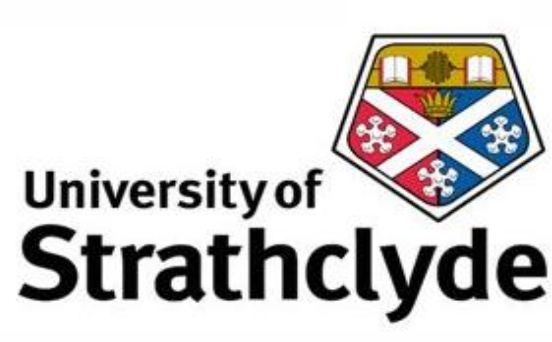

Gender in a Trade Union Organisation: Exploring Logic, Lock-in and Their Implications

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A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

To my beloved late parents, Weziwe and Mandlenkosi, for instilling a value for and love of education, and nurturing my curiosity by always asking why.

Copyright Statement

Signed: MZD
Date: 16/12/2024

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It would be amiss not to thank the Lord Almighty for carrying me through this year and surrounding me with individuals who have been motivational and supportive towards the completion of my degree.

At the top of this list is my supervision team, Dr Kendra Briken and Dr Brian Garvey, who guided me through this process, both by challenging and supporting me when needed. The constructive feedback and guidance have been essential to the completion of this journey.

Not forgetting my peers for the continuous emotional support and pep talks that kept me focused on the end goal. The coffee chats and reminders that it's okay to breathe and not have it all figured out were a breath of fresh air. I do not think I would have come this far without you all helping me out of my miniature spirals. You have truly lived up to the principle of "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" – I am because we are.

To my family and adopted family, the phone calls, your care packages, and prayers were noted. Even though I was far away, at no point in time did I feel alone. You have lifted me in all respects, and your unwavering support has been a constant source of strength.

And finally, I would like to extend my thanks to all individuals who participated and took the time to engage with me throughout this process. Your candour and objectivity, given the context of the subject matter, have been appreciated.

Abstract

Research has long shown that organisations are not neutral spaces but reproduce gender inequalities in how people work, lead, and are represented. Yet gaps remain in understanding how these inequalities take root in particular histories and contexts, especially those of organisations in the Global South. This study takes up that challenge by examining how gendering practices are embedded in a South African trade union. To do so, it is guided by gendered organisations theory, inequality regimes and feminist perspectives. Feminist perspectives, specifically standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist perspectives, are brought together in a framing that I refer to as a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens.

Using a qualitative case study approach, I combined interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations to trace how gendering praxes emerge and endure in everyday trade union life. This multi-method strategy enabled depth, specificity, and contextual analysis of how past political, economic, and social conditions continue to shape gendered dynamics within the trade union.

The findings show that leadership and decision-making remain shaped by an organisational logic centred on the frame of 'patriarchal sedimentation.' I define patriarchal sedimentation as the organisational logic that is grounded in a gradually solidified, male-centred practice, defining leadership, representation, and decision-making within the organisation. It demonstrates how historical legacies, organisational routines, and external socio-political pressures interact symbiotically to reinforce gendered praxes and hierarchies. Therefore, it highlights not only how gendered praxes are rooted but also why they remain resistant to formal reforms or policy interventions.

The study contributes in three ways. Theoretically, the study enhances understanding of gendering processes by illustrating their historical and contextual roots, moving beyond universalist explanations and emphasising the significance of specific socio-political contexts, such as those in South Africa. Methodologically, by adopting a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens, this lens highlights how colonial and Apartheid legacies influence gendered praxes, especially for Black women, offering a decolonial expansion of feminist theory that situates analysis within local histories and contexts. Empirically, it demonstrates how gender inequalities persist in a South African trade union, despite progressive labour laws, offering practical, locally grounded insights into how organisational contexts perpetuate gender disparities and thereby prompting situational guidance for context-aware, equitable interventions.

Together, these contributions advance both scholarship and practice by foregrounding the complex roots of gender inequality in trade unions. These highlight that gendering is not only about organisational structures, but also about economic survival within unequal systems.

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1. Introduction

Gender remains a significant influence on how individuals experience opportunities and challenges in organisations (Gradín, 2021). Numerous research studies highlight that the resulting gender disparities extend beyond mere equal opportunity or representation (Wagner & Teigen, 2021).

In trade union organisations, these disparities manifest in leadership structures, decision-making processes, and the representation of women in key roles (Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022). Some arguments posit that gender disparities and inequalities in trade unions are exacerbated by gendered power relations, organisational structures, and cultural norms (Rodriguez et al., 2016), reflecting the broader argument that "gender [is] a basic organising principle that shapes the conditions of [our] lives" (Creswell, 2018, p. 28). Therefore, despite trade unions' role in advocating for workers' rights, the rootedness of gendered practices within their organisation may contribute to the marginalisation of women in leadership and negotiations, thus reinforcing existing inequalities rather than challenging them (Ledwith, 2012; Tilly, 1998).

These inequalities, according to West and Zimmerman (1987) are socially constructed gender norms and expectations mirrored in organisational arrangements and functions (Acker, 1990, 1992b). In the context of trade union organisations, these norms are embedded in hierarchical structures, leadership representation, and workplace culture, influencing how men and women engage in union activities (Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022; Colgan & Ledwith, 2002). The arrangements and functions not only reflect but also reinforce the gendered disparities that shape access to leadership, bargaining power, and representation in decision-making spaces (Acker, 1992b, 2006b; Jaga et al., 2018).

Research indicates that women in trade unions often face structural and cultural barriers that limit their ability to access leadership roles, despite gender equality policies (Healy et al., 2011; Healy et al., 2019; Kirton, 2013, 2015, 2021). Therefore, gender disparities, in trade unions are not merely a matter of formalised participatory structures and processes but are deeply rooted in historical and structural dynamics that extend beyond straightforward access to equal opportunity or representation in divisions of labour, behaviours, and power (Parsons, 2017). This suggests that trade unions, whilst advocating for workers' rights, may simultaneously reproduce gendered hierarchies that limit women's agency and influence on their practices (Tilly, 1998; Webster & Adams, 2022).

Given this context and understanding, this thesis examines the origins of gendering practices within a trade union organisation. To set the focus of the thesis, this chapter begins with an overview of the broader context of the area of interest, specifically emphasising trade unions as organisations. This is followed by outlining the problem statement, establishing a foundation for the study's aims and objectives. Subsequently, the study's significance, methodology, and contributions are discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the subsequent chapters.

1.1 Drawing on Existing Literature on Gender in Organisations

Historically rooted in interdisciplinary fields, including feminist theory, sociology, and organisational theory (Acker, 2006b), inter alia, research in the field of organisation studies has made significant progress in discussing gender in organisations and how gender affects the unfair differences, disadvantages, and advantages that individuals encounter.

