

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

My African Husband did not Conform to Gender Roles while Supporting Me through Doctoral Studies

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Abstract

Both men and women with doctorates are known to have significantly contributed to the advancement of continental and national growth through knowledge and skills acquired while conducting research in the pursuit of a doctorate. However, the percentage of women on the African continent with PhDs is still low across all nationalities. Students enrolled for PhD programmes have been known to exit at some stage for a variety of reasons, including financial hardships, obligations to one's family, and demotivation engendered by prolonged research. Some women seek divorces because they believe that their husbands hindered their paths to accomplishing their goals. This article presented a research narrative on an African woman PhD graduate who attended a university in South Africa. Mandisa talks about how her husband assumed gender roles perceived to be that of a woman to help her successfully complete her doctoral studies. This qualitative research was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm. Through the lens of the capabilities approach, this article demonstrated how spousal support is essential for a wife to achieve success in PhD studies. The results revealed that Mandisa's husband inspired her to succeed in her doctoral studies by relieving her of taking care of the household chores. The article envisions promoting doctoral education scholarship through highlighting the value of familial support, especially for African women.

Keywords: African women; doctoral education; higher education; academic development; patriarchy

Introduction

The research capacity of academics is crucial when pursuing doctoral studies since this promotes the growth of the knowledge economy in all countries (Mouton and Cloete, 2015). This is because individuals with doctoral degrees are capable of applying their intellectual and technical competence to finding solutions to a variety of global issues (Teferra, 2015). According to Cloete *et al.* (2015c, 77), Africa needs "tens of thousands more PhDs" scholars. In this regard, during the past ten years, more African women have obtained PhDs, making up 30.4% of the region's scientists (UNESCO, 2017). The relatively minor increase in the number of women PhD graduates is significant because, as members of society, they should obtain skills necessary to contribute to the growth of their communities, nations, and the entire world. Although there are many barriers preventing women in achieving success in doctoral education, this article specifically focused on cultural hindrances of the patriarchal system which influenced how women and men are socialised from childhood. According to Awung and Dorasamy (2015), traditionally, males are supposed to be responsible for external affairs, females are supposed to be responsible for internal affairs, and males are assumed to be superior to females. African women, in particular, face challenges like caring for their families, supporting their husbands' careers, and taking care of the sick or elderly in their families – all which hinder or delay their pursuit of doctoral studies (Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.*, 2018). These practices lead to the oppression of women enforced through patriarchal norms which stifle women's advancement and holistic development.

Since doctoral graduates are needed worldwide, raising academic excellence for all students in African universities is a priority (Matsolo *et al.*, 2018). Accordingly, Africa needs to increase its number of PhD graduates by expanding its doctoral programmes, in addition to networking with other countries for benchmarking reasons (The Kigali

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Communique, 2014). However, the patriarchal culture prioritises men as academics, and generally restricts women's rights to ascend the academic hierarchy (Altay, 2019). African women experience discrimination that disadvantages them because of their gender, race, and class compared to African males and European women (Mokhele, 2013). Robinson (2013) concurs that women live in a society riddled with racism and sexism which marginalises them, thus attaining their doctoral degrees will change their narratives. This article aimed to provide insight into the importance of an African man who supported his wife during her doctoral studies. The African woman is Mandisa whose doctoral journey was revisited mainly because of the resilience she demonstrated during, and most importantly, her husband's support which empowered and inspired her to pursue her doctoral degree. She was one of the three women who gave birth during this journey. Further, this case was unique because the husband was not highly educated, but he supported his wife and cared for their 4 children including the new-born, as the wife was busy working day and night on her doctoral studies. It must be noted that since this article emanated from a doctoral thesis which looked at fourteen African women's attributes to successfully complete a doctoral degree, the decision to discuss only one woman's story does by no means amplify her resilience in comparison to other women's stories which are not referred to in this work.

