Workplace Bullying and Its Implications for Gender Transformation in the South African Higher Education Sector
An Intersectional Perspective

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ABSTRACT
While transformation in the higher education sector in South Africa has been the subject of intensive research since 1994, few studies have explored the link between workplace bullying and transformation. Whereas workplace bullying has drawn researchers’ attention for decades, it is only recently that scholars have started to interrogate the phenomenon through the intersectional lens. This paper employs intersectionality to explore women academics’ experiences of workplace bullying and to suggest links between workplace bullying and gender transformation in the higher education sector in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of 25 women academics who had experienced workplace bullying. As part of data triangulation, four union representatives and three human resources practitioners were also interviewed. The study’s main findings indicate that gender, race and class mediate women academics’ experiences of workplace bullying. In historically White universities, African, Coloured and Indian women academics, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, are more likely to be bullied, by seniors, peers, administrators and students. For White women academics, race ameliorates their workplace bullying experiences. The simultaneous effects of race, gender and class derail transformation as members of previously disadvantaged groups either remain stuck in junior academic positions, or exit the sector.

KEYWORDS
Intersectionality, gender, race, transformation, workplace bullying

Introduction
Before 1994, the apartheid systems of government were designed to advance White interests and entrench White privilege, at the expense of Black South Africans (Mokhoanatse, 2015).

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After 1994, the new democratic government was faced with the onerous task of transforming South African society and institutions. The Constitution prohibits unfair discrimination against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, marital status, ethnic or social origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion and language. The Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1997, was passed to transform universities and to ensure equal access to education for all South Africans.

The jury is still out on the efficacy of this legislation. According to Statistics South Africa (2019), cited in the Commission for Employment Equity report (2019), 54.6% of the Economically Active Population (EAP) in South Africa were men, and 45.4% were women. Of this 45.4% of economically active women, 36.2% were African, 4.4% Coloured, 1.1% Indian and 3.8% White. During the same period (2019), of the 19,901 permanent academic staff in South African higher education institutions 47.7% were women. White women made up 46.31% of women academics, followed by Africans (35.98%), Indians (9.35%), with Coloureds lagging behind at 8.34% (DHET, 2021). This overrepresentation of Coloured, Indian and White women in academia, and underrepresentation of African women, compared to their representation in the EAP, suggests a stubborn racialised pattern in the higher education sector.

There is a positive relationship between holding a PhD, postgraduate supervision, research outputs and career progression (DHET, 2019). According to (STATS-SA, 2019), of the 46% of university academic staff holding PhDs, most were men (DHET, 2019). In 2017, of the 9,033 permanent academic staff who had PhDs there were 30.1% African, 5.8% Coloured, 7.74% Indian, 52.79% White and 0.03% Unknown. Zulu’s (2013) study on research productivity found that women lacked the time to do research due to heavy teaching workloads, administrative work, household responsibilities and supervision of postgraduate students. Women academics also lacked access to supportive networks. African women were less likely to hold a PhD. They, as a result, were overrepresented in junior lecturer roles and underrepresented in the professoriate level, compared to other races (DHET, 2019; Rugunanan, 2019).

Phaswana (2019) argues that, despite the gains brought about by transformation in South African HE, Black women still grapple with racism, sexism and classism. Their antagonistic treatment in the academy is a continuation of their university experiences as students (Nathane, 2019). While being an academic remains a challenge for Black women academics, it is particularly challenging for young Black women academics who are not adequately supported, be it through adequate resourcing or mentorship (Rugunanan, 2019). While the government provides financial incentives to encourage young, Black, women academics to obtain their PhDs, and as will be shown later in this discussion, their professional development efforts get frustrated at the faculty and departmental levels. Of course, as Moore (2017) and Zulu (2013) point out, all women, including the ones with tenure, experience gendered barriers. White women also experience gendered challenges, but their race and relative academic seniority do serve as a kind of shield.

The few Black women who join academia are met by a revolving door. Mekoa (2018) argues that most Black academics leave because of job dissatisfaction, social and intellectual frustrations, rampant racism, disillusionment with management and inadequate salary packages. For Vandeyar (2010, p. 931), Blacks are not forced to leave because of racism only,
but also by longing for “intangible benefits such as collegiality, rapport with department leaders, career advancement opportunities, teaching and assignment opportunities, research opportunities, and influence in department”. As will be shown later, workplace bullying is a common dynamic in academia and affects different groups of women differently. Feelings of alienation result in more women from previously disadvantaged groups exiting the sector, much to the detriment of the transformation project.