Much of the work on organisations and gender studies, including the work of scholars Acker (1990, 1992b), Judith Butler (1988), West and Zimmerman (1987), Mill and Peta (1992), and Gherardi and Poggio (2007, 2014), Desire Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon (2021), inter alia, has intensely focused on this argument. These feminist scholars reason that organisational practices are characteristically embedded with gendered assumptions (Acker, 1990, 1992a, 1992b; Mills, 1992). To argue and support this perspective, Acker's (1990) seminal work 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organisations' popularised the conceptualisation of gendered organisations. Providing a popularised framework for understanding gendered organisations, Acker (1990)highlighted that organisational processes are not neutral but are designed and operated in ways that reflect and reinforce preferential advantages and disadvantages of individuals based on gender.

Since then, empirical studies supporting this argument have been conducted by scholars such as Bates (2018; 2021), Parsons (2017), Parsons et al. (2017), Dye and Mills (2012), and Benschop and Dooreward (1998), to name a few. The common denominator of these respective studies is their endeavour to engage and broaden understanding of where and how these preferential advantages and disadvantages occur in organisations and highlight the premise of the arrangement. These studies establish that substantive gender inequalities and their persistence can be understood and observed in organisational components such as job roles, employee exchanges, structural hierarchies, and cultures, echoing Acker's (1990) finding.

This study also adopts Acker's (2006d) inequality regimes framework to explore how organisational structures, practices, and processes produce and sustain inequalities. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on intersecting social identities, inequality regimes provide a framework for understanding how systemic and organisational factors shape differential access to resources, opportunities, and rewards. By focusing on organisational dynamics rather than individual identities, this approach allows for a more direct analysis of how inequality is embedded and reproduced within organisations, consequently as gendered practices within the organisation.

Similarly, historical and contextual factors are essential to understanding gender in organisations, as isolating it from these broader dimensions risks obscuring and oversimplifying the complex interplay of contextually based power relations, normative, and institutional practices. As Friedman (2021) notes, the impact of gender constructs on women is a prime example of historical implications, wherein historical and contextual variables have moulded gendering dynamics of today, with gendering understood as a wide range of traditions, attitudes, and procedures that support and perpetuate gendered advantages and disadvantages (Acker, 1990; Dye & Mills, 2012; Lorber, 2000). These gendered dynamics are enabled by a range of behaviours, including interactions and expectations between co-workers, broader cultural dynamics, hiring decisions, promotion criteria, and organisational regulations in organisations (Acker, 1990, 1992b).

Nonetheless, research on gender in organisations has only minimally examined how gendered praxes are shaped by their specific social and cultural context. Instead, historical, social, and cultural implications occasionally emerge in arguments established by looking at other occurrences relevant to society. This is not to say that historical, social, and cultural implications have not been covered within a Global South context. Edward Webster (2013, 2015), Friedman (2015, 2019, 2021), and others explore it within the macro levels of the South African labour market and political landscape. However, their studies do examine these issues through a feminist lens. Their work alludes to marginalised individuals, and gender is not the focus of the subject or the arguments they raise. Therefore, feminist research can contribute to, and in return be enriched by, a greater understanding of how historical and contextual factors, seen as forms of rootedness, help maintain and sustain gendering praxes.

Since the study focuses on gender within a South African-based case study organisation, it is crucial to place these perspectives within the wider context of South Africa's trade unions.

1.2 Gender in a South African Trade Union

Trade unionism in South Africa has a rich history of advocating for equality and social justice, particularly in response to the country's historical injustices and apartheid-era atrocities (McQuinn, 2022; Wood & Harcourt, 1998). Throughout the 20th century, trade unions played a crucial role in the fight for workers' rights and broader socio-political change, as seen in movements led by Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), and later Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and other labour organisations (Khunou, 2013; Tshoaedi, 2013b; Wood & Harcourt, 1998).

In this journey, much of the focus has been on the broader labour movement, with the role of women in trade unions often overlooked, despite their significant contributions (Tshoaedi, 2013a). Women trade unionists, including Elizabeth Mafekeng, Mary Fitzgerald, Lydia Mope, and Emma Mashinini,[1] inter alia, not only fought for workers' rights but also challenged gender-based discrimination within the labour movement itself (LaNasa, 2015). Alongside organising strikes, advocating for non-racial labour practices, women called for integrating gender issues into labour struggles. Thus, women's trade unionism was a crucial movement that not only improved workplace conditions but also played a role in changing societal views on women's roles. These efforts paved the way for further labour activism and gender equality in the workplace (LaNasa, 2015).

However, three decades into democracy and despite progressive labour laws aimed at promoting equality, gender inequality remains deeply entrenched in trade unions. Post-Apartheid policies aimed at gender inclusivity and disrupting historical patterns of exclusion continue to shape the experiences of women in unions (Gradín, 2021; Hassim, 2006; Phaswana, 2021). Despite progress in advancing gender, gender equity in trade union decision-making processes, leadership positions, and the broader labour market remains elusive (Espi et al., 2019; Parry & Gordon, 2021).[2] The

[1] One intriguing aspect of the emergence of women's trade unionism in South Africa is that many of the women who led the battle for workplace equality were from mixed racial backgrounds or racially diverse unions. Particularly, many early trade unions were either exclusively White or predominantly male. These women bridged racial divides by creating unions that welcomed all workers, regardless of race or gender.

[2] Here, equality is distinguished from equity by its approach to fairness. Equality is understood to seek uniform treatment of individuals regardless of needs, circumstances, and differences, whereas equity seeks practical treatment that recognises and attends to context-based action to reach balancing outcomes Briskin, L. (2014). Strategies to Support Equality Bargaining Inside Unions: Representational Democracy and Representational Justice. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *56*(2), 208-227.

persistent gendered disparities are partly due to social norms and expectations that shape how organisations are structured and operate (Acker, 1990, 1992b), as well as a lack of equity measures where they are needed to address the disparities of social constructs (Bruno et al., 2021; Gradín, 2021).

As a result, trade unions in South Africa occupy a paradoxical position concerning gender equality concerns. They historically advocate for 'all' workers' rights, yet their structures and cultures often reflect deeply entrenched gender biases and inequalities (Webster & Adams, 2022). On the one hand, they are gendered institutions that have historically reinforced patriarchal norms and male-dominated structures (Colgan & Ledwith, 2002; Connell, 2005; McQuinn, 2022). On the other hand, they are also expected to challenge gender inequalities in workplaces by advocating for policies that promote fairness and inclusion. This dual role positions them as both sites of labour advocacy and spaces where gendered inequalities persist (Ledwith, 2012), a contradiction that creates tensions and limits their effectiveness as advocates for gender equality, both internally and externally.

