

# ENGENDERING CHANGE: FEMINIST CONSIDERATIONS OF ONLINE CONFERENCING AS A SAFE SPACE IN THE NARRATIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA WOMEN ACADEMICS DURING COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

The digitisation of education that has deliberately reformed the pedagogical practices of tertiary education in the 21st century, rapidly transformed all aspects of academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic conferences, as traditional sites of embodied knowledge production, were also impacted and virtual conferences were quickly adopted as socially responsible alternatives. As a component of contemporary academic work, conferencing is meant to foster networks of community and support deep learning but are most often criticised as sites that reproduce prevalent discriminatory academic hierarchies. The most common observations in gender analysis of conferencing report on inequalities of representation and the absence of women in key roles. As organisers of the Southern African Student Psychology Conference (SASPC), we explore our experiences organising our first online conference in the context of the pandemic. Unfortunately, very few researchers have considered the representative space of online forms of conferencing, and to date none reflect the experiences of women academics from South Africa. This article aims to extend these examinations of the gendered nature of academic conferencing by utilising Empowerment Theory (ET) to understand narrative reflections from three women academics and organisers of an online Southern African conference. Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) served as a critical emancipatory tool for collectively gathering counter stories of our internalised oppression as marginalised women academics. Consequently, this article explicates the gendered dynamics of academia, as well as sustainable pedagogical possibilities for change that is

engendered by technology through online spaces as important sites of agency and resistance.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, higher education, online, women academics, Southern African Student Psychology Conference, collaborative autoethnography

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated change in various domains of life and necessitated major transformations in many sectors, including higher education. Mandated social distancing measures essentially forced rapid changes from the traditional method of face-to-face learning towards online distance e-learning (ODeL) in order to maintain student and staff access to academic programs. As these virtual interactions became our new reality, academic conferences moved into online spaces as well. Online or virtual academic conference reformations offer both challenges and opportunities for inclusive reform, which have been explored and documented by researchers (Bray et al. 2022, 7; Newman 2021, 493; Pedaste and Kasemets 2021, 92–104; Reinhard, Stafford, and Payne 2021, 171–185; Woodruff et al. 2021, 127–128), albeit of a limited scope due to the relatively new emergence of the phenomenon. Notably, of the research studies concerning the impact of changes in academic conferencing brought about by the pandemic, very few focus on gender equality considerations, despite the disproportionate effects felt by women during that time (Górska et al. 2021, 1546–1561; Kalia et al. 2020, 2). To date, none focus on the experiences of women academics from the global South or more specifically, South Africa.

In this article, we prioritise our gendered experiences as women academics organising the first online Southern African Students' Psychology Conference (SASPC). To follow, we discuss literature on evolving academic identities and the context of gendered identities in the global South, while considering critical conference studies and feminist perspectives on spaces of academic conferencing acting as sites of access and empowerment. We then further explicate our use of Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) as an emancipatory methodology. Thereafter, we analyse our narratives as informed by Empowerment Theory (ET), a theoretical orientation that relies on empowerment and counter spaces (Ammari et al. 2022; Raymond and Canham 2022, 992) to facilitate understandings of the experiences and identities formed in online safe spaces, in particular the complexities faced by women in academia. By exploring the gendered dynamics of traditional academic spaces and conference communities, we aim to envision pedagogical possibilities for sustainable change that are engendered by online spaces as important sites of agency and resistance.

## **EVOLVING ACADEMIC IDENTITIES**

As cited by El-Soussito (2022, 100139), James Gee states that identity, or the state of a person's "being" at a specific time and place, can change according to different contexts. Churchman and King (2009), as cited in Smith et al. (2022, 1291), define academic identity, or sense of self as an academic, as based on a professional role that includes activities such as teaching, research and administrative tasks. Establishing a professional identity plays a pivotal role in the success of an academic, but that identity formation is dependent on many contextual variables, such as personal subjectivities, professional knowledge and expertise, as well as social and cultural expectations (El-Soussito 2022, 100139). Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the move to online spaces, academic identities in cyberspace became an additional contextual variable to consider (Almpanis and Joseph-Richard 2022, 100133). Academics, who had previously shaped their professional identities according to their professional contexts, have now had to revise these identities as their pedagogical beliefs and practices shift to online spaces. Although accelerated by the pandemic, academic virtual identities have been formed for some time now (Okdie et al. 2011, 153–159; Suler 2002, 455–459), as higher education has migrated to online learning and conferencing.