**Research Methodology**

This qualitative study used purposive and snowball sampling to identify the participants. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of 25 women academics (see Table 1) from three South African universities. Two of these institutions are historically White and one historically Black. The sample of women academics consisted of eleven African, six White, five Coloured and three Indian. For data triangulation, interviews were also conducted with four union representatives (one White man and three Black men), and three human resources practitioners (two Black men and one Coloured man). The study got ethical clearance from the university’s Research Ethics Committee and all the participants signed informed consent forms. For confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms are used in this paper. Comments that risk revealing the identity of the university, the participants or other people mentioned in participants’ narratives have also been edited out. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process of thematic analysis. Themes were then subject to an intersectional lens. May (2015, p. 4) posits that intersectionality “offers a different lens to question and challenge dominant discourses that reproduce or deepen the disparities, erasures and distortions that aims to divide and conquers”. Intersectionality acknowledges the importance of historical and political contexts, creating an opportunity to understand individuals’ “status and experiences in multiple discriminated identities” (Zander et al., 2010).

**Literature Review**

Bullying at work means regularly harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work, in the course of which the person confronted ends up feeling powerless to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2011). Research on workplace bullying in higher education has largely been conducted in the Western context (Hollis, 2015; 2016; 2019; Giorgi, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Keashly and Neuman, 2010; Zabrodska and Kveton, 2013). Few studies have been conducted in Africa (Ahmad et al., 2017; Ngale, 2013; Kakumba et al., 2014; Pietersen, 2007). A number of factors have been found as contributing to workplace bullying. These include competition for scarce institutional resources (Twale and De Luca, 2013), managerial control (Zabrodska and Kveton, 2013), and targets’ social identities including race, gender, class, age and ethnicity (Johnson, 2011). Work role factors including role conflict, role ambiguity, job insecurity have also been found to be contributing factors (Johnson, 2011). At the group level Samnani and Singh (2012) found that group norms and status inconsistency can cause bullying. At an institutional level the leadership style, organisational culture and situational factors such as rewards systems have been found to enable workplace bullying (King and Piotrowski, 2015; Rai and Agarwal, 2018). Workplace bullying behaviours have been found to negatively affect targets’
wellbeing, their job performances and family life (Celep and Konakli, 2013; Johnson 2011) and negatively affect productivity.

Earlier studies on workplace bullying in HEIs primarily focused on the frequency of bullying and the type of bullying behaviours (Cassell, 2011; Keashly and Neuman, 2010; McKay et al., 2008). These studies found that workplace bullying was prevalent in higher education across the globe, with the main perpetrators tending to be supervisors (Hollis, 2015; Zabrodska and Kveton, 2013), followed by colleagues, subordinates and students (May and Tenzek, 2018; McKay et al., 2008). Hollis (2016) found that bullying occurred in front of other staff, which means there were witnesses.

Types of bullying behaviours vary and include the following: excessive workload allocation, removal of key areas of responsibility and being given trivial tasks to replace one’s core duties (Dlamini, 2010; Botha, 2008), unreasonable deadlines, withholding information, interference in one’s work activities, excessive work monitoring, ignoring or overlooking contributions, isolation and being ignored by others, belittling, silencing and having one’s requests for assistance denied (Ahmad et al., 2017; Giorgi, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). McKay et al. (2008) found that academic staff also experienced bullying by students, including the disruption of lectures, and displays of lack of respect and accountability. Johnson-Bailey (2015) found that workplace bullying directed at African academics in a White university included consistent interruptions during meetings and class, incorrect greetings, students not accepting the lecturer and students consistently challenging the lecturer’s knowledge despite his/her professorship title.

On the gender front, studies have revealed that women are more likely to be bullied than men (Cunniff and Mostert, 2012; Motsei, 2015). Salin and Hoel (2013) found that there were gender differences, not only in the reported prevalence and forms of bullying experienced,

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but also in how targets and third parties made sense of and responded to the bullying. In a study of gender transformation, the mediating role of race cannot be ignored. Hollis (2018) found that in American universities, women of colour and other minorities experience more bullying than other races because of their intersecting identities. Einarsen et al. (2010) found that Black women were more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment than White women. As Accapadi (2007, p. 208) put it, “while White women are members of an oppressed group based on gender, they still experience privilege based on race. This dual oppressor/oppressed identity often becomes a source of tension when White women are challenged to consider their White privilege by Women of Colour”.