Whilst this supports research on gender and trade unions in general, the South African context adds an important contextual factor, namely the Apartheid regime. Throughout the decades, women's organisations have historically collaborated with the labour movement to challenge the brutal inequalities and practices under Apartheid (McQuinn, 2022; Webster, 2013; Webster & Adams, 2022). In this sense, the South African case demonstrates how the democratisation of society, fought for collectively, did not yield the same outcomes of equality for the groups that formed the collective. Instead, as it will be argued, the path towards democratisation was aligned with an existing path of historically unequal political, social, and economic structures that are gendered.

As Gentle et al. (2018) note, workers' organisations in South Africa have been influenced by the country's contemporary capitalist history, which has unfolded over four distinct areas (as far as historically recorded). First, it was during the British colonial rule in the 19th century that capitalism began to emerge. Then the Union Act of 1910, which established self-administration and White minority rule, was later expanded by the Apartheid era, which started in 1948. The Apartheid era legislated

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https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185613517472 , Mannix, E. A., Neale, M. A., & Northcraft, G. B. (1995). Equity, Equality, or Need? The Effects of Organizational Culture on the Allocation of Benefits and Burdens. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, *63*(3), 276-286. https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1995.1079 .

and reemphasised economic segregation based on racial lines, which had a profound effect on labour and economics, mainly as it relied on cheap, exploited Black labour (Phaswana, 2021) and policies that entrenched racial and gendered economic disparities that resulted in resources being concentrated in the hands of the White minority (Gradín, 2021). The economic and political changes that took place in South Africa during the final years of Apartheid reforms softened the harshest aspects of Apartheid without dismantling the system entirely (Gentle et al., 2018). These epochs and strategies embedded racial and hierarchical capitalism, and the socio-economic dynamics that endure in the broader context of South Africa to date (Friedman, 2019).

Whilst legal frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act (1998), Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000), Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997) and the Labour Relations Act (1995), amongst others, reflected democratisations and sought to create more inclusive workplaces; structural and institutional barriers have continued to reproduce gendered disparities (Friedman, 2015, 2019). Thus, understanding how these discrepancies persist and are enforced, particularly in trade union organisations where patterns of male dominance in leadership, divisions of labour, and institutional inertia endure unchallenged, is crucial.

1.3 Problem Statement

Within the employment context, trade unions are not only representatives of employees but also important organisational actors and stakeholders in their own right. In South Africa, they remain powerful mechanisms for workplace gender equality, as they have the capacity to negotiate policy changes, enforce legal protections, and advocate for women's interests (Rubery & Hebson, 2018). They are sources of change and one of the oldest forms of organising, advocating for workers' interests both internally and externally (Adler & Webster, 1995). Despite this role, existing scholars highlight philosophical and theoretical limitations in the study of trade unions, particularly the predominance of masculine narratives that shape interests, frameworks, and analyses of labour and employment (Lee & Tapia, 2021). As a result, the perspectives and experiences of women and other marginalised groups are frequently underrepresented or undervalued in trade union studies (Ledwith, 2012; Ledwith & Munakamwe, 2015).

Notwithstanding that gender in organisations has been widely studied across disciplines and perspectives, the subject remains to be explored from this perspective and context. Much work remains to be done, partly because there are often multiple perspectives, ambiguities, relational dynamics, and conflicting views on the topic

(Acker, 1992b). Research studies focusing on trade unions as key sites for exploring gendering practices remain scarce (Bates, 2018; Parsons, 2017), a gap that is more pronounced when the focus is on a trade union in the Global South context.

Whilst other feminist organisational theorists (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Martin, 2003), inter alia, have demonstrated how inequalities are reproduced through organisational processes and culture and explored the gendering process in male-dominated organisations (Ledwith & Munakamwe, 2015; Parsons et al., 2017), very few of these organisations are structured and designed to represent diverse members as central to their functions, despite being male-dominant. Except for Bates (2018), there is a paucity of research examining how gendered praxes impact their organisational functionality and effectiveness in representing diverse groups through gendered organisation theory. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Global South, where scholarship on trade unions has focused mainly on macro-level labour markets and political economies (Friedman, 2019, 2021; Webster, 2013, 2015) rather than on the historical and contextual factors, as forms of rootedness, that help maintain and sustain gendering praxes.

Furthermore, feminist studies (Colling, 1989; Colling & Dickens, 2001; Dickens, 1999; Healy & Kirton, 2000b; Heery, 2006a; Heery & Conley, 2007; Kirton, 2013; Ledwith & Colgan, 2001) have examined trade unions, yet are rarely informed by knowledge production situated in the lived experiences of women in the Global South. The experiences of women in Global South trade unions, therefore, occupy a unique position for generating situated knowledge and for exploring how gendered praxes are enacted in their locality. As such, trade unions in the Global South provide a compelling site for exploring the rootedness of gendering praxes. This presents both a theoretical and an epistemological opening, as the perspective of Global South women remains marginal within dominant discourses on gender and trade unions.

Theoretically, Acker's (1990, 1992a) theorisation of gendered organisations demonstrates how gendering processes are embedded in organisational structures. Yet, its application to trade union organisations — organisations designed to represent diverse membership but historically dominated by men — remains underexplored, particularly in the Global South. Epistemologically, much of the scholarship on trade unions has been shaped by masculine standpoints and Global North perspectives, which marginalise the situated knowledge of women workers and trade union members in the Global South. Feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 2000a, 2000b; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 2003; Rolin, 2006) challenges this by asserting that knowledge is socially situated and that the perspectives of marginalised groups,

particularly women, provide critical insights into social structures, power, and inequalities. Butler's (1988) work on gender performativity also shows how gendered norms are reproduced through everyday practices in an organisational context. However, in trade union research, women's perspectives have rarely been central to knowledge production, particularly in South Africa, where trade unions have historically shaped struggles for democracy (Friedman, 2015; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004; Webster & Adams, 2022), and continue to influence labour relations.

Moreover, from a decolonial perspective, Black feminist theories and postcolonial critique from scholars such as Connell (2014), Dosekun (2021a), Mama (2001), Horn (2025), Tamale (2020), and Mohanty (2003a, 2003b) note the dominance of Northern theories in organisational studies, even those that take a feminist lens. This is especially relevant to South Africa, where historical struggles against Apartheid and contemporary commitments to equality intersect in complex ways that differ from those of other countries in the Global South. Consequently, this study addresses both a theoretical gap by extending and testing theories of gendered organisation in the context of a trade union in the Global South, and an epistemological gap by foregrounding women's experiences through a feminist standpoint and situated knowledge lens, framed as a post-Apartheid reflective feminist lens. In doing so, it contributes to debates on gender, knowledge, and organisation in the Global South, where structural inequalities and histories of resistance remain rooted.