Despite many contextual and systemic challenges encountered, the higher education system in South Africa has embraced digital forms of learning and conferencing (Hedding et al. 2020, 1–2; Maphalala and Adigun 2021 1–13; Mpungose 2021, 266–282; Olawale et al. 2021, 179–193). This shift, of course, has impacted on these academics' perception and presentation of their professional identities, as online spaces enhance and constrict opportunities for editing the presentation of the self. Whether in online or offline contexts, our identities are still bound by socially constructed roles and interactions that are ruled by normative conventions relating to personality, professional identities, culture, race and gender. Indeed, online gender identities are constructed similarly to professional identities, with individuals expressing reticence to construct significantly different online identities that are in conflict with their offline selves (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 101–112; Okdie et al. 2011, 153–159).

## **ACADEMIC GENDERED IDENTITIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

According to Nadal et al. (2021, 100895), women, like other historically marginalised groups, may internalise institutional and systemic oppressive systems. Internalised oppression is a nuanced version of overt oppression yet may have significant psychological consequences for marginalised groups that can affect their identities (David 2014, 1–31). It is, therefore, imperative to acknowledge identities when trying to fight against oppressive systems that we

take for granted. Studying academic identities is important in understanding how women's realities are constructed within the university context (Zulu 2022). Both individual factors and social circumstances are essential determinants in how a woman academics identity is negotiated and represented (Ursin et al. 2020, 311–325). Academic identity is also fractured by career trajectories, tenureship and competencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the basis of academic identity (i.e., research, teaching, administration) due to the migration to online learning (Smith et al. 2022, 1291–1292). For example the teaching roles of academics were disrupted and a new self-identification as competent online practitioners emerged (Smith et al. 2022, 1296), and this occurring within one's home. Substantial research focus has been afforded to academic and student's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hedding et al. 2020, 1–2; Kriger et al. 2022, 142–154; Maphalala and Adigun, 2021, 1–13; Moodley and Gouws, 2020). A pattern in the reviewed literature on women academics during this period reveals the themes of academic productivity (or the lack thereof) and work-life balance. Productivity was a major concern amongst students and university staff at two rural South African universities (Olawale et al. 2021, 179–193), due to concerns of undefined work schedules, unbearable workload, increased work stress and academic pressure, which affected workload management and productivity.

Although gender parities within academia have been well documented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic heightened these disparities pervasively, which affected the productivity of women in academia (Moodley and Gouws 2020). Women published less as compared to their male counterparts and this was attributed to the increased domestic and caregiving responsibilities, with research indicating that women were generally more vulnerable to the impact of the lockdown than their male counterparts (Augustus 2021; Kriger et al. 2022, 143; Parry and Gordon 2021, 795–806; Walters et al. 2022). Women academics spent much of their work time teaching online (Walters et al. 2022) and many performed so called invisible forms of labour (Górska et al. 2021, 1556; Toffoletti and Starr 2016, 489–504): a gendered space where emotional support and caring for students is a central and a necessary requirement for women academics, due to discriminatory practises and traditional notions of gender (Gordon, Willink, and Hunter 2022). This invisible expectation was only exacerbated during the pandemic, where research has found that women academics devoted more time to teaching activities and to the demands of students, than to their own research activities (França et al. 2023, 470–485; Rickett and Morris 2021, 87–101).

## **GENDER, ACADEMIC IDENTITY AND CONFERENCING**

Sá, Ferreira and Serpa state that “academic conferences can take place in a context that may

locate in a continuum from the more traditional (in-person) to the pure virtual conference, each with specific definitions, goals, advantages, limitations and specific underlying logistics” (2019, 39). Whether in person or online, they are often seen as a gateway to an academic career as important events which offer opportunities to network, build academic reputations and disseminate research (Black et al. 2020, 115–129; Bray et al. 2022, 7; Pedaste and Kasemets 2021, 92–104; Woodruff et al. 2021, 127–128). Academic conferences are perceived to be spaces and moments of collective learning, and also spaces and moments of academic socialisation (Sá, Ferreira and Serpa 2019, 38).