“Workplace bullying does not exist in a vacuum, as it is affected by a societal hierarchy that structures along the lines of race, gender and heterosexuality” (Johnson-Bailey, 2015, p. 46). A country’s socio-cultural landscape impacts workplace bullying (D’Cruz et al., 2021; Samnani and Singh, 2012). South Africa is a patriarchal, classed and racially polarised society. Workplace bullying, like other organisational phenomena in the country, assumes a racialised, classed and gendered tenor. Consistent with global studies, Pietersen (2007) found that targets of bullying in HE experienced lack of recognition, discrimination, blocked advancement and isolation. Workplace bullying studies in South African HEIs found that targets experienced unfair discrimination, bullying from students and administrative employees, unfair promotion, sexual harassment, and racism leading to burnout and depression (Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2016), inconsistent work allocation based on race or gender, and favouritism, withholding information, spreading rumours, undermining, humiliation, inappropriate jokes, belittling and intimidation (Mokgolo, 2017). A recent study by Conco et al. (2021) found race, gender and academic rank to be antecedents of bullying. In South Africa, academic rank often translates into Whites holding senior academic positions compared to other racial groups. As such, Conco et al. (2021) found that Coloured, Indian and Asian academics experienced more bullying than Whites. And so did women, compared to men. These findings, for Conco et al., (2021, p. 318) demonstrate “the gap between intention and the realities” because of an institutional culture that enables bullying by “silencing or pushing out those who speak up”. Silencing and pushing out vocal members of minority groups does not auger well for transformation in the sector.

Makhubela (2020) argues that prejudice is the underlying cause of bullying in South Africa. This is consistent with Pietersen (2007) and Samuel’s (2015) study that found that there were still subtle, unspoken tensions between racial groups in post-apartheid South Africa. Such tensions are likely to escalate in the work environment and lead to workplace bullying. Prejudice plays itself out in the form of derogatory comments, exclusion, overlooking the targets in promotions, micromanagement, preventing the target from using their benefits, physical aggression and the worst form being lynching (Makhubela, 2020). Motsei (2015) found that Whites perceived employment equity to be reverse racism, and bullied Black employees as a form of resisting the legislation.

To the extent that South African managers and leaders tend to over-rely on positional authority, it is not surprising that supervisors, irrespective of gender or race, tend to be the main perpetrators of bullying. Radical politics in South Africa, however, serve to disrupt managers’ positional power and as Makhubela (2020) points out, management can
also get bullied by students and student formations, as well as by subordinates and labour unions.

**Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the presentation and discussion of the findings is aligned to the themes that emerged from the interviews, namely, Access Denied, Resources Withheld, Neither Seen Nor Heard, Black Woman, You are on Your Own, Recognition Withheld, Authorisation Denied and Pharaoh’s Daughters. Figure 1 is informed by the themes and depicts women’s academic journey.

**Access denied, resources withheld**

Access refers to the onboarding experience as well as access to the resources a person needs to do their job. For the Black women, their celebrations of appointment as academics were short-lived. African, Coloured and Indian participants shared their negative experiences from the first day of work. Black women academics reported that they were not the preferred candidates, and were, consistent with Macintosh’s (2005) findings, bullied from the onset. This manifested as lack of support by supervisors, colleagues and administrators and having to fend for themselves. Workplace bullying included getting an unappealing or a remote office or not getting an office at all. Teaching materials and stationery were not provided, and no proper departmental orientation was done. Denial of access to resources and withholding information was also common. Lizzy shared how a White male professor mistook her for a tea-girl who was not supposed to use the staff tea-room. These negative experiences led to isolation and victimisation, with other staff members choosing to distance themselves from them. This was either in support of the bully or was done to avoid being victimised, in retaliation for being seen to be associating with the target. Some participants stated that they were expected to teach undergraduates, whilst White staff who were less qualified than them were allocated postgraduate classes. None of the White participants mentioned similar onboarding experiences.

