Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the post-apartheid government’s quest for an inclusive economy to reduce structural inequalities, African women continue to be marginalised in the labour market, where unemployment remains high. Notwithstanding the introduction of various policies\(^1\) aimed at redressing the inequalities of the past by supporting the assimilation of previously disadvantaged groups into the labour market, unequal access to jobs and labour discrimination remain evident, with unemployment rates being significantly higher for women and particularly African women (Van Klaveren et al. 2009; Bhorat and Goga 2013; Shepherd 2008; Ranchhod 2010). However, in South Africa participation in the labour market remains largely influenced by race, class and gender. African females are not a homogeneous group as their experiences of race, class and gender depend largely upon their location in these social structures, where socio-demographic factors such as financial resources, economic opportunity and quality of education affect individuals differently (Department of Women 2015; Meiring et al. 2018). The prospects of upward social mobility amongst African women are further determined by factors including an individual’s family background, parental education and household economic status as well as their own educational status (Louw et al. 2006; Tonheim and Matose 2013).
This chapter aims to show that participation in paid work and the division of unpaid labour within households is a gendered struggle as well as a class-based struggle. Gender inequality in unpaid care work results in labour outcome gaps and influences how women experience productive work. Social reproduction theorists argue that the continuation of capitalism is dependent on the human labour that produces life itself (Luxton 2006: 36). The chapter highlights the myriad ways in which social reproduction is unevenly differentiated and distributed by race, class and gender, resulting in poor women largely bearing the burden of income inequality. Most importantly, the availability of work opportunities for women is not sufficient to gauge the progress in gender equality in the workforce and the home, nor does it signify that women are automatically emancipated by participating in the workforce. The chapter highlights the importance of disaggregating the category ‘women’ by class in order to prioritise the needs of women, to ensure actual emancipation rather than mere formal equality. I show that intersectionality as a framework is key to understanding African women’s conditions in South Africa and further illustrate African women’s social mobility through a class perspective. The empirical findings from a study that I conducted to ascertain the effects of social class on African women’s future work choices and the process through which these expectations develop and shape their prospects regarding paid work, will be employed to support and enrich some of the arguments made in this chapter. Through in-depth interviews, I explored middle-class and working-class African women entrepreneurs’ career aspirations and labour market choices and how these limit their social mobility.\(^2\)

**CHALLENGES FACING AFRICAN WOMEN BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19**

A Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2017) vulnerability report revealed that women are the most vulnerable to poverty due to social inequalities and rising unemployment. While gender equality and the empowerment of women has been central to South Africa’s democracy, unemployment and poverty remain widespread amongst African women. The highly stratified society and labour market prevalent during apartheid forced African women to occupy the lowest positions in both arenas due to restrictions on education, training, housing, work and pay (Lalthapersad 2002). Despite the progress made since 1994, from a socio-economic viewpoint, South Africa still remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. According to Murray Leibbrandt et al. (2012), 85 per cent of income inequality is caused by labour market income, with unemployment being the driver of inequality. The StatsSA
Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2018) reported that the unemployment rate was higher amongst African women (33.2 per cent) than amongst coloured (22.9 per cent), Indian/Asian (12.2 per cent) and white women (7.4 per cent). However, class position is a determining factor in terms of how women experience their levels of material wellbeing and life opportunities. The findings from my study exemplified that class influences women’s expectations about future work and affects their occupational choices. Both middle-class and working-class women's perceptions of future work opportunities were formed mainly by the availability or absence of educational opportunities as well as the race and gender dynamics in the South African workforce. For instance, educational equality does not guarantee equality in the workplace for middle-class women as the ‘glass ceiling’ effect continues to hinder their progress in the workplace. More so, working-class women without specialised skills due to lack of educational opportunities anticipate working in menial jobs. The relationship between education and workforce participation is not straightforward in South Africa, as systematic discrimination in the labour market affects African women's access to opportunities, regardless of their class and education.

In South Africa, African women make up a large percentage of the poor, mainly in rural areas where they live in dire poverty. Thus, poverty patterns continue to be gendered and female-headed households are more likely to have low incomes, to be dependent on social grants, and less likely to have employed members (StatsSA 2010). Due to poverty and unemployment, women are at more risk of contracting HIV/AIDS than are men. HIV/AIDS infections are highest among African females (Drimie 2002; Shisana et al. 2014; Harrison et al. 2015; Zuma et al. 2014; Gilbert and Selikow 2011; Williams et al.2017). Since most of those affected by HIV are poor adults and women, the human capital of these adults will also be lost, which can lead to a chain reaction, including a negative impact on socio-economic status by constraining the individual's ability to work and earn income, hence affecting future generations and intergenerational mobility.