Yet, despite the central concept and purpose of academic conferencing as networking opportunities, these spaces are often very exclusionary. Feminist researchers (Dashper and Finkel 2021, 70–84) consider academic conferences as gendered spaces and practices which highlight a need for fairer accessibility (Henderson 2018, 224) that includes physical accessibility, financial accessibility, and cognitive accessibility (Walters 2018, 17–32). They argue that the ability to attend conferences and present intellectual outputs has less to do with research capability and skill, and more to do with an individual’s identity and gender, as well as other socio-economic systems by which social oppression manifests (Górska et al. 2020, 1556). Similarly, feminist research on conference organising has indicated that there is an inherent gendered expectation of women academic’s involvement in “soft” domains such as maintaining group cohesion, well-being and care (Burford, Bosanquet, and Smith 2020, 86–100; Henderson 2018, 222). Referred to as academic housekeeping, these organising responsibilities taken on by academic women conference convenors are another inviable or hidden form of care work and emotional labour that contrast with the public role of the conference convenor as an intellectual leader (Burford et al. 2020, 96).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been theorised by researchers that the significant advantages of online conferencing, which include the reduction of costs associated with invited speaker and attendee travel; as well as no cost of venue hire; accommodation; and catering, would result in conferences becoming more equitable and accessible (Pedaste and Kasemets 2021; 94). Most importantly, they stated that inclusivity would be increased as the accessibility of online conferences improves attendance opportunities for those relegated by the lack of equity involved in attending in-person conferences: early career researchers; researchers from developing countries; women attendees, attendees who are parents with small children; and attendees living with a disability or with a chronic illness (Bray et al. 2022, 7). This article aims to contribute to the aforementioned gap in the literature and theorisations of equality in online conferencing through the narratives of three South African women academics. Informed by a theoretical orientation that relies on empowerment and counter stories (Raymond and Canham

2022, 992), the identified themes to follow facilitate understandings of the experiences and identities formed in online spaces, addressing the complexities faced by women in academia, specifically a diverse group of women academics organising the first online Southern African Students' Psychology Conference (SASPC).

### **WOMEN IN CONTEXT: THE FIRST VIRTUAL SASPC**

Started in 2009, the SASPC is a biannual conference that provides undergraduate and postgraduate students from Southern Africa, who are studying psychology, the opportunity to present their research. The structure of the conference replicated traditional academic conferences and endeavoured to create a learning space for students to present their completed or in-progress research to their peers and academics from the host and collaborating universities. Traditionally, the conference has been successfully convened with in-person attendance only. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the conference organisers to re-evaluate. At first, we (like many other conference organisers at that time) considered postponing or cancelling the event, but after much deliberation, we decided to move ahead and host the conference online. Although none of the conference organisers had experience in convening an online academic conference, we felt somewhat prepared as the move to a fully online platform was within our higher education ODeL institution's strategic plan. However, these advancements were challenged by wider digital inequalities face by many South African citizens during the pandemic, such as internet accessibility, connectivity issues, and software and hardware challenges, which also impacted our students. Additionally, our academic workloads increased as we struggled to provide equitable online service delivery to our students amid pandemic turmoil and uncertainty. Lockdowns, work-from-home and home-schooling mandates meant that we, like many women academics, were thrust into challenging work-life imbalances. Regardless, the 7th SASPC went ahead and was held completely online, for this first time from the 7th to the 9th of September in 2021. Competently guided by our conference chair (who was a woman), the conference team (made up of 11 women and one man), organised a conference that had two keynote speakers (one of which was a woman), nine pre-conference workshops (seven of which were run by women), and 23 paper presentations (19 of which were women presenters, as well as three men and one presenter identifying as non-binary).

### **EMPOWERMENT THEORY**

Empowerment is a process through which power is redistributed between classes, races, or genders and it occurs within the context of personal agency or in a broader community (Ammari et al. 2022). Empowerment Theory (ET) is noted by Joseph (2019, 138) is one of the most

commonly used theoretical frameworks by scholars and researchers seeking to understand issues of marginalisation within the context of discriminatory social, political, and economic environments. ET research focuses on identifying the capabilities of individuals functioning under constrained conditions, to understand the environmental impacts of social problems, rather than victim blaming (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570). As a social constructionist theory developed in the 1970's, ET has evolved to recognise the human agency criterion in empowerment, where individuals are seen as active agents within their environment and are conceptualised from an intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural viewpoint (Joseph 2019, 146). Scholars of ET have long viewed higher education as a liberating agent for personal empowerment, as well as engendering peer empowerment through more equitable relationships, particularly in communities who experience societal inequalities or powerlessness (Freire 1985; Veugelers 2017; Wallerstein 1993). This form of empowerment can therefore be seen as the expansion of individual agency towards peer empowerment as well, as underpinning the principle of academic conferencing and socialisation. It is through this lens that the narratives of three women academics from two South African universities are understood, to analyse how online conferencing is perceived as a safe space that empowers them to claim and assert their agency in academia.