Hence, a gap exists regarding gendered practices in a post-Apartheid state, highlighting the discrepancy between existing theories of gender and organisational practice, as well as the distinctive historical and social dynamics of South Africa. Current theories of gendered practices often originate from Western contexts and may not fully reflect how the legacies of Apartheid influence organisational norms and behaviours in South Africa. Whilst post-Apartheid policies promote equality, there is a limited theoretical understanding of how everyday organisational practices (gendered praxes) either reproduce or challenge inequalities in this setting. Lastly, frameworks such as Acker's Inequality Regimes broadly address gendered inequalities but do not incorporate the specific socio-political landscape of post-Apartheid South Africa, leaving a gap in understanding how gendered practices develop within historically divided organisations.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The study aims to explore the contextual rootedness of gendering practices in a trade union organisation, focusing on how and why they are sustained, reinforced, and experienced by its members within the South African context. This problem is

described as ‘gendering praxes’, holistically capturing the wide range of traditions, attitudes, procedures, and rationale that support and perpetuate advantages and disadvantages of praxes along gendered lines, hence gendering praxes. The objective is to pinpoint and examine the historical and contextual ways in which gender influences decisions, choices, interactions, and behaviours within a trade union organisation, and the implications it has on representing members and on who represents them.

Inspired by a feminist lens that draws on Acker’s gendering process framework and feminist perspectives, this study aims to answer the research question: *how and why is the trade union, as an organisation, rooted in gendering praxes?* In doing this, it investigates the underlying historical and contextual mechanisms of gendered praxes that the trade union, PublicU, is rooted in, how these manifest in the organisation, and what leads to their persistence and rootedness within the trade union's operations and functionality. As such, the ‘how’ focuses on institutional structures and practices that reproduce gendering, whereas the ‘why’ explores external, relational and ideological factors that sustain these practices.

To do this, the overarching research question is explored through three objectives that:

- Identify and explore how gendering inequality and inequity practices are embedded in the underlying rationales that shape the overall daily operations and functions of the trade union.
- Explore the specific organisational arrangements, actions, and patterns that support and strengthen the gendering practices within the trade union.
- Highlight the underlying rationale and motivations behind the established gendering practices within the trade union.

1.5 Significance of the Study

With the feminisation of the labour market, women’s involvement in trade union organisations has shifted and continues to do so rapidly (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004). These changes, alongside the evolving diversity of employees in organisations, highlight the increasing importance of diverse and representative interests. This makes the gendered nature of organisations, including trade unions, an increasingly urgent focus of study.

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) argue that such transformations create unique opportunities to examine how gender order is produced and maintained within organisations, with trade unions offering a particularly compelling site of analysis.

Yet, as Rodriguez et al (2016) caution, gender cannot be understood in isolation from the organisation's contextual, historical, social, and systematic components and surroundings. These factors shape and influence how gender dynamics unfold. This is because historical paradoxes have a significant impact on defining expectations, attitudes, behaviours, norms and organisational structures, maintaining or questioning established gendered practices (Gradskova & Asztalos Morell, 2018).

Furthermore, existing research acknowledges the gendered nature of organisations. Still, from a feminist lens, much less attention has been paid to trade unions situated in contexts shaped by legacies of political, economic, and social oppressions, such as that of South Africa's Apartheid history. This study highlights the importance of understanding trade unions in this context by illustrating how gendered practices can persist within them to the extent that they undermine the solidarities forged through liberation struggles.

Drawing on gendered organisations theory, inequality regimes, and feminist standpoint theory, this is highlighted through the perspective of the most marginalised in this process, Black women, whose experiences reveal how male dominance sidelines them despite broader political and social transformations. This matters because it demonstrates how progressive movements themselves can remain bound by historical exclusions, offering critical lessons for both feminist and labour activists. By revealing how gendered praxes persist within advocacy institutions that claim to champion equality, the study highlights the deeper structural work required to make advocacy organisations genuinely transformative, both internally and externally.

Therefore, its significance lies in demonstrating how gendering processes unfold within a trade union organisation. It shows that trade unions, whilst positioned as advocates of workers' rights and fairness, can themselves reproduce gendered forms of disparities. Inclusive representation can also be challenging in advocacy organisations.

1.6 Methodology

This is an empirical qualitative case study of a trade union organisation with a strong history of fighting inequalities. As a case study, it offers salient features of specificity, depth, and contextual analysis (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014). The trade union organisation, hereafter referred to as PublicU, was selected for its historical significance and status as one of the largest public sector trade unions in South Africa.

Given the complex and interconnected nature of the research problem, a methodology was necessary that allowed for the exploration of multiple social dimensions. Adopted is an analytical lens that I frame as a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens, which draws on feminist perspectives and nuances of Apartheid history. This lens, further explained in Section 4.2, was particularly suited to explore how socio-contextual history, particularly Apartheid history, has also shaped gendering practices, given the socio-economic and political conditions embedded in the past that continue to affect gendering practices in the contemporary South African context. It brings the historical and contextual factors into the conversation and foregrounds how local gendering practices are rooted in the organisation. This is because the study acknowledges that gender does not operate in isolation but is deeply intertwined with situational context and relationships (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 1984).

The research question and objectives informed the profile and characteristics of the population sample, allowing for the adoption of a purposive and snowball sampling technique. This allowed the researcher room to expand the scope of the sample size in an operative and time-feasible manner that still complied with the research design. Therefore, for data collection, the study adopted a multi-method strategy incorporating semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This process was achieved through a two-phased data collection process. The first phase consisted of 15 online, semi-structured interviews conducted over three-months during the COVID-19 contact restrictions. The phase provided initial insights into participants' perspectives. Following the analysis of data collected from Phase 1, field visits and focus group discussions were conducted over the next three months to build rapport and deepen engagement with participants.

1.7 Contribution

This study contributes to feminist, gender and organisations research by demonstrating how gendering praxes are sustained through organisational sense-making processes that incorporate historical and contextual rationales. These insights not only extend theoretical debates on gendered organisations but also inform strategies for fostering more inclusive institutional environments in a given context, offering a situated analysis of gendering praxes.

Theoretically, the study contributes to advancing the understanding of gendering processes beyond a framing that is purely relational practices. It also demonstrates that gendered praxes are contextually rationalised and sustained through

organisational sense-making rooted in specific, situated histories and socio-political contexts. In doing so, it accentuates the role of history and context, moving beyond universalist, one-size-fits-all explanations. By situating gendered praxes within a specific context, the study demonstrates how context significantly influences the persistence and rootedness of gendered praxes in a given context, as illustrated by the South African context.