**Neither seen nor heard**

Departmental and institutional culture and climate are key in retention (Hollis, 2019). The academic journey can be a lonely journey for women academics appointed in White male-dominated departments, and especially in male-dominated disciplines. Women shared their
alienating experiences within their department as well as in the wider institution. The majority of the participants shared that their departments were White male-dominated, which was corroborated by the union representatives and human resource practitioners. This is consistent with the DHET (2019, 2021) report that found that most senior positions in South African universities were White male-dominated.

It is interesting to note that bullying experiences were multidirectional and, at times, defied typical gender and race patterns. White women participants pointed out that they were bullied by their White male supervisors. One young White woman pointed out that a young Coloured woman academic bullied her and Black male professor colleagues bullied a White associate professor. This was at a previously Black university. The White targets’ experiences included being undermined, silenced, ignored, being yelled at and being at the receiving end of belittling remarks. Work allocation was also cited, with one sharing that she was removed from chairing a committee she had effectively led for years. The responsibility was given to the Supervisor’s “favourite person”.

The Indians and Coloured participants had similar experiences as Whites, but were also bullied by colleagues, while Africans were bullied by their supervisors, colleagues, subordinates and administrators. African women academics experienced isolation, exclusion, invisibility, having their decisions overruled, the flaunting of status and power by colleagues, attacks on their professional status and excessive monitoring. Unfair criticism and assessment of their work were common. These results are consistent with Domingo (2017) and Gabriel and Tate (2017), who argued that Blacks had been dehumanised and subjected to excessive scrutiny. They were also consistently silenced as they were perceived not to have a voice.

While processes exist to report these bullying experiences, many Black participants opted to self-silence, not only as an act of self-preservation, but because they had observed that speaking up leads to silencing. They had come to understand and accept that bullying was part of the culture and was designed to preserve the status quo. White academics, however, were more likely to challenge bullying behaviour, albeit without success at times. When some reported their cases, their concerns were trivialised, with suggestions being that they were being too emotional, not collegial or that the bullies were in a bad mood or dealing with something else.

There is evidence that organisational culture enabled the bullying, with males protecting or rallying behind other men. Women academics consistently used the words “boys-club” to describe their gendered experiences. Various committees silenced women, especially African women, even using Afrikaans as a language to exclude them. Women remained as the minority and were mainly absent in decision-making structures. This means that decisions that affect women were taken by those who would prefer to keep them out of the system. The boys club still perpetuates the stereotype that women do not belong in universities and only deserve lower positions. Women were treated as tokens, their qualifications, titles and positions meant nothing because they did not receive the same respect afforded male academics, especially by White male academics who bullied them. In one case, the bully did not want to recognise the target as a professor. This was after all his attempts to ensure that she was not promoted failed. The White male bully intentionally made sure that he did not call her with her new title of professor.
Language usage within an organisation offers a lens to understanding cultural dynamics (Alvesson, 2011). The historically White institutions are still dominated by White men who insist on speaking Afrikaans in meetings. This is despite the claims by the universities that they want to create access for Black staff and students. Some participants shared that departmental meetings were conducted in Afrikaans or when questions were asked by Afrikaans-speaking staff, the response would be in Afrikaans. On one occasion, Zukiswa attended a meeting that was conducted in Afrikaans, although it was well known that she does not understand nor speak the language. She was told they would explain to her later. This was collaborated by the union and human resource participants.

Overall the findings demonstrate that in South African HEIs masculinity continues to be associated with power, whilst femininity is associated with subordination (Booyse & Nkomo, 2010). Universities are gendered and racialised (Acker, 2011; O’Connor, 2014).

**Black woman, you are on your own**

Development entails access to training opportunities, mentorship and coaching. Four of the five Coloured women were junior lecturers and needed to pursue their master’s degree. Their dual role as staff and students presented them with an interesting dilemma as they depended on their colleagues as their seniors, supervisors and research supervisors to complete their studies. The participants experienced their White research supervisors as not receptive to the kind of scholarship they wanted to pursue, leaving them frustrated. One participant, appointed on contract, was acutely aware that her future depended on her bullies, and found herself having to tiptoe around them, “as if walking on egg shells”. The participants’ trepidation was exacerbated by the fact that they had observed their colleagues bullying Black postgraduate students.