## **METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Collaborative Autoethnography or CAE is a derivative of autoethnography and as such it involves two or more collaborators working together to consolidate their unifying or divergent experiences on a particular sociocultural phenomenon of interest (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017, 251–254). The plurality of CAE aids in eliminating the criticism of autoethnography that uses univocal narratives since there are collaborative experiences that are drawn upon in enhancing “relational authenticity” of a particular social phenomenon (Hernandez, Chang and Ngunjiri 2017, 253). For this research study, each of us documented our experiences of organising the conference pre, during and post conference using unstructured field notes. Our unstructured field notes were guided by broad themes related to the challenges and opportunities for learning that we experienced in our roles as conference organisers. These unstructured field notes, together with other headnotes (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2008, 209–217), formed the starting point for our individual narratives. As we followed an analytic interpretive writing approach (Chang 2013, 107–122), the layers of or experiences influenced by our personal, institutional and societal contexts, emerged dominantly. We circulated our narratives to each other. We had further discussions telephonically or via email to encourage self-reflexivity and to expand on experiences superficially covered. One of the authors created

a Google document that allowed us to write collaboratively, constantly reading and writing together, in real time, facilitating swift writing and integration of three different academic voices, and writing styles. This was a very strange process for us and required a mind shift from the traditional psychological research that we were familiar with, as now we were both the subjects and researchers (Chang 2013, 107–122) of our own study.

Quotes from our individual narratives were used during the writing of these themes, enabling our individual voices to shine through this collective inductive writing process. It is through this process that we realised the importance of context in relation to ourselves (Anderson and Fourie 2015, 170–182; Ngunjiri et al. 2010) and the importance of context in positioning ourselves in CAE. CAE also enabled writing and learning within the safety of collaboration, reducing researcher vulnerability (Lapadat 2017, 589–603). We had shared experiences that strengthened the rigour of our analysis. Yet, we were also uniquely different in terms of the roles we played in organising the conference, our daily academic responsibilities, the level of our experience in publishing, but also in our social identities and stages of life (Barakat cited in Anderson, Goodall, and Trahar 2020, 3–4). However, we understand that this emancipatory process eliminated anonymity not only for us but for those that formed part of our collaborative experiences. Despite removing all overt reference to our institution, colleagues and loved ones, their anonymity is self-evident raising issues of relational ethics and the impossibility of neat solutions to such ethical concerns (Lapadat 2017, 589–603). We were guided by the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence (Lapadat 2017, 589–603) when referring to our personal, institution and societal contexts. We obtained ethics approval and institutional permission to conduct the study as part of a broader application to conduct research during the 7th SASPC.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the section to follow we discuss emerging findings in relation to our theoretical interests of a feminist standpoint that foregrounds empowerment, through our CAE accounts, and in relation to the literature reviewed and the contextual milieu in which we work and live. We discuss the findings under the following broad themes: counter spaces and personal positionality, internalising our marginalised and gendered identities, invisible work in academia and experiences of empowerment through online safe spaces.

### **COUNTER SPACES AND PERSONAL POSITIONALITIES**

Counter spaces have been described as being located outside of traditional academic spaces, in the margins of the mainstream, with interrelated social factors contributing to a sense of not



belonging and isolation, particularly for women who embody intersecting identities that are devalued within academia (Ong, Smith, and Ko 2018, 206–245). As a group of diverse women academics in South Africa, we can certainly attest to how our identities differ according to the contexts in which we move, and indeed that these spaces can shape, constrict or empower our identities. Our differences are glaringly apparent in the words we chose to introduce to introduce ourselves in this text:

Janice: “I am a third-generation born South African of Indian descent. I am a psychological practitioner and have been an academic for nine years. I am grateful for the students that I get to interact with, as we shape and mould each other through lively debates and discussions. I am grateful for the brilliant minds of colleagues that challenge me to think out of the box and to get out of my comfort zone. I have had the privilege of serving as the conference chair for the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Southern African Student Psychology Conference. I am also a wife, and mother to three rambunctious kids!!!”