The vulnerability of poor women was further exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. A report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) South Africa revealed that women in the informal sector were more impacted by the consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak than those employed in the formal sector (UNDP 2020). African women are overrepresented in the informal sector and are susceptible to higher poverty risk across the spectrum of informal employment types; they hold less secure jobs and have less capacity to absorb economic shocks, which aggravates existing inequalities (Rogan and Alfers 2019; International Labour Organization 2020; United Nations 2020; Jain et al. 2020). Recent surveys conducted by the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) and the Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) during the national lockdown showed
that the restrictions on individual mobility and business activities have a direct impact on people's employment prospects (Ranchhod and Daniels 2020). Daniela Casale and Dorrit Posel (2020), who utilised the NIDS-CRAM survey to study the early effects of Covid-19 in the paid and unpaid economies in South Africa, found that the lockdown measures destabilised work in the unpaid care arena, with the childcare burden increasing rapidly for many women who were already bearing this responsibility pre-lockdown. Additionally, the increasing tensions and distress caused by Covid-19 resulted in an increase in intimate partner violence (IPV). African working women are particularly at risk of experiencing IPV because of their ‘poor living conditions with already burdened access to health, safety, policing and socioeconomic needs’ (Parry and Gordon 2020; Blouws 2020). Without a doubt, the existing systemic instabilities of capitalism were exposed by the crisis of work caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The feminisation of unpaid labour, violence and the reproduction of patriarchy, as argued by Nigam (2020), have exposed the unequal power relations which predominantly affect women. Consequently, the devaluation of work typically performed by women is central to processes of capital accumulation and gender plays a key role in the dynamics of social reproduction but not one that operates in isolation from relations of class and race (Stevano et al. 2021; Bannerji 2011). At the same time it can equally be argued that while the class location of women is considered in intersectional feminism, the cause and endurance of class positions are not straightforward and may not be adequately explained. Bell hooks (2014: 40) quotes an American feminist writer, Rita Mae Brown, to emphasise that class is much more than an issue of money. According to Brown, ‘class involve[s] your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future … how you think, feel, act’. Thus, while the presence or absence of social mobility for African women can be attributed to these dimensions, the neoliberal economy persistently increases social inequalities across racial, gendered and class lines. The incorporation of women into the labour market is far from turning out to be always positive, especially given that the majority of women are concentrated in undervalued and poorly protected sectors where neoliberal reforms have pushed them into even greater precarity and vulnerability (Falquet 2016; Talahite 2010). This is why a gender-based analysis cannot proceed without a simultaneous analysis in terms of class and race.

Shulamith Firestone (1972), as cited in Cock and Luxton (2013: 128), argues that “the economy” and “the family” are distinct sites generating class and gender hierarchies and that the subordination of women was a necessary precondition for the development of class inequalities. In South Africa, the radically changing forms of employment pose a far-reaching threat to economically vulnerable groups that are
mostly African women who lack options to assemble a livelihood (Mabilo 2018). This results in the feminisation of labour, which signifies low-wage, itinerant jobs and a lowering of employment conditions for women.

CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The gendered nature of social reproduction is not atypical in South Africa and class inequalities lead to a disparity in care work, with women taking on a far greater share of unpaid and paid care work under difficult working conditions, particularly for those living in poverty. In short, women bear the burden of care work and work in the home; reproductive work is informally cast as not ‘real work’ and mostly performed by women even as they increase the time they allocate to paid work (Delaney and Macdonald 2018; Budlender 2008). This may result in some women leaving their paid positions in the labour market or opting for the more flexible hours offered by temporary employment, as they juggle household responsibilities and unpaid caring for family members (Parry and Gordon 2020). In order to create an equilibrium between paid work, caring for children and other unpaid care-work activities, women living in poverty may seek out more precarious forms of employment which may restrict their choices about work location. Nancy Folbre (2006: 185) argues that ‘as women juggle productive and reproductive work, time becomes a limited resource as the time they use to fulfil care responsibilities could be spent developing their educational skills in market-related activities’. Frene Ginwala, Maureen Mackintosh and Doreen Massey (1992) note that this pressure on women’s time can hinder the networks of relations among women which are so important to community strength and survival.

Consequently, the obligation of unpaid care work confines African women’s progress and opportunities to various spheres such as education, skills development and employment. Citing the feminist movement, Jacklyn Cock and Meg Luxton (2013: 131) posit that in order to thrive, capitalist economies depend on the unpaid care work of women, which acts as a significant subsidy for the private profit making essential to capitalism, and that the divisions of labour that make this care work central in women’s lives are key to the maintenance of women’s oppression and subordination. Based on this analysis, the integration of relations of production and reproduction ‘as part of the same socio-economic process’ has been echoed by social reproduction theorists (Bezanson and Luxton 2006: 37).