Numerous studies have shown that the family may be both beneficial and detrimental on a woman's ability to succeed academically (Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.*, 2018). Although many studies have been conducted on doctoral education in South Africa (Cloete *et al.*, 2015b, Breier and Herman, 2017), there is a dearth of literature on the role that husbands should play in supporting their wives who embark on doctoral journeys. Both internationally and locally, literature speaks to how this journey causes families to break up through divorce because this journey can be arduous and frustrating which many individuals cannot manage. Particularly, married women often chose divorce since being married impedes their ability to make progress in their doctoral studies (Brown and Watson, 2010; Ts'ephe, 2014). One aspect that hinders women's progress, especially in academic pursuits, is the patriarchal culture that is still prevalent in many societies; as a result, many women have been marginalised across the world. In a larger sense, the term *patriarchy* refers to the institutionalisation of male superiority over females and children in the family, and in many societies (Sultana, 2012). Within patriarchal societies, there are cultural norms that influence how boys and girls are socialised. These lead to women assuming multiple roles since patriarchal societies see women as second-class citizens who belong mainly in the kitchen (Makama, 2013). Research reveals that domestic responsibilities are one of the greatest impediments to women's career advancement (Batool and Sajid, 2013). These involve parenting, household chores, and caregiving which are regarded traditionally to be solely the responsibility of women (Awung and Dorasamy, 2015). In Africa, patriarchy still affects relationships between men and women because of embedded traditions (e.g. culture and religion) which obstructs achieving gender equality in Africa (Rwafa, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This article applied the Capabilities Approach (CA) which is a normative framework primarily used for analysing and evaluating an individual's wellbeing, while considering the social structures that either support or impede policy implementation and recommendations for social change within communities (Robeyns, 2006). The CA, however, is not a theory of social justice or of justice in general (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009). Although CA prioritises access to resources, it challenges theories that advance equality and development but only emphasise the economic aspect of life. These theories ignore the opportunities, skills, and freedoms that different people have to transform available resources into functional realities that expand individuals' range of options.

Created by Amartya Sen, CA utilises fundamental ideas like functioning, capabilities, agency, wellbeing, and conversion factors to measure and analyse human development (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006). One's functioning refer to the achieved outcomes or doings and beings that one values (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2003). The Capabilities Approach highlights what people can actually do and/or be, and it promotes the growth of their opportunities and freedoms to attain and enjoy the benefits of these valuable beings and doings (Sen, 1999). These opportunities and freedoms are referred to as capabilities. People do not only require suitable opportunities and freedoms to realise functioning that are valuable to them, but they should also realise the importance that they are actually able to be and do that which they have reason to value (Walker, 2005). This is because there may be the provision of resources or opportunities that not all students have access to. For example, there may be a library for all students to use, but if there are no ramps which will enable a student on a wheelchair to access certain parts of the library which would be helpful to them, the student is as good as not having the opportunity. For African women doctoral graduates like Mandisa, this was a valued accomplishment which depended on her actual access to opportunities

and freedoms to pursue higher education which contributed to her holistic development and wellbeing. As a mother of 4, she fortunately had a supportive husband who assumed the responsibility of taking care of the new-born child while she industriously worked on her thesis. Obtaining a doctorate was not merely a product of intrinsic motivation, but also a journey that equipped her with knowledge, skills, and values to become a better researcher, which also raised her status within her community. Without the support of her understanding husband and her resilience, her goals in life would have been negatively impacted and severely affected her doctoral studies. Agency is a CA pillar that illustrates a person's resiliency which Mandisa enacted that propelled her to succeed in attaining her goal. For instance, she would leave her house at 08:00 to find a suitable space (e.g. in a library) to work from while she was on maternity leave; at this point she was at the writing-up stage of her thesis. However, devoting time to her studies which required time away from her family could have been impossible had the husband not supported her in taking care of the children, including the new-born child.

The ability to exert effort or take actions that will assist one in achieving one's goals is referred to as agency, which is a core CA principle (Crocker and Robeyns, 2010). The Capabilities Approach is thorough in that it considers the conversion factors that affect a person's ability to exercise agency in converting capabilities into functioning on a personal, societal, and environmental level (Crocker and Robeyns, 2010). Conversion factors either enable or hinder an individual from achieving the desired goals, depending on one's willingness to circumvent the challenges or capitulate while facing adversities. For example, even if one has all the tools necessary for success, one still needs to toil, read and write critically, and be accessible for supervision in order to attain the results one desires. Moreover, no matter the amount of effort invested by Mandisa towards realising her dream – that of completing her doctoral studies - she needed to work collaboratively with the family because she was not a single woman. At one-point Mandisa's sister-in-law passed away, but she had to continue working on her thesis and miss attending the funeral which is one of the rarely acceptable norm in African societies. She was supposed to oversee the preparations for the funeral especially as she was married to a husband who was the first-born child. This is because in the African culture, sons stand in for parents' when they are older, making their wives to rise to the position of mother to the husband's siblings. Throughout this bereavement, Mandisa's husband encouraged her to focus on completing her PhD.