Methodologically, it offers a localised lens for understanding the rootedness of gendering praxes. Using a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens that focuses on the gendering aspect, the implications of both colonial and Apartheid histories are drawn into the analysis. This lens is vital as Apartheid as a policy was rooted in the use of intersectional differences to embed hierarchical discriminations, oppressions and advantages. A post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens foregrounds a situational understanding, particularly that of Black[3] women in post-Apartheid South Africa. It draws upon various feminist perspectives by situating the analysis of gender within South Africa's unique history, economic, political and cultural context. This offers a grounded, decolonial extension in research. Therefore, it contributes to broader post-colonial feminist theory by revealing how former colonial and Apartheid structures persist in contemporary life, particularly in relation to locality.

Empirically, it offers contextualised insights into a trade union organisation, a space where gendered inequalities persist despite progressive labour laws. The study emphasises how organisational environments shape gendering praxes and provides a situated analysis of a trade union, PublicU, adding to localised knowledge rather than relying solely on Western feminist organisational theories. This approach helps improve practical ways of identifying how and why gender inequalities endure in trade unions, even when they appear to be inclusive spaces. It lays a foundation for rethinking gender equity interventions, ensuring they address the deep-rooted processes of sense-making that justify and sustain gender disparities in trade unions within this context.

Therefore, this contribution extends beyond merely analysing gender through interpersonal relationships; it examines the broader societal, historical, and institutional contexts—the macro external environment—that shape gender dynamics within organisations. It highlights that gender is influenced not only by socially constructed relationships but also by larger systemic, economic, and historical forces, particularly in the South African context, associated with longstanding socio-political

[3] 'Black people' is a generic term which means African, Coloureds and Indians as per the South African Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998.

and economic inequalities. By utilising gendered organisations theory, inequality regimes, and feminist standpoint theory, this approach sheds light on these factors and enhances understanding of how gendering praxes persist within organisations.

1.8 Overview of Chapters

This section offers a comprehensive overview of the chapters' structure and content, highlighting the key themes and topics addressed. The overall structure of the study is arranged into eight subject-based chapters. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the study's overarching argument and contributes toward holistically answering the research question and objectives. Read together, they construct an argument, analysis, and a story from the chapters.

Chapter One began by setting out the study's premises, highlighting its rationale, the research problem, and the study's objectives. It provided a brief overview of the existing knowledge and the significance of the study. Similarly, it sets out the context in which the research question of how and why the trade union, as an organisation, is rooted in gendering praxes is explored. The purpose of the chapter was to orient the reader, clarify the focus, the aim of the research, and establish the parameters for the study.

Chapter Two focuses on the theoretical framework that forms the foundation of the study's premise. It engages with literature essential to the argument and objectives outlined in Chapter One, as well as the subsequent discussions. The chapter accomplishes this by providing an overview of relevant concepts and theories, such as gendered organisation theory and feminist standpoint theory.

Chapter Three is a broader contextual background of the organisation under study. An outline of the history of South Africa's trade union movement is provided at the outset. Thereafter, the workings of the tripartite alliance and its impact on trade union leadership and operations are highlighted. Notwithstanding the history, the chapter also highlights women's roles in the liberation struggle and trade unions, as well as the intricacies of the post-Apartheid trade union movement, with special attention to the role played by women. Overall, the chapter situates the gender dynamics within the South African trade union movement in perspective, highlighting the social and historical ramifications of these dynamics and providing the basis for understanding the study's later discussion and analytical chapters.

Chapter Four presents the methodological approach by outlining the data gathering techniques, analytical framework, and research methods. This chapter

outlines the philosophical premise that guides the research process and informs the study's design choices. The chapter discusses the tool adopted and provides an overview of the processes involved in data analysis, including coding for themes, gathering pertinent information, and the various techniques used to analyse the data. Therefore, the chapter informs the reader about what the researcher did - the design; how the researcher implemented it - the choices of design; and, lastly, why the researcher chose this approach.

Chapters Five and Six present and discuss the themes and patterns discovered from the empirical data. First, the empirical data are presented, arranged, and subdivided into themes to highlight related trends and connections. After each empirical data section, insights are synthesised into existing research studies, a process that offers fresh viewpoints whilst emphasising the relationships between the study's insights and other studies. Chapter Five's theme focuses on 'how' gendering praxes occur in the trade union, whereas Chapter Six focuses on 'why' gendering praxes occur.

Chapter Seven focuses on the holistic patterns of actions and reasons that perpetuate gendering praxes in the trade union.

Chapter Eight, the conclusion chapter, maps out gendering in the context of a trade union. As the conclusion, the insights established in answering the central research question '*how and why the trade union, as an organisation, is rooted in gendering praxes,'* are presented and the study's value for the broader field of research. This is demonstrated by discussing the research's key findings, noting the study's contributions, and offering recommendations for future research.

The next chapter critically reviews theories and concepts relevant to exploring this study.

2. Literature

This chapter sets the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the study by engaging with key debates on gender, work, and knowledge production.

It begins by exploring scholarship on gender in trade unions, highlighting how gender dynamics shape participation, representation, and power relations within union contexts. The discussion then moves to definitions and conceptual clarifications, where central terms are introduced to ensure analytical clarity throughout the study. The chapter further explores gender and organisation, with a focus on gendered organisation theory and Acker's concept of inequality regimes, which provide a framework for understanding how inequalities are rooted and reproduced in organisational structures and practices. The final section engages with feminist epistemologies, standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist perspectives. This section foregrounds how knowledge produced from marginalised positions can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative ways of understanding gendered organisational experiences.

Together, these discussions provide the conceptual tools and critical perspectives that inform the analysis undertaken in the rest of the thesis.

2.1 Gender in Trade Unions

The gendered nature of leadership in labour movements has been widely studied, with different scholars highlighting how trade union leadership remains a masculinised space. Scholars (Allen, 1954; Blaschke, 2015; Briskin, 2006b; Britwum, 2013; Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022; Colgan & Ledwith, 2000, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Healy & Kirton, 2000a; Jordhus-Lier, 2013; Kaminski & Pauly, 2012; Kaminski & Yakura, 2008; Kenny, 2022; Kirton, 2013; Ledwith, 2013; McBride, 2020) covering both local, global and comparative contexts has contributed to this body of literature examining how traditional leadership paradigms in trade unions are maintained, challenged, and transformed.