As discussed in the previous section, neoliberalism is one of the causes of gender inequality globally. In South Africa, the post-apartheid neoliberal policies have not benefited previously disadvantaged groups and have intensified African women’s
economic vulnerability. The inability of the post-apartheid state to transform the position of women, particularly black women, has confined women in a poverty trap, leaving many with limited choices. The formation of the Women’s National Coalition by the African National Congress (ANC) Women’s League mobilised women from all walks of life with the aim of putting gender at the centre of the agenda, but lacked an integrated approach to promote women’s interests. The ANC Women’s League has not challenged the neoliberal project of the ANC state which causes the crises of social reproduction faced by African women.

Jacklyn Cock (2018) argues that the feminist analysis of the relation between a gendered division of labour and women’s oppression is often affirmed, but seldom questioned. This unconscious liberal feminism is not changing power relations and class dynamics and advances a particular form of social mobility which is truly exclusionary. Precariousness should thus be studied and recognised beyond employment and should include the ‘precarization of social reproduction’ (Candeias 2004: 1), as these spheres interact with and condition each other.

Allison Pugh (2015) addresses the relation between precarious work and gender inequality by emphasising that there is class and gender difference in how people respond to the culture of insecurity. According to her, middle-class persons seem able to maintain a moral wall between market and home as they derive a sense of confidence and privilege from their immersion in market transactions. On the other hand, working-class members adopt a more detached or independent stance within both paid employment and family life, as they have too few resources to support such boundary work (Pugh 2015). This was confirmed in my study, which revealed that African women, irrespective of their class location, struggle to create an equilibrium between paid work and family responsibilities. However, socio-economic privileges influence the strategies that women employ to overcome role conflict. As pointed out by Shireen Hassim and Shahra Razavi (cited in Fakier and Cock 2009), increasing poverty and the commodification of the economy are changing the coping strategies of households, causing disruptions in gender and generational configurations of work and responsibility. The findings from my study showed that economic privileges compelled middle-class African women to consider hiring domestic workers and/or nannies or enrolling their younger children in childcare centres in order to reduce household demands on their time, while increasing available time to grow their businesses. On the other hand, working-class women relied heavily on family members, especially older children and relatives, as well as communal support such as neighbours and friends, to overcome the role conflict. The reliance on marginalised women to do domestic work allows middle-class women to engage in paid work, which accentuates that class location affects how women
assume social reproduction, or not. The desperation for better opportunities leads to the ‘feminization of survival’, a term used by Saskia Sassen (cited in Fakier and Cock 2009) to describe a process where economically desperate women leave the responsibilities of social reproduction in their households in the hands of other women in search for opportunities or to engage in economic activities outside the home. This is exemplified in this woman’s account: ‘My extended family and neighbours have always been support and make my life easier since I explore business opportunities outside my community. I never worry as I know my children are in good hands. Without their help, I am not sure I would have achieved much’ (Mathabo, interview, July 2014).

Clearly, the desperation for better opportunities results in women, especially working-class women, participating in a ‘care chain’, as noted by Khayaat Fakier and Jacklyn Cock (2009), which results in African working-class households becoming sites of a ‘crisis of social reproduction’ and indeed the shock absorbers of this crisis. This crisis is further explained by Jacklyn Cock and Meg Luxton (2013: 132) in their analysis of domestic labour amongst working class women. They argue that

from a social and structural perspective, in raising their children, parents are ensuring the generational reproduction of the working class. This analysis theorised households, families, kinship systems as crucial relations in any social formation and exposed the material basis of working-class women’s subordination and its links to the political economy of the capitalist society. It demonstrated housework’s contribution in maintaining the capitalist system and showed the important link between working-class housewives and capitalist economies.

The National Gender Machinery (NGM), which stemmed from the national Policy Framework for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality, meant that the state came to be viewed as the site through which equality for women would be created. The NGM was to provide the channels through which women would exercise policy influence with regard to women’s interests and serve as structural nodes through which gender equality would be effected (Gouws 2005). The NGM rarely functioned as an instrument to reduce gender inequalities and has been described as insensitive to women’s demands and often perceived as being co-opted by the state (Hassim 2005; Meer 2005). The creation of laws does not necessarily translate into the elimination of gender discrimination and, as Nomthandazo Ntlama (2020) argues, the effectiveness of the law depends on the understanding of the dynamics which are the subject of gender equality. Consequently, to ensure women participate and shape the implementation of policies, policy ‘production’ should
assume a bottom-up approach. How women in these structures engage the dialogues in the state contributes to the influence of such structures or machineries. There is a need for policies that seek to improve the conditions of women in paid and unpaid work and that expand women's options in the paid economy. It is not about women enjoying equal status with men, as this does not guarantee equality in jobs and opportunities. Rather, policies ought to take the specific needs of women into account if holistic transformation is to occur (Hassim 1991).

