education (World Bank, 1998; Aluko, 2005; Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Johnson, 2011; Adeniran, 2008). Gender roles, socio-cultural and patriarchal expectations and responsibilities alongside hetero-normative gender orientation are connected factors affecting the successful pursuit of higher education for women in South Africa. It is against this background that addressing the myriads of challenges besetting women's advancement and completion of postgraduate education should be prioritized. Findings from this study lend itself to key conclusions; one of which is that the girl child should be encouraged and supported at an early stage on their academic journey. Campaigns on the girl child and women should become increasingly visible at a grassroots level encouraged by parents, friends, family and community members and the society at large to pursue education to its

highest levels. The accentuating motivation for enrolling in postgraduate studies, completion and drop-out rates can be dramatically altered if priorities are set right and education to any level desired is seen as a primary right of everyone irrespective of gender. There are essentially two reasons why people choose to further their education 1) for the passion and zeal to acquire advanced education and; 2) because of experiences of unemployment. Studies have found that socio-cultural factors exert significant influences on women's access to higher education and their persistence in advancing. The role of culture and societal expectations for women is deeply rooted in daily historical patriarchal practices, norms, and other institutionalized practices.

The study correspondingly found that institutional and familial support are crucial to women's pursuit of higher education. This level of involvement serves as a foundation for the development of interest and a desire for academic pursuit and completion. Patrikakou (2008), noted that parents must get involved in their children's education; they must show concern, care and support them emotionally. The significance of this narrative is that the social capital of women is important in the attainment of a postgraduate degree. The financial impediments students face are of major concern to key stakeholders in education and the economic need of historically marginalized women within the South African society must be attended to. Adeniran (2008) identified that socio-economic exigencies impact greatly on the educational pursuit of students and this study further opines that education is an economically taxing adventure that should be subsidized by the government, so all can partake. The conclusions reached in this study are context-driven but could have global implications on how gender is theorised in education.

#### Declarations

##### Author contribution statement

Oluwatobi Alabi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

Mariam Seedat-Khan, Ali Abdullahi: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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##### Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

##### Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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