The participants reported that, while their study commitments were known by their line managers, they were still allocated excessive teaching workloads. They saw this as an attempt to derail their development, and to ensure they would not qualify for promotions and leadership positions. There was also no support in the form of training on teaching and writing for publication, and the participants did not receive mentorship or coaching. This presented them with additional challenges, especially as they lacked supportive social relations due to racial, gender and class created by their academic rank. These findings are consistent with DHET (2019) which found that new recruits received little or no academic support.

**Shifting goal posts**

Johnson-Bailey’s (2015) study found that workplace bullying directed at African academics included students not accepting the lecturer and consistently challenging the lecturer’s knowledge despite his/her professorship title. African academics narrated their bullying experiences with programme/module coordinators and line managers who chose the side of the students when they received complaints about their teaching. In the classroom the bullies were primarily White students, some who had never experienced being taught by a Black person, and some Black students who were socialised that academics were mainly White males. The students questioned Black women’s competence and English language proficiency. They gave them negative evaluations based on issues not linked to their teaching,
but more about their race, gender and class. Black women found themselves having to con-
stantly prove themselves, that they were not appointed because of their race or gender but
competence. They found themselves having to work twice as hard as their colleagues.

The findings are consistent with previous studies (Ahmad et al., 2017; Johnson-Bailey,
2015; Keashly & Neuman, 2008) that found students bully academics, especially African
academics. Interestingly none of the Coloured, Indians and Whites complained about bul-
lying by undergraduate students. Although two White women shared that the #FeesMustFall
has given students a voice.

On the other hand, co-teaching had its challenges, with Black academics not trusted or
presumed incompetent. They found themselves being told what and how to teach. Kavita, a
young Indian participant shared how she was forced to teach sections that were supposed to
be taught by her colleague, as she was presumed to be young and having no child-rearing
demands. This was used to justify the extra workload.

Senior African women (Lizzy, Chikadaya, Xolile, Anele) and a Coloured woman
(Ayanda) had challenges with research supervision allocations. They reported that they
were given weak students, while Whites got the best students. White postgraduate students
also did not trust Black women as supervisors. This had more to do with race than with
competence. When co-supervising with White colleagues, when a Black woman provided
feedback, White students overlooked the feedback until it was validated by White staff
members.

Petunia, a White woman professor, working in a male-dominated discipline, was bullied
by a foreign African male postgraduate student who was a friend to her colleagues, also
foreign African nationals. The student flatly refused to take instructions and guidance from
her. The student claimed to be bullied and was backed by Petunia’s foreign African male
colleagues.

Three African women (Xolile, Chikadaya and Anele) and one Coloured woman
(Ayanda) observed that postgraduate and ethics committees had double standards, and
were lenient to White staff and rigid towards African women academics. The approval of
research proposals, ethics applications, thesis or dissertation examination outcomes, and
the awarding of postgraduate qualifications were raised as forms of bullying by African
women. When White colleagues’ students had significant changes, they were treated as
minor and recommended as a pass, however there were more expectations and deviations
from the standard policy and procedure in how their cases were treated. It was a constant
battle, where African women had to fight to defend their students. They made it a point to
attend committees because their absence would most likely lead to their students’ research
proposals or reports being rejected.

In another case Lizzy, an African academic, published a paper and the authenticity of
the paper was questioned. The mantra “publish or perish” is used in the corridors of higher
education, yet this is close to impossible when African women who have PhDs have to teach
large classes at undergraduate levels, and some have caregiving roles at home, which is con-
sistent with findings by previous researchers (Ramohai, 2014). Researchers have found that
publishing comes with own challenges of gatekeepers who would rather publish their White
friends. Keet (2015) calls this the economy of knowledge. Only a few have the privilege to
publish and thrive in the academic world. DHET (2019) found that there were research barriers for Black academics.

**Recognition withheld, authorisation denied**

Career progression consists of academic promotions and promotions to leadership positions. Three African women (Vulindlela, Anele and Xolile) and one Coloured woman (Ayanda) commented on their promotion experiences. The promotion criteria for academics consist of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Promotions for Black participants were often blocked and for those who got promoted it was assumed they were promoted because of their race. Even though universities had promotion policies, promotions were nearly impossible for Blacks because of close to unattainable criteria with work overload, personal commitments and subjective and inconsistent policies. The union representatives concurred that promotions are subjective and contentious.