For the above to be realised, the state remains an important vehicle for advancing just and equitable conditions for women through diverse resources that will enable differently positioned women to actualise freedom and equity (Bailey 2016). In South Africa, the state envisioned the adoption of measures to redress social imbalances, such as affirmative action and employment equity, as fundamental to promoting the upward mobility of women in the labour market and to breaking the glass ceiling (Van Zyl and Roodt 2003). However, affirmative strategies have failed to address and transform the underlying causes of the inequalities that women face, in both productive and reproductive spheres. Although it is important that the necessary legislative frameworks are in place to ensure gender equality and the equal employment of women, having these frameworks in place will not in itself change women's positions; it is only effective implementation that will do so. For affirmative action to be effective, it must extend to the advancement and promotion of women in all spheres, which includes social mobilisation and policy actions to overcome the crisis of reproduction and in order to redress the unpaid work that perpetuates neoliberal capitalism (Ginwala 1991; Randriamaro 2013). For Erin Nel (2011), in order to thwart the systematic racism and classism that is prevalent in society, class-based affirmative action would be a more transformative strategy as it is directly concerned with material deprivation and could have the effect of transforming, rather than affirming, reified racial identities.

One of the limitations of liberal feminism is exemplified in the assertion that society in general would benefit from educated women, without paying adequate attention to the conditions of working-class women. The working-class women interviewed in my research acknowledged that their lack of education and skills forced them into precarious employment at an early age in order to support their families. From that point forward, many remained in low-paying jobs with poor working conditions, thus restricting their access to the resources and opportunities that allow people to work towards (or not work towards) fulfilling their potential and experiencing social mobility (Potgieter 2016). Thus, inadequate education and lack of skills limit the employment prospects of poor women in the labour market, leading to poor access to salaried income and limits to social mobility (Lekezwa 2011).
CLASS ANALYSIS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The various forms of exploitation that women have endured are largely explained through an intersectional framework of class, race and gender that has perpetuated inequality. Intersectionality is understood in a wide variety of ways, as both a theoretical and an analytic tool (Sigle-Rushton and Lindstrom 2013). As Elizabeth Cole (2009: 170) asserts, the concept of intersectionality was offered ‘to describe the analytic approaches that simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference and disadvantage that affect a person’s beliefs about their capabilities and define their opportunities’. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) states that intersectionality symbolises how black people (and more particularly black women) continue to exist at the crossroads of oppression.6

The theoretical debates about women, class and work can be situated at the intersection of Marxism and feminism. Socialist feminists reformulated the ‘women question’ by rethinking key categories of Marxist logic, including production, reproduction, class, consciousness and labour (Hennessy and Ingraham 1997: 6). Although Karl Marx’s work did not specifically address the oppression of women, Martha Gimenez (2005: 15) is of the view that his theoretical insights are necessary to contend with ‘the oppression of women under capitalism, and with the limitations capitalism poses to feminist politics’. However, for some, the contribution of Marxism to feminism is not straightforward. Heidi Hartmann’s (1979) work on the ‘unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism’ strongly stressed that the merging of feminism and capitalism was unsustainable and would result in an unhappy marriage as it was marked by extreme inequality, since it subsumed the feminist struggle into the ‘larger’ struggle against capital (Hartmann 1979: 1).

From a South African standpoint, Belinda Bozzoli (1983) noted that the collapsing of female oppression into the capitalist mode of production is the central tendency in analyses of women in South Africa. Thus Hartmann proposed that ‘either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce’ (Hartmann 1979: 1). Wendy Brown (2014) proposes that Marx’s work can be used to understand the historical development of women’s nature, while Silvia Federici (2018: 19) emphasises that Marx’s methodology has given feminists tools to weave together ‘gender and class, feminism and anti-capitalism’. Writing from the South African context, Puleng Segalo (2015) proclaims that these dimensions can be used to appreciate the multifaceted levels at which social injustices and inequalities occur to generate a system of oppression. Frene Ginwala (1991) echoed this sentiment by positing that the fundamental issue we have to confront is the interface of race, class and gender that has shaped our society.
The transition to democracy brought gender into the spotlight yet it is obvious that South African society is structured in terms of social groups and it is within the class system that social divisions and inequality occur (Lushaba 2005; Seekings 2003). To fully capture African women’s social mobility trend in post-apartheid South Africa, which can be described as the individual’s trajectory within a social structure over their lifespan, the social class perspective will help us dissect the many ways inequality is produced and sustained amongst African women from different class groups. The hierarchical structure of society in South Africa, which largely defines access to wealth, prestige and power, was constructed on the basis of race, placing restrictions on where people could live, and the type of education and work occupations they had access to (Taylor and Yu 2009).