This article specifically examined the social aspect of Mandisa's successful completion of her doctoral studies. I focused strictly on what her husband's support system entailed.

Methodology

This paper was inspired from a study that was positioned within the interpretivist paradigm which holds different realities and encourages researchers to draw on their own values and views. The general study was a narrative inquiry that sought to gain a qualitative understanding of the lives and aspirations of African doctoral women graduates which focused on how these experiences affected their valued 'beings' and 'doings'. A qualitative approach was utilised to develop a close understanding of the research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; O'Leary, 2010). Participants in this general study were fourteen African women who had graduated with doctorates five years before the interviews were performed. Because the researcher wished to incisively understand participants' PhD paths, they were purposefully chosen (Neuman, 2007) to understand their narratives concerning the successful completion of their doctoral education. The university requested the researcher to apply for ethical clearance before conducting the study. Following its approval, the researcher contacted the alumni office again to ask for a list of women who were suitable as participants for this study.

However, due to ethical considerations, the office instead sent an email to all prospective graduates which included the researcher's contact information so that anyone who wished to participate in the study could get in touch with the researcher. After the relevant women contacted the researcher, checks were done to verify if they met the core criteria; for those who did, details were included in the consent forms regarding the research were forwarded to them. Appointments were then scheduled for interviews and the researcher travelled to meet the participants at their chosen place (mainly their workplace or the universities where they studied at). For those who were not in close proximity (outside South Africa), virtual meetings were arranged. An interview schedule and probable probe questions were pre-planned to elicit incisive information, to clarify, and elaborate on the certain issues (Maree, 2007). Fourteen interviews were verbatim recorded and thereafter transcribed. The researcher reviewed the transcripts and listened to the audio-recordings to identify the recurring themes that emerged from participants' PhD journeys. The thematic analysis approach was applied to analyse the data. To become familiar with the interviews, it was necessary to read the transcriptions multiple times. Themes or assertions that arose from the

collected data, and that were relevant to the study, were coded in each text using the Atlas TI software. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym in accordance with the ethical standards for research study to protect their identities. The social capabilities that were attributed to Mandisa's success in doctoral studies are explained below:

Discussion of Attributes to Mandisa's Completion

This section discussed the significant attributes to Mandisa's successful doctoral journey; this mainly pertained to her husband's support which helped her complete her PhD. The availability of opportunities does not automatically translate into success, but involves persistence and resilience especially when encountering challenges along life's route. As previously indicated, this article employed the CA also because it considers the principle of applying effort to engage available resources astutely while working through adversity to achieve set goals. Below is Mandisa's demonstration of her husband's support from the moment she decided to enrol for the PhD, covering areas of her choice to study in South Africa, the window to pursue the PhD, leading a balanced life by juggling responsibilities, and her husband as being from a 'rare species of men who fully supported her dreams. Contrary to the norm, where women put their dreams on hold to support their husbands to build their careers (Brown and Watson, 2010; Carter *et al.*, 2013; Magano, 2013; Magano, 2011b; Magano, 2011a), Mandisa's husband prioritised her goals despite managing his own business with all its demands. It is important to note that the timing to enrol for doctoral studies played a major factor in her decision-making.

... my husband quit his job, he didn't like working for somebody so he was doing business so sometimes his business wouldn't be profitable, so we would have debts and so on. But at the end of the day we told ourselves that I needed to get this degree. I decided to do my PhD right before my kids started going to high school, because I knew that if they were already in high school then there would be more responsibilities. So, I commenced my PhD when my first born was in Grade 4, just before high school, so I thought it was a good opportunity. Then the rest were still in primary school, one was not yet born, and the 3rd one was still very young so I thought it was a window when I should do my PhD.