For instance, Ledwith (2012) notes that male-dominated trade unionism can be traced back to the closed-shop practices of artisans, where membership was strictly controlled through apprenticeships and journeymen systems. As trade unionism expanded during the Industrial Revolution, it continued to be shaped by these traditions, with trade unions forming among workers in coalfields, shipyards, and factories (Allen, 1954; Ledwith, 2012). These trade unions largely excluded women,

as these industries were male-dominated, reflecting broader societal norms of the times. In response to this exclusion, women in the UK formed their own trade unions, with earlier forms of organisation noted in the textile industry, where women were included in trade union membership (Ledwith, 2009; Radical-Tea-Towel, n.d.). However, in most industries, male trade unionists distanced themselves from the concerns of women workers, reinforcing gender-based inequalities in pay and conditions (Boston, 1987; Coote & Campbell, 1987). Therefore, struggles over gender inclusion in trade unions persisted, with women continuing to challenge the male-dominated structures that often prioritised men's economic interests (Ledwith, 2012).

Nonetheless, the conflict between men's and women's roles within trade unions has persisted as a significant issue. Coote and Campbell (1987) describe this as an underlying force that, whilst not entirely blocking progress, continues to hinder substantive equality in organised labour. Despite the feminisation of the labour market and changes in trade union membership (Colgan & Ledwith, 2003; Kaminski & Pauly, 2012), the dominance of men in trade unions endures. In attempting to understand this endurance, Ledwith (2012, p. 185) poses the question "[h]ow can we account for the persistence of exclusion of women from organisational power and leadership in trade unions despite their increasing proportion of the labour force and trade union membership?" This question prompts a response that requires an examination of the structural, cultural, and historical factors that contribute to the exclusion of women in trade union leadership positions. Research studies over the years have consistently shown that, whilst women are joining trade unions, their representation in higher levels of organisational hierarchy positions declines (Colgan & Ledwith, 2003; Kaminski & Pauly, 2012). There is a persistence of exclusion of women from organisational power and leadership structures, despite their increasing presence in the labour force and membership numbers (Ledwith, 2012), even in the face of the implementation of gender equality structural reforms in broader organisations and trade unions.

In accounting for this persistence, at an organisational level, one significant factor is the enduring culture of oligarchic and hegemonic masculinity embedded in traditions and values of a patriarchal, masculinised world (Ledwith, 2012; Walby, 1989; Waylen et al., 2018). According to Britwum (2013), Ledwith (2013), Briskin (2014), Bridget (2022), and Shefer and Ratele (2023), deeply ingrained cultures of oligarchic and hegemonic masculinity perpetuate the exclusion of women from informal political processes, such as leadership grooming and networking, often favouring male candidates. Informal networks that play a crucial role in leadership

recruitment frequently privilege male leaders who have historically dominated these spaces (Waddington & Whitston, 1997) and continue to renew leadership in the image of this existing history (Batstone, 1977; Ledwith, 2013). This makes it difficult for women, and other marginalised groups and or individuals to break and rise through the ranks, as qualities typically associated with leadership, such as assertiveness, negotiation skills, and strategic decision-making, are coded as masculine (Dye & Mills, 2012; Hanek & Garcia, 2022; Parsons, 2017).

Furthermore, women are often not seen as long-term or permanent trade union members, due to their frequently precarious state of employment (Munck, 2013; Standing, 2015), and are often denied and excluded from opportunities to gain the necessary experience to be considered for leadership or elected positions (Allen, 1954). And when they do manage to run for a leadership office, they often face the pressure to conform to these established norms by adopting traditionally masculine leadership styles (Ledwith, 2013). Moreover, there exists differentiation in levels of performance and expectation. As women rise to leadership positions, they often face additional scrutiny (Kanter, 1977), tokenism, and exclusion from key decision-making processes (Kaminski & Pauly, 2012), and an emphasis that they need to work harder to gain legitimacy and to prove their competence in ways that men are not expected to (Ledwith, 2013). There is a widespread perception that women are less capable than men in leadership roles, leading to lower confidence in female leaders (Healy & Kirton, 2000a).

As a result, women often face significant disadvantages because the system is biased in favour of men, making it difficult for them to succeed (Allen, 1954, 1957). Additionally, notes that whilst some younger and progressive male leaders may be more supportive of gender equality initiatives, entrenched hegemonic masculine culture norms continue to hinder substantial change; therefore, they are also often forced to conform or face consequences (Heery, 2006b). And beyond equality concerns, this is problematic because when women are limited and or excluded from key leadership roles in trade unions, the trade union remains gender-biased. Hence, many trade unions still function as ‘old boys' clubs,’ where leadership and activism align with traditional masculine traits such as aggression, competitiveness, and dominance, which reinforce hegemonic masculine (Ledwith, 2012).

Accounting for this persistence at a broader social level, Eagly and Karau (2002), Ledwith (2012) and Gonalons-Pons and Gangl (2021) note that gender

disparities in trade unions reflect broader labour market inequalities rooted in historical and contemporary systems that valorise men's work and reinforce their dominant roles as breadwinners. Efforts to promote gender equality in leadership are often met with resistance and backlash, including exclusionary practices and overt hostility (Healy & Kirton, 2000a). These inequalities stem from patriarchal structures that position men as primary earners and workplace leaders, whilst relegating women to subordinate roles both in the labour market and within their unions (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021; Ledwith, 2012). And this is because patriarchy as a system is built on men dominating, oppressing, and exploiting women, as a dynamic that extends into class relations and trade union structures (Walby, 1989). In interrelated patriarchal regimes, such as household production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions, women's participation in trade unions is shaped by reinforced gendered divisions of labour, limited access to leadership, and constrained scopes of women's collective action (Ledwith, 2012; Walby, 1989). And because trade unions reflect occupational and industrial gender patterns, they both reproduce and challenge these inequalities within organised labour (Ledwith, 2012).

Ledwith (2012), drawing from Acker's arguments on gendered organisation, highlights that both conscious and unconscious masculine structures construct the characteristic of trade union consciousness - organisational logic. It is Cockburn's arguments that capture the essence of this organisational logic. According to Cockburn (1991), the solidarity of men has historically been built on brotherhood, with women's involvement seen as diluting this brotherhood. Whilst such intense views are no longer publicly articulated, the gender power dynamic they reflect persists, as the organising logic of trade union activism remains rooted in hegemonic masculinity, often making those who do not conform or share these similar traits feel unwelcome (Ledwith, 2012). Kaminski and Pauly (2012) further emphasised this perspective, arguing that women's underrepresentation is not due to a lack of skills but rather to structural discrimination, workplace bias, and social constraints.

Likewise, gender regimes often intersect with race, class, and sexuality, even though these dimensions are not always adequately addressed in mainstream trade union reforms. In these efforts, inequality regimes highlight that race, class, and other identity markers also play significant roles in leadership access (Acker, 2006d). This observation also aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework, which emphasises the need to consider multiple axes of identity when analysing structural barriers and power dynamics in organisations. In the context of the Global North, trade

unions are no longer mainly composed of exclusively older white men, although such individuals continue to hold leadership positions within trade unions (Ledwith, 2012). Whereas in the Global South, trade union leadership is often dominated by older Black men, as white men were historically part of the management structures that trade unions sought to challenge.