To effectively theorise class, Joan Acker (2006) asserts that we need to think of class as constituted by race and gender. Miriam Glucksmann (2009) expanded on the debate on class and gender by arguing that the manner in which labour is divided up in a particular society is highly differentiated by gender and includes productive and reproductive work, paid and unpaid. I argue that incorporating class is essential in order to fully understand the struggles faced by African women in both paid and unpaid work, as women’s class location shapes their beliefs and decisions about work and unpaid work. In addition, reproductive work in some cases determines the type of work that women engage in and is experienced differently, given one’s class location. My research showed that the women’s perceptions of future work opportunities were formed mainly by the availability or absence of educational opportunities, as well as the race and gender dynamics in the South African workforce. Therefore, class influences women’s expectations about their future work opportunities and affects their occupational choices. The class factor cannot be ignored as family background and status play a role in women’s preparation for and decisions related to paid employment (O’Reilly et al. 2013). Luxton (2006: 37) expounds on the need to consider class analysis in order to understand how production and reproduction are linked. According to her, ‘by developing a class analysis that shows how production and reproduction of goods and services and the production of life are part of the integrated process, social reproduction does more than identify the activities involved in the daily generational reproduction of daily life. It allows for an explanation of the structures, relationships and dynamics that reproduce these activities’.

The data from my research revealed that family expectations, which are linked to the family’s class location, play a significant role in shaping an individual’s career choice and aspirations for the future. As a result, socio-economic standing is distributed along racial lines in South Africa and a family’s background has significant
consequences for an individual’s future and social mobility prospects. A family’s socio-economic background shapes the type of support that an individual receives and ultimately the choices they make regarding a future career. The working-class women, who were predominantly raised in working-class homes, highlighted that their parents expected them to work, as expressed by this participant:

My mum did her best to raise me in times where she had limited choices and resources. She worked as a domestic worker as she never had the opportunity to go to school; hence there were no other jobs for people like her. She was constantly frustrated and would often stress that I should ensure that I find a better job than hers so that my life could be better. As a result, I started working at a young age to help her as we were struggling financially. (Ulwazi, interview, October 2014)

On the other hand, some middle-class women who grew up in middle-class homes explained that their parents encouraged them to seek high-paying jobs as this would guarantee them a financial safety net and reduce the possibility of future financial strain: ‘I was constantly told that a job was not enough unless it paid well. My parents believed that a high-paying job acted as a safety net but also kept one motivated. They expected me not to settle for less when I started working’ (Kensani, interview, September 2014).

From the above accounts, it is evident that based on their current social class, parents from different classes develop their own social and cultural values, which impact on their children’s career choices and decisions. Class thus affects occupational choices by imposing the values and expectations of that social strata on their children’s career choices. A class-centred approach to intersectionality can thus be useful to understand the condition of African women in post-apartheid South Africa and to show that their experiences are not homogeneous. Considering only gender is insufficient to fully explain the multidimensional and diverse paths that women across classes follow with respect to career aspirations and work choices (Mbithi 2020). The integration of class into the gender debate should therefore be explored to understand the factors that shape the career aspirations of African women and the process through which workforce expectations are established. Despite the drastic increase of African women in the workforce, many continue to experience what Michelle Fine calls ‘the presence of an absence’ (2002: 26). This signifies that their ‘presence’ may remain somewhat of a façade as many continue to face challenges that are directly linked to their class position, race and the fact that they are women. This is demonstrated further below.
AFRICAN WOMEN’S SOCIAL MOBILITY THROUGH CLASS