The decision to pursue a doctoral degree while the children were still young meant that the husband had to take care of the children. Fortunately for Mandisa, the husband as a progressive African man, did not see raising children solely as a woman's role. According to Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* (2018), PhD students enrolled for distance education programmes (compared to those enrolled full-time) work remotely on their doctoral studies from home, thus combining their academic and domestic duties. The stress precipitated by this lack of physical separation negatively impacted women, especially those who found it difficult to balance all their obligations. Considering that Mandisa had to work, study full-time and tend to family obligations, the husband played a huge role in supporting her. After giving birth, and while on maternity leave, Mandisa mentioned that she had to depart from the house to go work on her thesis. To exacerbate the situation, she did not have the luxury of a nearby local library so she had to drive a distance to access one. She also had to park under a tree away from home to work in her car to avoid distractions such as a crying child. A PhD student must maintain mental stability to be able to effectively complete the PhD programme. According to Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), the significance of having a supportive and encouraging spouse cannot be underestimated – so true in Mandisa's case. Despite traditional beliefs, her husband assisted with 'women's duties' which included preparing the kids for school and putting them to bed, while she cooked when time occasioned it (Tsephe, 2021).

Mandisa was a Zambian national who studied in South Africa; as such she and her husband were committed to making this doctoral journey a success. As much as she wanted to further her studies, Mandisa felt coming to study in South Africa was worth the sacrifice because of the country's reputable universities. South African Government's drive to invest in research to increase the quality and number of doctoral graduates through improving and expanding the supervisory capacity of academics, in addition to it being relatively cheaper than studying abroad, many international students are attracted to further their studies in SA (Cloete *et al.*, 2015a). Mandisa articulated:

I wanted something different because I did my Master's, primary, and kindergarten in Zambia, so I wanted something different, a new experience, meet new people, and also, I heard from people that have done their PhDs that universities in South Africa are better equipped, and have good facilities. So, I didn't want to be left out, and as a senior research officer, I wanted an institution that was vibrant in terms of research, so not to say that Zambia is not vibrant in

terms of research, but I knew that South Africa is better. Also, I wanted to acquire skills in research while getting international exposure. I was tired of being at home.

Mandisa mentioned that although she was a senior researcher, it was a post below management level. She wanted to develop her skills as a researcher. As a result, she chose to come and study in South Africa because she had heard that South African institutions have good facilities which would equip her with the necessary skills as well as expose her to the world of research, bearing in mind that SA is considered to be the African PhD hub (Cloete *et al.*, 2015). Mandisa was a full-time registered doctoral student, who only came to South Africa to attend research training sessions as well as supervision meetings with her promoter. She held a full-time employment post back in Zambia, and was a full-time mother to her four children, but still attended PhD support sessions in SA. She did all this in the knowledge that she had a responsible and supportive husband taking care of the children. According to studies on women in higher education (Carter *et al.*, 2013, Magano, 2011b), gender socialisation causes women, unlike men, to assume many duties, which has a detrimental effect on their success rate in PhD studies. Further, because of the socialisation process, Mandisa felt guilty that the children became more attached to the husband because he spent more time with them while she was focused on her doctoral studies. This is consistent with Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* (2018) claim that women may experience feelings of guilt due to external pressure and criticism associated with gender roles if they chose to pursue doctoral studies because it deviated from the traditional roles of wives and mothers. In contrast to women, males receive encouragement to persevere in the face of difficulties from their families and social networks (Carter *et al.*, 2013). Mandisa mentioned that her liberal-thinking husband did not conform to gender norms, but did everything that needed to be done to support her in completing her PhD. She stated:

I feel bad that I left my children because of not being there; it was a big sacrifice. I was in an African setting and I wanted to be around my family

This feeling is not uncommon. It falls within the academic guilt component which an individual forms a negative sense of oneself as a result of the expectations of the society Collins (2021). Most working women often feel like this because of the failure to live up to the traditional idea of being 'good mothers'. The concept of a *good woman* determines how a woman allocates her time and energy to her family since society expects mothers to take care of their children in order to be good mothers (Carter *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, institutional support is key to doctoral students' success (Herman, 2011; West and Gokalp, 2011). Mandisa mentioned that she attended all research support sessions provided by her department despite the financial challenges. She indicated that she and her husband ensured that they made the necessary sacrifice just so she could come to South Africa to attend training and supervisory sessions.

I never missed any support session, attended all, and in fact I would always save money and come. Sometimes his business wouldn't be working, so we would have debts and so on but at the end of the day we told ourselves that I needed to get this degree, so whether we had money, or we didn't have money, we had to make sacrifices.