Bianca: “First off, I’m a woman ... a 38-year-old white South African to be precise. I am married, without children, living in the northern suburbs of the city of Johannesburg in South Africa. I come from a small town in a rural province of South Africa and I was the first person in my family to go to university. Therefore, I am proud to call myself an academic and believe that education can be used to better your life. Currently, I am doing my Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship at a South Africa university. I grew up in a household of very strong women living in patriarchal contexts, and so my research primarily concerns the lived experiences of marginalised communities, living on the fringes of South African society.”

Itumeleng: “I am a black South African woman, unmarried and navigating my career in the academy. My academic career started when I registered for a masters in psychology in 2015. I worked as a research assistant during the course of my masters and later as a part-time lecturer after completing my studies. It was in December of 2019 that re-joined the university as a full-time lecturer. I started my PhD journey a year into the pandemic focusing on adverse childhood experiences and motherhood.”

These personal introductions were the first step in the CAE process and form the ground work for our narratives and positionalities therein, contextualising our quotes in the themes to come.

## **INTERNALISING OUR MARGINALISED AND GENDERED IDENTITIES**

Imposter syndrome within academia has been well researched (Addison, Breeze, and Taylor 2022, 1–631; Heslop et al. 2023, 63–70; Monteiro, Chan, and Kahlke 2023, 958–970) and found that the burden of feeling like an impostor is not distributed evenly with women, especially women underrepresented in academia and early-career scholars, who likely to feel like frauds in their professional lives (Muradoglu et al. 2022, 1086–1100). Initially, we too internalised our feelings of inadequacy, of not belonging, of being imposters, and assumed that our lack of confidence in our ability to organise the conference stemmed from the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. However, on deeper reflection, we came to understand that these

feelings were already present during our time in academia before COVID-19, and well before we had to organise an online academic conference:

Bianca: “I guess I’ve always felt like a person who questions herself and questions her abilities, even though I know that I can do these things, I still have anxiety about them. And I still question them. I’m not sure how that relates to my gender. I know that it does. I know that it is connected. I know that when we are in an environment that is mainly dominated by Professors and seniors and supervisors who are male, it definitely plays into that feeling of inadequacy, even on a subconscious level.”

Itumeleng: “The academic space can be most intimidating for someone without a PhD. I think the qualification gives one a voice or a level of charge. Since I had previously worked at the department as a research assistant, I still felt like an intern, a novice, a ‘rookie’. As a black female I also felt the internal pressure to perform and prove my competence. The pressure was also external because we were expected to perform and meet our KPAs in this new working environment and report on our weekly activities. The exercise of reporting was foreign in the academic space and made me feel incompetent. I was also not tenured, and I felt that anxious about incompetence during the probation period. This meant me investing long hours to fulfil tasks that should have been performed by other colleagues on the committee. A part of me wanted to do everything myself so that I have control on the process, however, this was not healthy nor was it productive.”

Janice: “I remember walking into the doors of the then, Theo Van Wyk Building, and knowing that I had found my academic home – it was the strangest feeling. However, this spatial belonging did not easily translate into a sense of belonging as an academic. This was my first tenure and I felt ill-equipped to deal with social politics embedded within academia. I didn’t understand it at first, but I felt a sense of imposter-hood that was cultivated and natured by various social norms – within and outside academia. Chairing the conferences was an incredibly daunting task in the face of such learned feelings of imposter-hood. It meant that I worked harder to establish my credibility as an academic and as the conference chair. It meant working through maternity leaves and through intense grief during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to ensure the success of the conference. These personal scarifies also seemed necessary, due the magnitude of the responsibility of providing our students with a professional platform from which to gain important academic social skills.”

## **INVISIBLE WORK IN ACADEMIA**

Service work such as conference organising and serving on committees relates to the “invisible work of academia” (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group 2017, 230). As Bowyer et al. (2021, 309–341) argues, service work within the university is undervalued. Our key performance areas include teaching and learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. However, like other academic labour structures these performance indicators are not valued the same in terms of career advancement and rewards within the academic career trajectory. Organising the student conference counted only marginally towards our structured work performance indicators amidst other expectations related to teaching and research outputs. Despite this, we were motivated to provide some normalcy for students and a

space for academic socialisation during the isolating period of the pandemic:

Itumeleng: “This would be a great opportunity for students to still have the space that the conference provides for their research and for networking. But questions of how this would happen were looming in the back of my mind. I was concerned about the students’ data challenges for the duration of the conference. Some universities provided students with data for online learning, but the conference required more data. I worried about the reach of the conference for students in remote and rural areas who could have internet challenges. On one morning, a student sent me an email informing that she had contracted COVID-19 for the second time and that she was struggling to record her presentation. The reality of the pandemic hit me that morning and I began to panic. The emotional work required in organising the conference was something I took for granted. Work-life boundaries were becoming invisible because we were working from home. Our personal cell phones became work phones, normal working hours were seemingly non-existent. On one evening, the conference chair and I were on a call on a Friday evening. We wanted the conference to succeed and were willing to put in the extra hours.”