The Natives Land Act No. 27 of 1913 created socio-economic injustice in terms of poverty and dispossession of land from black South Africans. According to Ben Scully (2017), centuries of colonialism and racialised restrictions elicited a crisis in the traditional agrarian economy, which the majority still relied on as a main source of livelihood. Prior to the Natives Land Act, black South Africans owned and utilised land effectively for their welfare as well as for their economic stability (Modise and Mtshiwelwa 2013). Land dispossession thus led to many families finding alternative work to survive, which meant that they became dependent on employment for survival, thus creating a pool of cheap labour for the white-owned farms and mines (Rugege 2004). The destruction of peasant agriculture and restrictions on the informal economy under apartheid created a society that was overwhelmingly reliant on waged work (Seekings and Nattrass 2005). The migrant system that resulted from the need of black males to migrate to the cities and white farms in order to earn a living and provide for their families, in many cases resulted in the break-up of families and the dislocation of social life (Rugege 2004). Debbie Budlender and Francie Lund (2011: 926) describe the deliberate destruction of the family in apartheid South Africa as ‘state-orchestrated destruction of family life’. This is because families were undermined by deliberate strategies implemented through the pass laws, forced removals, urban housing policy and the creation of the homelands (Hall 2017; Hall and Posel 2019).

Sarah Mosoetsa (2004) adds that family and kinship networks in South Africa were historically divided between town and homelands by the migrant labour system. As a result, many men migrated to the city but a range of restrictions prevented them from migrating with their families or settling permanently in urban areas (Budlender and Lund 2011 Posel 2010). Consequently, restrictions on settlement and employment divided families across space (Posel 2010). Rates of marriage and union formation, which were already low, continued to fall, remittances declined and unemployment rates remained persistently high (Hunter 2007; Posel 2010; Posel and Rudwick 2013). Katharine Hall and Dorrit Posel (2012) posit that the majority of African children in South Africa do not grow up in two-parent households, and where children do live with a parent, this is far more likely to be their mother than their father. The restrictions on settlement, commonly referred to as the pass laws, were paramount in ensuring that only employed blacks were allowed within designated white areas, while those who were unemployed and the families of labour migrants were forced to remain in the homelands and townships (Blalock 2014). As a result of male-dominated patterns of labour migration and the institutional constraints of the apartheid period, fathers are more likely than mothers
to live separately from their children (Hatch and Posel 2018). This limited African women’s economic participation by restricting their mobility and many became economically dependent, focusing on care duties. In the context of low and falling marriage rates in South Africa, women typically bear both economic and caregiving responsibilities for children (Hatch and Posel 2018).

Apartheid further limited black Africans’ workplace advancement by denying them educational opportunities (Terreblanche 2002). In the post-apartheid context, unskilled employment within the formal sector has declined while employment within the informal sector has increased, further distorting labour mobility in South Africa and widening unemployment, inequality and poverty (Blalock 2014; Schiel 2014). Given the lack of formal or regular employment amongst African women, many employ livelihood strategies in response to vulnerability, deprivation and insecurity (Beall et al. 2000). One of the strategies that was introduced in South Africa is the social protection system of social grants, which includes, amongst others, old-age pensions, disability grants and a child support grant which currently (in 2020) stands at R740 (US$48.85) per child per month. These interventions are premised to guarantee a minimum livelihood to those who cannot reliably access sufficient income through labour (Dawson and Fouksman 2020).

For many poor women, as revealed in studies conducted by Michelle Williams (2018) and Granlund and Hochfeld (2019) in Cutwini and Keiskammahoek in the Eastern Cape respectively, grants are the only consistent and reliable source of income to meet basic needs and provide a measure of security, survival and increased dignity. This is, however, challenged in my research as most working-class women acknowledged that the child support grant was a temporary solution and insufficient to meet their basic needs. One woman described her situation as ‘just getting by’: ‘This money is not enough given that there is no one else working in my family. We buy, but the money has not done much for us as we struggle every day. I end up borrowing money from relatives, but they are now tired of me because I do not have a job to pay back’ (Mary, interview, October 2014).

A cash transfer alone does not alter the economic and political roots of poverty, which are largely structurally determined. As Leila Patel (2016) argues, social assistance has stepped in where the labour market has failed to provide the poor with a reliable means of income. Social grants have thus become a de facto safety net for the long-term unemployed and underemployed (Scully 2017), with female household members bearing the burden of caregiving and unable to compensate for the inadequacies of the labour market and basic service provision (Fakier and Cock 2009).