Previous researchers have found blocking promotion is a form of bullying (Hollis, 2016; Vickers, 2014), especially for African academics (Frazier, 2011; Hollis, 2019). Lisnic et al. (2018) postulate that the evaluation process is influenced by the gender and race of the evaluator and the evaluated. Dlamini (2013) confirmed that the intersection of race, gender and age impacted women's career progression and their life experiences. According to DHET (2019) there is limited formal support to assist academics to move up the ranks. This is consistent with Acker's claim, cited in Lisnic et al. (2018), that previously disadvantaged groups do not have work interaction as they are outside the professional and social work networks which can give them institutional knowledge about the promotion process.

**Leadership experiences**

Booysen and Nkomo (2010) found the prevalence of the “think-manager, think-male maxim”. This concept describes the belief that managers are men, not women. Thoko, Xoli, Hlaloso, Thembi and Zukiswa (African), Ayanda (Coloured), Aarusha (Indian) and Ansu and Portia (White) held leadership positions. At no point did the two White participants share any challenges with their leadership experiences. In fact, Ansu shared that her school won an award for best team. Ayanda, on the other hand, was so overwhelmed by her leadership experience that she was adamant she was not going to apply for a second term.

When Black participants took up their leadership positions, they were questioned and undermined by their subordinates. Their authority and competence were constantly questioned, including by White junior staff who felt that an African woman could not lead them. Some would overlook the decisions made by their Black woman line manager and try to get authorisation from the next in command. Interestingly, the latter saw nothing wrong with this behaviour and would neglect to tell them to follow protocol.

The abuse of power to advance the bully’s agenda was predominant. This was consistent with Berlingieri (2015), Rai and Agarwal (2018) and Tehrani (2012) who argued that power imbalance also contributes to workplace bullying. Although Black women had positional power, they led White professors who had expert and coercive power because of the rank and various statutory committees they chaired. These are committees that the Black women leaders had to report to. Junior staff often had referent power due to their proximity to powerful relations.
Pharaoh’s daughters
The previous five pillars determined whether staff chose to remain in the institution or resign. All women shared that they were impacted negatively by bullying, with Africans mostly affected due to the severity of their bullying experiences from multiple university stakeholders. Women shared that bullying led to absenteeism, burnout, career regression, low commitment, job dissatisfaction, fear, sadness, anger and impatience and concentration loss (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011), as well as presentism (Naseem & Ahmed, 2020). Three African women (Anele, Zukiswa and Nomalanga) and a White woman (Petunia) shared that they had applied for job opportunities in other institutions and sectors. Petunia found employment elsewhere but couldn’t leave due to family responsibility. Her bullying experiences were so bad that she even wanted to commit suicide.

Even though women were in a hostile environment, most African women felt that teaching was a noble job and personally felt that they were making a difference. Some even suggested their exit would mean African students would be exposed to bullying at the hands of their White colleagues, which is what they experienced while they were university students. Natalia shared that, although she was aware that she was being pushed out of the university, she was not going to give her bullies that satisfaction by resigning. An additional consideration for her was the fact that she would not be able to up and move with her family to another province. When bullied, White academics mostly seek out counselling interventions (Ansu, Petunia, and Portia). African women (Zukiswa, Nomalanga, Vulindlela) had intentions to leave but due to support provided by their families, friends and colleagues and therapists, they were able to cope with the bullying.

Interestingly, human resources staff were aware of a number of bullying cases, yet chose to self-silence to avoid being bullied, while others advised staff to remain silent as the bully had more power. One union representative expressed that some staff approached the union before their exit. The reasons for exit are normally informed by two factors: how the case was handled and/or irreconcilable relationship. HR corroborated the experiences of the targets, expressing that they had to deal with a staff member who was affected psychologically, emotionally and all other ways. Sadly, the member of staff was head-hunted to join the university only to be met with bullying.

All African participants reported cases of African colleagues resigning, while there were no cases of White academics’ resignations. Nomalanga compared the bullying experience to that of Israelites in Egypt, under the leadership of Pharaoh who oppressed the Israelites. In Exodus 1: 10–11, Pharaoh instructed the soldiers to find ways to keep the Israelites from becoming even more numerous. So the Egyptians put slave drivers over Israelite to crush their spirits with hard labour. Those who came in quickly exited the system. The environment is created of a revolving door.