Bianca: “I was very worried about how this conference would take place on an online platform. How would it look? Would our students actually be able to have access to it? South Africa has some of the highest data costs in the world and I know that to have a two or three day or even a one day conference, the data costs involved in that would be cost prohibitive to students, so I was quite concerned but I was also emboldened by the challenge of organising a conference online for the first time, and even if it was only for a day, at least providing our students with some form of interaction and being less isolated. But we weren’t compensated for our time, even though this organising process, because it was new ... this organisation of the conference was far more time consuming than it had been previously. We were fulfilling new roles and we were coming across new challenges that were so different to holding a face-to-face conference.”

Janice: “Our work on the 7<sup>th</sup> SASPC felt completely invisible. We were physically detached from our conference support system and the visibility of collegial camaraderie. At times it felt like a dark and lonely space but we took ownership of what was happening around us and we made it work, despite the turbulent times, and we created our own unique space .... Our decision to even have the conference in the first place was a gendered experience based on our previous experiences of the conference. But the technology gave us the opportunity to create the safe space for ourselves as well as our students ... moving the academic social socialisation of our students forward. It also became a sustainable safe space for me, to still be engaged academically, but within the confines of my own gendered responsibility.”

## **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ONLINE SAFE SPACES**

In recent years, the academic space has made strides to recognise the lack of gender equity and increased the number of initiatives to address gendered issues in its sphere (Llorens et al. 2021, 2047). However, the change is protracted and inequalities remain, with women’s success in academia largely dependent on them being able to fit into a particular mould. As stated by Llorens et al. (2021, 2047), “A major source of inequity is gender bias, which has a substantial negative impact on the careers, work-life balance, and mental health of underrepresented groups in science”. Gendered biases are based on numerous stereotypes related to gender that compel women academics, like ourselves, to restrict our identities and conduct activities in order to fit

in. This does not result in a singular, discriminatory issue but rather manifests as a collection of issues that impact our lived experiences as academics and reduce our experiences of empowerment and agency. However, within these challenging conditions, amidst the turmoil of a global pandemic, we were able to carve out safe spaces of empowerment:

Itumeleng: “I must say that the conference in a way felt like one of the only things going right in my work. I was grappling with remote teaching and other core functions of my job, and the fact that the conference would continue online gave me hope. I was in constant contact with the organising team and because we were working remotely our online meetings were a space where I could engage with colleagues.”

Bianca: “I leaned heavily on my colleagues for support ... and although this was a very difficult time, I had lost a loved one recently as well, there was definitely a feeling of empowerment working under a female chair ... working with female academics as colleagues on the marketing team and the Scientific Committee and the organisational team in general. Everyone expected us to give up, to fail ... no one really offered resources, only a few experienced female professors offered us guidance or support ... but we supported each other. We figured out this new strange online world of conferencing and adapted to it! It really was a wonderful sense of camaraderie, of empowerment, of understanding and I think that the true way forward to prevent the feelings of inadequacy and isolation and imposter syndrome is really to recognise the strength of these female networks. And the online space gave us a safe space to do that!”

Janice: “So that for me ... this space is where there was a dual safety in terms of safety for us, in terms of continuing our own academic project, in terms of continuing our own commitment and responsibility to the student conference, and also in terms of continuing the academic socialisation opportunity that the student conference offered to our students. So I think in that in that in that situation it is very sustainably empowering for woman students to attend ... much like it is empowering for me to sustainably engage with the wider academic audience while still maintaining my own gendered responsibility. So for me, obviously in retrospect, technology really gave us an empowering space both for ourselves and our students, and they would have never been able to attend a student conference, it would have never been able to take place, where it not for technology. It was quite, you know, a scary time ... I knew people who had died of the Delta variant ... but the technology and the ease with which we could navigate it once we became a little bit familiar with it, is what brought this empowerment to us as women academics. For us as women academics that have other responsibilities, it gives us an equal playing field and it doesn't just have to be in terms of gendered responsibilities.”