The increased number of black women in the labour market was followed by the development of the black middle class in South Africa. The middle class can
be described as those people who occupy either the middle strata of income distribution in a given country or a middle position between a lower class and an upper class with unique occupations and skills (Seekings and Nattrass 2005; Mattes 2015). Occupation and skills further determine an individual’s life chances and are instrumental in class mobility. Roger Southall (2016) stresses the importance of family background, shaped by class, in determining children’s life chances and class mobility. As noted, the family, as the primary and most important agent of socialisation, plays an important role in the vocational development and decision-making process of an individual – a process that starts in childhood. Consequently, a family’s racial background and class location influence this process. Middle-class women participating in my research shared that parental support and education encouraged them to remodel the middle-class life: ‘My parents were both teachers and worked hard to ensure that I went to the best schools and universities and that I had everything that I needed to perform well. They were also emotionally supportive and constantly stressed that I should work hard at school. This was the turning point for me as it highlighted the importance of education in shaping my future’ (Lerato, interview, August 2014).

For other middle-class women, especially those who grew up in working-class homes, the lack of parental education as well as challenging circumstances within a household can also be motivating factors for one to aim for a better future and find work. In my research, the accounts of such women illustrate ‘class escape’, as their parents wanted them to have a better future: ‘I felt as though my parents spoke to me through their daily struggles about valuing the opportunities I had. While they had very little, they worked hard and sacrificed financially so that I could attain a degree. It is evident that they wanted me to have a better life than the one they had which meant that I had to have a qualification and a better job’ (Priscilla, interview, August 2014).

At the same time, huge numbers of African women are confined to an ‘underclass’ of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The ‘underclass’ refers to people who live in extreme poverty, and those involved in ad hoc or informal sector survival activities as they lack the basic education and skills needed for stable employment (Schlemmer 2005: 3; Wright 2015: 4). This was evident from the accounts of the working-class women in my research, who grew up in extreme poverty, as described by this woman:

Growing up in a small town in rural Limpopo, my three siblings and I had a difficult childhood. My parents were unemployed, and poverty was rife. As the eldest of the three siblings, it was difficult to think about the future amid
the uncertainty that confronted me. I dropped out of school, a situation I had predicted, given my parents’ inability to pay school fees. But that was not it; I felt that it was my responsibility to do something about the financial crisis at home. The pressure that my parents put on my shoulders to find work was the final stamp to the realisation that I had missed the most important phase of my life, which was getting an education. It was a gone dream, and I had to think about life without skills and qualifications. (Thulani, interview, July 2014)

As Sarah Damaske (2011) argues, women of different classes face uneven structural limitations and form different expectations about work and family that shape how their work trajectories and family trajectories are interrelated over the course of life. These expectations are further influenced by gender stereotypes and cultural expectations based on a family’s class location. Traditional gender messages influence middle-class women with respect to, for example, their career choices and their role as caregivers in the home. As this woman puts it: ‘Growing up, my dad would tell me that irrespective of how educated I am, I should always put my family first and take care of my husband. He kept emphasising that men leave when women are too occupied in their careers, and I should always think about this when I look for work one day. These comments affected my career choices’ (Kopano, interview, August 2014).

On the other hand, working-class women are gendered in their desperation for work or marriage at an early age. The socio-economic challenges experienced by working-class women result in future work uncertainties: ‘I was not surprised when my parents announced I was to get married, as it was the norm. The fact that I had not attended school gave me no other life choices. They also had to survive, and they viewed my marriage as a reward for the family from a monetary point of view. As a result, I never saw the possibility of having a career one day’ (Thembeka, interview, October 2014).