However, this is not to say women have been complacent bystanders to these practices, nor that they have not played a role in challenging them. Women in trade unions and autonomous women's committees have played a significant role in advocating for gender equality, adopting strategies focused on women's mentoring, networking, and training programs to aid in breaking through leadership barriers, despite limitations (Ledwith, 2012). Heery and Conley (2007) and Kaminski and Yakura (2008) argue that, despite its limitations, women's participation in leadership has expanded the scope of labour advocacy beyond traditional economic concerns to include issues such as workplace discrimination and family-friendly policies. Similarly, Kirton and Healy (2012) found that trade unions with higher levels of gender diversity in leadership positions tend to adopt more inclusive policies and engage in broader social justice initiatives.

Women's organising efforts within trade unions have been crucial in promoting women's leadership, increasing union democracy, and ensuring that gender issues are prioritised on the bargaining agenda (Briskin, 2008; Kirton, 2015). Ledwith's (2012, 2013) research further supports this claim, arguing that feminist trade unionists have worked both within and outside traditional union structures to push for leadership reform that challenges traditional leadership structures with feminist trade unionists engaging in various strategies, including policy advocacy, leadership training, and the formation of women's networks, to promote gender equity in labour leadership. As such, feminist discourses are being integrated into trade union activism, leading to incremental cultural shifts, which Brunning and Melin (2010, p. 5) note in a different context as continuance change —an act of transformation that often develops gradually over time and carries the remnants of the past. This kind of transformation enables an organisation to change in a way that is non-disruptive and/or radical relative to its historical foundation ideals.

Nonetheless, even as trade unions have introduced structural reforms to encourage gender equality, leadership structures remain resistant to gender inclusion (Kaminski & Pauly, 2012; Ledwith, 2012). Reforms are often superficial, as they do

not necessarily challenge the underlying power dynamics (Kaminski & Pauly, 2012). To achieve substantial changes, Kaminski and Pauly (2012) argue that genuine gender equality in trade union leadership necessitates dismantling structural, cultural, and societal barriers, not just increasing numerical representation, but also disrupting the deeply embedded logic that perpetuates these barriers. Whilst policies such as gender quotas, reserved seats, and affirmative action may cause disruptions, they are often met with resistance and have had mixed success (Ledwith, 2012). Removing restraining forces, such as gender-based bias, exclusion, work-family conflict, essentially both organisational and broader social level constraints, is more effective than simply increasing support mechanisms.

Because of this, male domination remains, and many trade union reforms predominantly focus on structural changes (e.g., quotas) but fail to address deep-seated cultural and institutional biases.

2.2 Definitions and Conceptual Clarifications

Whilst generalisability is not the primary aim of case studies (Carminati, 2018; Parsons, 2017; Priya, 2021), it is essential to define the key terms used in the study, particularly when a plethora of definitions exist to facilitate understanding. The complexity and diversity of the terms ‘gender,’ ‘gendering,’ ‘praxes,’ and ‘sedimentation’ need to be clarified, as the presented definitions and others are adopted for this study. Comprehending these concepts is crucial in gaining a broader understanding of how they are applied in the arguments presented in this study.

2.1.1 Gender and Gendering

2.1.1.1 Gender

Despite its widespread use, the concept of gender lacks a consensus definition or a clear understanding of its meaning (Acker, 1992a; Butler, 2002). Once considered synonymous with sex due to its social construction (Butler, 1988), it is now amenable to several interpretations. Even amongst researchers who identify as feminists, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the concept (Acker, 1992a; Amaefula, 2021; Butler, 1988, 2002). Its subjectivity to diverse interpretations carries varying connotations depending on the context in which it is used, hence the ambiguity (Acker, 1992b).

Amongst its common uses, gender is understood as a social construct–the concept of how individuals and groups share an understanding of the world, realities,

and their place in it, created and maintained by social cultures, and influences social interactions (Hanek & Garcia, 2022)–along lines of femininity and masculinity (Acker, 1992b). It relates to sex roles and culturally distinct behavioural patterns that may be associated with particular sexes (Mills, 1992; Mills, 1988).

Certain gender-based assumptions exist regarding the nature and traits of biological differences between men and women (Kennedy et al., 2020). These presumptions give rise to several beliefs, customs, and behaviours that have a deterministic impact on an individual's identities, "social opportunities, and life experiences" (Mills, 1992, p. 94). A general narrative of this process is the belief that females have domestic functions and males have public obligations (Mills, 1992). It is an ongoing application of gendered divisions, going beyond simply counting the proportion of men and women occupying various types of work and roles (Acker, 2006d). It is this central narrative that shapes the characteristics of gender across different cultures and historical periods.

Therefore, gender is an emblem of authority that typically subordinates the feminine over the masculine, either literally or figuratively (Kennedy et al., 2020) and holds a central role in the reproduction of hierarchies (Acker, 1992b). It is vital to the establishment, upkeep, and perpetuation of hierarchical structures in organisations and society. For this reason, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is not a fixed set of characteristics or roles but an outcome of social interactions and behaviours. Gender presumptions are neither exclusively universal nor entirely diverse, as they are also shaped and honed by the social narratives and environments of a specific context. It involves individuals consciously and unconsciously adhering to or challenging established gender norms, dictating how individuals of different sexes are expected to behave, communicate, and relate to one another (Acker, 1992b). It encapsulates actions and behaviours that people consistently engage in, especially in interactions with others, rather than just being an innate characteristic of a person (Acker, 1992b; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Martin (2003, p. 342) explains "gender as a dynamic process, as practise, as what people say and do, in addition to such static properties as an identity, social status, what is learnt via socialisation, a system of stratification and so on." Unlike biological sex, which is solely determined by biology, gender is a socially constructed practice (Benschop, 2009) that enforces and upholds hegemonic roles and behaviours that align with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Acker, 1992b). Hegemony in

this context demonstrates that power doesn't always rely on force; it works because people consent to it, often without realising it (Amaefula, 2024). It is an active layer that constantly evolves and changes through interactions and behaviours that occur in society. Still, it has some stable aspects of hegemony, including learned and socially enforced characteristics based on gender lines. In these stable aspects, society plays a significant role in how gender is constructed. Lorber (2000, p. 82) aptly captures society's role in this ongoing process.