## CONCLUSION

Although much of the research has been conducted in the global North, some academic women's experiences in the South African context have been represented in the literature (Kriger et al. 2022, 142–154; Moodley and Gouws 2020; Walters et al. 2022; Zulu 2022). However, none of these explicitly highlight experiences of women academics organising a virtual conference within an ODeL context during the pandemic. As we developed understandings of our experiences in the form of counter stories, we drew on the work of Solorzano et al. (2000, as cited in Ong et al. 2018, 209–210) to redefine counter spaces as

academic and social safe spaces that allow underrepresented communities to promote their own experiences and validate these as forms of collective critical knowledge. In our narratives, we vent our internalised exasperation outward, sharing stories of isolation, microaggressions, and discrimination, to challenge gendered stereotypes and deficit notions of women and their work in academia. We reclaim our invisibilised work in organising a student conference, online, during the turmoil of a pandemic. Similar to the participants in Zulu's (2022) study on academic identities of South African black women professors, we wanted to encourage scholarship and student learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite the internalised fears, external challenges and naysayers, we overcame the common, self-defeating reaction of women academics to self-isolate (Ong et al. 2018, 230), and created safe online counter space for ourselves, and our students, to connect, develop, and support each other.

Feminist researchers are still uncovering how the unpredictability of the pandemic and the new freedoms created by online platforms have provided safe spaces for marginalised voices to be heard. We, as women academics, used online platforms as safe gathering spaces, to foster experiential and relational knowledge production, a kinship and a community that in turn facilitated the development and promotion of scholars and scholarship (Black et al. 2020, 123). These voices, with support of diverse actors in academia, are what is needed to shift the current culture and acknowledge the gendered identities of women academics in the global South. By exploring our collective experiences of organising an academic conference online during the height of the pandemic, CAE provided us with a safe space to understand our collective lived experiences, centred them as expertise, and gave primacy of voice to narratives that may not be palatable to the academe. By prioritising our gendered experiences as women academics in the ODeL space, we renounce the masks of restraint that have been reinforced through our training, vocational work, and publications, to recognise that our own experiences are valuable. Narratives of personal and peer empowerment demonstrated and validate how online spaces in higher education, such as academic conferencing, create personal empowerment opportunities to reclaim human agency under constrained conditions. Here, we consider digital spaces in particularly constrictive, hierarchical, and patriarchal contexts, as safe spaces for women and further marginalised communities of academia, to self-present and support one another in disabling gendered social norms (Ammari et al. 2022, 2–3). Here, we envision the possibilities for sustainable change that are engendered by online spaces as important sites of agency and resistance.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings presented here contribute to the dearth of research on women academics in the

global South and explicate how their experiences can promote personal empowerment. We believe that our experiences of organising this conference during the pandemic contributes to the construction of new knowledge in a collaborative process that engenders online conferencing as a safe space for other women academics and offers a valuable learning space for practical insights. These counter spaces that focus on diversity allow marginalised communities in academia to contextualise their own experiences and develop a greater sense of belonging, to interrupt the structures, norms of success, and privilege of higher learning (Ong et al. 2018, 233). The innovations needed to address gender bias must be acknowledged by all academic entities, from individuals to departments to conferences and professional organisations (Llorens et al. 2021, 2066). When spaces of academic socialisation, like conferences, include participants from a wide range of backgrounds, nationalities and career levels, it produces multiplicities of experience which offer varied and valid perspectives that prevent scientific stagnation (Sá, Ferreira, and Serpa 2019, 38).

This study further recommends that institutions of higher education and learning should recognise and value the gendered and invisible work of academics, such as emotional support of students and care work. Academia needs to develop a system of documenting and reporting such work by faculty, which would help to level the playing field for male and female academics (Górska et al. 2021, 1556). These practises of digital integration and diversity inclusion can promote sustainable development of all employees and students in higher education, enabling safe spaces and the promotion of scholars and scholarship. Lastly, CAE should be considered as a critical emancipatory methodology for higher education to explore how oppression is internalised in marginalised groups and how shared counter stories highlight the knowledge that resides in lived experiences, sharing often-hidden experiences and making them knowable. speak-able and potentially alter-able (Black et al. 2020, 119).

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