According to Magda Rukhadze (2018), early marriage, especially for women, has socio-economic risks, among them reduced access to education and employment opportunities. Jeanette Bayisenge (2010) adds that the potential rewards for educating daughters are too far off; hence, many poor families do not recognise their education as an investment. The participant’s account outlined above suggests that gender roles delineate what women and men are expected to do, which affects the talents they cultivate and the opportunities and constraints they encounter, and this correlates with the career paths they pursue.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has emphasised how social reproduction is differentiated by race, class and gender. African women continue to experience unequal access to jobs and labour market discrimination due to their position in a highly stratified society. African women also continue to experience high rates of poverty and unemployment and are overrepresented in the informal sector, where they hold less secure jobs with low pay and precarious working conditions. This aggravates their vulnerability and existing inequalities. Their dire situation is further exacerbated by unforeseen shocks such as Covid-19, which has threatened work in both paid and unpaid arenas. Unpaid care work further confines African women to the domestic sphere and restricts their participation in the public sphere. As highlighted in the chapter, any analysis of unpaid work and care work must be aware of how gender and class impact the economic lives of women differently. Women's disproportionate share of unpaid work shapes their home experience, limits their participation in and gains from the labour market and contributes to their vulnerability, particularly where labour outcomes such as wages and job quality are concerned. Integrating class into gender debates is crucial to an understanding of women's work choices and prospects, especially the multifaceted and diverse paths that women follow to remodel their work–family options across classes. However, it is worth emphasising an important dimension of social reproduction in capitalism, which is the work of ‘making workers’ – this includes not only the physical work but also affective labour and cultural transmission to children. In this regard, the way parents shape expectations for future employment is a direct part of social reproduction – not just equipping people for the labour market in terms of skills, education and so on, but also to accept their classed place in the labour market. This demonstrates the role of the family in the reproduction of social class and class inequalities (Crompton 2006). As exemplified in the excerpts from my study, the occupational position of parents has an effect on the intergenerational transmission of occupational types and social mobility for adults. Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek (2017) argue that care work is work (regardless of whether it is privatised, public or personal) and it plays a crucial role within the complex and systematic challenges of contemporary society. As illustrated by Cock and Luxton's (2013: 137) argument, ‘both public and private forms operate within a capitalist framework and neither provides secure conditions of social reproduction for the majority, although the former modified somewhat the vulnerabilities produced by the market economies while the latter has undermined the capacities of a growing population to ensure its own social reproduction.'
Shamim Meer (2005) points out that the state continues to reinforce existing race, class and gender disparities. This can be attributed to institutions’ failure to address the ways in which the state continues to reinforce these dimensions of oppression. While legislative frameworks are necessary to ensure gender equality and the equal employment of women, many have not been transformative and emancipatory, hence policies need to consider the particular needs of African women. The participation of women in the South African labour market is influenced by gender, race and class; the experiences of African women are profoundly shaped by their class location. Therefore, a class perspective to intersectionality will help us dissect the many ways in which inequality is produced and sustained amongst African women from different class groups, as class location has enduring effects on the future work expectations and social mobility of African women. Family background, shaped by class, is a leading factor in determining an individual’s life chances and class mobility. According to Cock and Luxton (2013: 130), ‘both the production of the means of life and the production of life itself are distinct but interrelated necessary social processes’. Moreover, the ‘needs’ of workers are not natural or constant but are themselves relative and determined socially, such that the standard of necessity at which workers are reproduced is ‘enforced by class struggle’ (Lebowitz, cited in Bhattacharya 2017: 79).

NOTES

1 Structural transformation to address poverty and inequality was pertinent after apartheid as South Africa entered a new era. Key policies included the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) approach, the New Growth Path and the National Development Plan, which favoured a market system, as well as the affirmative action policies regarding employment, such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) for businesses (see Breakfast and Phago 2019: 46).

2 The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of class and gender on middle-class and working-class African women entrepreneurs and their perceptions of work and opportunities available to them. How do they perceive these experiences? How have these experiences affected them and how have they responded to these experiences? The research was conducted in Johannesburg and Pretoria, where the middle-class women operated their businesses, and in White River and Tzaneen, where working-class women operated survivalist businesses. The study employed a qualitative research method and utilised snowballing and purposive sampling techniques to select participants. In total, a sample of 103 women was selected and interviewed. Out of the 103, 41 were middle-class women and 62 were working-class women. Given my inability to speak the local languages, the recruitment of interpreters to assist in the research process was necessary, particularly with respect to the working-class
women, since most could not speak English. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were predominantly used to collect data and in some cases observations were paramount to understand the gender dynamics in the household and business, and how the women reconciled the trade-off between childcare and paid work. Data analysis software known as NVIVO was used to analyse the data.

3 The unprecedented economic impact of Covid-19 has resulted in many workers experiencing shocks related to earnings and employment. Simone Schotte and Rocco Zizzamia (2021) detail that the consequences of Covid-19 appear especially severe and long-lasting for those in informal work, whether in wage labour or self-employment.

4 The CRAM survey provides monthly nationally representative data on key outcomes such as unemployment, household income, child hunger and access to government grants (https://cramsurvey.org/about/).

5 All interviewee names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

6 The theory of intersectionality was birthed from debates on critical theory. See Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) work.

7 Also see Cock and Luxton’s (2013) engaging piece in which they debate whether Marxism and feminism is an ‘unhappy marriage or creative partnership’.

REFERENCES


Hartmann, H. 1979. ‘The unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union,’ *Capital & Class* 3 (2): 1–33.


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INTERVIEWS

Kensani, September 2014, Johannesburg
Kopano, August 2014, Johannesburg
Lerato, August 2014, Pretoria
Mary, October 2014, White River, Mpumalanga
Mathabo, July 2014, Tzaneen, Limpopo
Priscilla, August 2014, Johannesburg
Thembeka, October 2014, Tzaneen, Limpopo
Thulani, July 2014, White River, Mpumalanga
Ulwazi, October 2014, White River, Mpumalanga