So What Then for Transformation?
Data from the study revealed a link, albeit indirect, between workplace bullying and transformation. African, Coloured and Indian women academics were mainly employed at junior levels, and found themselves with excessive teaching workloads and invisible work. They found it difficult to find time to do research and/or complete their postgraduate studies. At the same time, those employed in academic leadership positions had their
authority and competence constantly challenged, from below and from peers. Black women academics in leadership positions were also subjected to multiple expectations, including being transformation champions and participating in multiple committees. This is invisible work that does not carry much weight in performance management and promotions.

Analysing the participants’ shared experiences one can discern that gatekeeping does not start with the promotion process. Committees ensured that some academics do not even get a chance to meet the minimum criteria, by blocking their research supervision, postgraduate studies and allocating excessive teaching workloads. This maintains the status quo. According to Msila (2015), promotions can lead to a pathway of professorship, which includes serving on decision-making bodies such as the senate. The absence of Black academics could mean other colleagues deride them and decisions are made on their behalf.

The intersection of race, gender and class affect the evaluation of promotion and the evaluation criteria are not uniformly applied (Lisnic et al., 2018). Even though there are promotion policies, there are also unwritten expectations. The fact that women do service work does not count much towards promotions.

Workplace bullying had negative psycho-emotional consequences for these women academics. This resulted in them being unable to fully apply themselves in their jobs. This, in turn, led to negative performance reviews and culminated in some finally exiting the sector. The revolving-door phenomenon, particularly amongst Black women academics, translates into retardation of both race and gender transformation in the sector.

Failure to provide development to young women academics is a form of bullying. The development of young academics is critical to a transformation project. Mentorship and coaching are essential for nurturing and socialising young women academics, which will provide a fair chance of success. At times it might be necessary to provide mentors from other institutions, or even more than one mentor who can help through different needs of young academics. Further, training can also focus on teaching and learning, research, community service, leadership and even understanding how to leverage international opportunities and collaborations.

To rein in the exodus of women from academia, transformation efforts must continue beyond recruitment. Hiring Black women academics to advance transformation does not automatically translate to inclusivity. The onboarding is critical for new staff members and those who have been appointed to leadership positions. Women academics also need to be provided with a conducive work environment. In addition to capacity building and mentorship, psychosocial support, including coaching, should be provided. Other recommendations are:

- Institutionalisation of gender responsive budgeting to ensure that there is vision, strategy and budget for gender equality and continuously check the impact of the interventions.
- Putting in place a workload model that is responsive to the career levels of women academics, with a prioritisation of African and Coloured women.
- Review, monitor and evaluate the implementation of policies and processes, including workplace bullying and sexual harassment policies.
• Training of staff (including line managers, unions and human resources) on workplace bullying, transformation, human rights, ethics, communication and embracing the values of the university is critical for the attainment of gender transformation.
• Demonstrated management commitment to zero bullying tolerance.

Conclusion
In this paper, we have presented data to show the raced, gendered and classed nature of bullying in the higher education sector in South Africa. We have also suggested links between workplace bullying and transformation. Three categories of women need attention in order to advance gender transformation. Those striving to become junior academics by attaining qualifications and publishing research articles, those who believe they are ready to move up the rungs and apply for academic promotions or leadership positions, and those who are at the helm of leadership. Bullying is bound to undermine the progression of gender transformation. It is important for universities to come with interventions to identify workplace bullying risks and introduce interventions that will help minimise the impact of bullying.

NOTES
1. African, Indian and Coloured as per the Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 2008. In this paper, while we use the EEA and Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) definitions of population groups and gender, we are mindful that race and gender are ambiguous, dynamic and contested social constructions (Dlamini, 2013; Rosenblum et al., 2016). They reflect emergent power dynamics within particular local and historical contexts. Whereas Apartheid legislation named four distinct race groups, namely, Blacks, Coloured (so-called mixed race), Indians and Whites, post-1994 legislation classifies population groups as African, Coloured, Indian, White and Foreign National. The bind here is that, even as the democratic government sought to deracialise South African society to reverse race discrimination in the workplace, it found itself falling back on problematic Apartheid race categories, thus, reifying them. The taken-for-grantedness of the man–woman gender binary is also no longer sustainable. Legislation, societal and academic discourse, beyond feminist, queer and gender studies, are yet to catch up.

REFERENCES