In general, most women prefer to delay their doctoral journey to raise their children and support their spouses; hence, their aspirations are kept in abeyance (Prozesky, 2008). It is interesting and admirable to see this African man put his dreams on hold while he teams up with his wife to support her ambitions. Mandisa regards her husband as being from a rare species. She indicated:

I would be working from 00:00 to 03:00 and the baby will be crying. Sometimes he would say, okay I will go out with the baby, you continue studying. He is one of the rare finds. I sometimes think that a female academician should have a husband who is a non-academic because if both of them want to be academics, it would be difficult for the family. One of them must play second-fiddle. Certainly, the woman must bow down, but if you have a businessman as a husband who is in their own world, it's a bit okay. So, I am thinking that one must be the lady. If the lady wants to do a PhD, then the husband must be someone who can be busy with family chores. Otherwise you will break your marriage and also damage your children's lives.

According to Rockinson-Szapkiw *et al.* (2014) and Springer *et al.* (2009), the family is an important hub of support for doctoral students; hence when given support such as a healthy diet, a proper educational space, and family backing, academically inclined women, among others, are able to operate successfully (Nussbaum, 2000).

Mandisa's husband was one of her strongest pillars of support. She also indicated that her mother and sister played a role; for example, her sister cooked for her family to lessen the pressure on the husband.

It is clear from Mandisa's narrative that sharing the same goal is important because the one spouse becomes the other's biggest fan. Working as a team brings about a win-a-win situation, and this is what Mandisa's husband saw – Mandisa's success was also his. Despite what people around them said, they did not let that tear them apart because they had a common goal for their family. Unlike some women who had to leave their marriages due to lack of support from husbands (Ts'ephe, 2014). Mandisa had a husband who believed and supported in her dream by caring for their children when she could not do so herself. Mandisa confessed:

A family friend talked to me in private and said what I am doing is not right, because I keep going up-and-down to university, and my husband is left behind; and that at some point I would be ashamed of my husband because I will feel bad that I am married to someone who doesn't have a PhD. I think the spouse factor is important, especially in Africa where women are supposed to be submissive, and are not supposed to be too educated.

Another important factor to achieve success was to network with peers and mentors who were on the same academic path for support and encouragement. West and Gokalp (2011) attest to this by stating that departmental climate and peer support influence completion success rates of doctoral students. Mandisa concluded:

However, I also got encouragement and support from Tebello. I talk to people, so when you go through stuff, you talk to people who can relate to your situation. Yah, so I discovered that Tebello's husband is not a PhD graduate. She used to tell me that I need to be grateful for my husband, as he was the one who brought me to where I am.

Like any journey in life, a doctoral student needs role-models to emulate and seek advice from especially when encountering stumbling blocks. Mandisa mentioned that Tebello had completed her doctoral education a couple of years before her and was now a lecturer in her department, Tebello also was married to a husband who was not a PhD holder but supported her to achieve her dream. Tebello encouraged Mandisa to not listen to what her friends were saying but rather appreciate her husband and the sacrifices he has done for their family.

Conclusion

This article brought to the fore the critical role played by a husband during his wife's doctoral journey. Although some women doctoral students still manage to complete their doctoral studies despite performing their traditional marital duties, most married women experience gender discrimination; hence, sometimes they find themselves postponing their dreams to support their husbands' careers. This is usually done through caring for the families' children, attending to the sick elder-relatives, as well as playing the role of 'good wives' while their husbands focus on building their careers. In this instance, however, it is interesting and encouraging that an African man, despite being advantaged by the patriarchal system, chose to not conform to society's norms, but chose to assume a role akin to that of a woman's by taking care of the family while his wife while his wife studied for a doctoral degree. Mandisa mentioned that even her children are now closer to their father as he was there every morning to prepare them for school, assisted with their homework, and performed household chores, while she was busy working on her thesis. Despite criticism from some family members and friends, Mandisa's husband persisted in assuring her that she could achieve her academic goal, that their sacrifices as a couple to attain this dream did not need to make sense to anyone else but themselves, and most importantly that obtaining a doctorate was for the benefit of the entire family. Although Mandisa at times felt guilty for being the 'absent mother' she can now contribute to her family in better ways than before as she had obtained the PhD degree to expand the range of available opportunities to better her family's standard of living.

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