> "[f]om a structural perspective, gender is the division of people into contrasting and complementary social categories, 'boys' and 'girls,' 'men' and 'women.' In this structural conceptualisation, gendering is the process, and the gendered social order is the product of social construction… Through interaction with caretakers, socialisation in childhood, peer pressure in adolescence, and gendered work and family roles, people are divided into two groups and made to be different in behaviour, attitudes, and emotions. The content of the differences depends on the society's culture, values, economic and family structure, and history. The resultant gendered social order is based on and maintains these differences (Lorber, 2000, p. 82) . "

As such, "[g]ender is a basic organising principle…" (Acker, 2004, p. 20), built into everyday functions and activities in a variety of ways that resonate differently for everyone, but into the stratification of being a 'man' and a 'woman' (Acker, 1992b, 2004; Lorber, 2000). It is embedded in interactions, practices, divisions of labour, logic, inter alia. The degree to which it functions and has an impact is determined by the way other ideas (e.g., class, race, religion) are tightly woven into the settings, histories, and placements of individual lives within a gendered web. As a result, it includes how people see themselves, interact with others, and are perceived by others.

Consequently, gender is both an active, ongoing process with static aspects of learnt and socially enforced characteristics shaped by societal beliefs about masculinity and femininity. These beliefs create a gender hierarchy that influences how individuals interact and behave (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and the hierarchy is continuously reinforced through social interactions, contributing to the perpetuation of gender norms and expectations along margins of masculinity and femininity. And because masculinity and femininity give rise to numerous constructed interpretations experienced in various historical and contemporary epochs, places, and spaces (Acker, 2004), gender is passively defined. Hence, Butler (1988) and Acker (2004) note that

gender is malleable and subject to change rather than fixed or unchangeable. As Butler (1988) argues, gender is created and performed via social and cultural practices, refuting the idea that it is an innate and immutable part of an individual's identity. Instead, it is created and maintained by repeated acts and performances, rather than something that people are born with (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This viewpoint contradicts binary concepts of gender and creates avenues for investigating the diversity and fluidity of gender identities, an area of research that is covered in queer theory and transgender studies, which is outside the scope of this study.

2.1.1.2 Gendering

Consequently, gendering is the process of creating differential advantages and disadvantages based on notions of femininity and masculinity (Acker, 1990, 1992b; Dye & Mills, 2012; Lorber, 2000). It is an ongoing process of doing, saying, and performing gender (Butler, 1988, 2002; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It describes the process through which social circumstances impose or build gender expectations and distinctions (Lorber, 2000), and how gender operates draws its basis from gendered social norms and expectations. Social norms in this context represent the collective expectations regarding appropriate roles and behaviours socially constructed by the dominant majority (Akpanudo et al., 2017).

Similarly, gendering is not a singular or uniform phenomenon but is enacted through multiple interrelated processes, such as recruitment, promotion, and everyday workplace interactions (Acker, 1990). In this sense, whilst the ‘gendering’ already signals a process, speaking of ‘gendering processes’ can be analytically sound to emphasise the differentiated mechanisms through which gendering is realised. However, this study departs from the nomenclature of the ‘gendering process’ as referred to in Acker's (1992b) seminal work, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organisation”. Instead, it adopts Lorber's (2000) argument that gendering is a process in its own right. The term ‘gendering process’ is redundant, unless one seeks to emphasise the multiple, differentiated mechanisms through which gendering unfolds. In this study, the term ‘gendering’ is used to capture both its processual nature and the differentiated mechanisms through which it is enacted. By doing so, the study shifts from Acker's term ‘gendering process’ to Lorber's definition. This change results in the ‘gendering process’ being referred to simply as ‘gendering’, and Acker's ‘gendering process framework’ being referenced as a ‘gendering framework.’

In organisations, gendering occurs both through explicit and seemingly neutral organisational activities, involving the creation of symbols and awareness-raising techniques that justify, explain, and sometimes challenge gender norms (Acker, 1992b). It influences people's identities, behaviours, and opportunities according to hegemonic perceived standards. Thus, it is an ongoing creation and negotiation of gender identities, roles, and norms (Benschop, 2009), informed by social constructs that ubiquitously shape social interactions and experiences (Butler, 1988). It emphasises the doing of gender as a social construct that is dynamic and constantly (re)produced through a range of institutions and societal interactions (Acker, 1992b; Butler, 1988; Martin, 2020). And doing gender reinforces and upholds accepted gender norms, presenting ensuing social structures (West & Zimmerman, 1987), often through praxes.

2.1.2 Praxes and Gendering Praxes

Praxes is a plural form of 'praxis', which describes behaviours and practical actions that follow beliefs that are often situational. According to Mahon et al. (2020), there are many ways to understand the term 'praxis,' which is synonymously used with the word practice. However, praxis has a different meaning depending on the language and context. It is a specific type of practice that goes beyond routine or habitual behaviour. It is intentional, reflective, and loaded with social and ethical ramifications, setting it apart from more mundane or automatic behaviours (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Mills, 1992). Kemmis and Smith (2008) note that praxis, as a form of action, is guided by the traditions of a specific field and is morally committed. As a morally committed process, it relies on and is influenced by a strong sense of duty and obligation to adhere to ethical values. As such, it entails individuals considering, consciously and unconsciously, all situations and difficulties they face at any time, adopting them to a broad viewpoint to decide on the best course of action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008), thus signalling processes of doing (Horn, 2025). Therefore, it is an action that adheres to normative standards and norms situationally, based on the synergy of morally committed thought and action (Mills, 1992).

As a result, gendering praxes refers to a broad category of ongoing customs, behaviours, and practices that uphold and reinforce gender norms and disparities. It is the creation and maintenance of gendered dynamics within contexts facilitated by a variety of practices, including hiring decisions, promotion standards, organisational policies, and interactions among coworkers (Acker, 1990, 1992a). It highlights that some behaviours are not neutral but rather are impacted by and reflective of gendered

dynamics and inequalities, thus demonstrating the interpersonal social systems and power hierarchies within organisations. Gendering praxes manifest in the division of social reproductive and productive labour spaces. And for this reason, it is encoded in engagements, be it in private or public avenues.

2.1.3 Sedimentation

Sedimentation is a significant concept for understanding how organisations change, or fail to change, over time. Rather than viewing change as a clean break from one form to another, sedimentation highlights how past structures, values, and practices build upon new ones, allowing historical patterns to persist even under new systems (Cooper et al., 1996; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The concept draws on a geological metaphor, where organisational originals accumulate like layers of rock (Cooper et al., 1996). Each layer represents enduring routines, norms, and power relations that continue to shape behaviour, decision-making, and organisational identity. Therefore, sedimentation shows that change is rarely simple or complete. Old or historical ways of doing things don't just disappear; instead, new practices coexist with older ones, sometimes in conflict, and sometimes reinforcing each other. The metaphor underscores that even visible transformations may rest on deep, enduring layers of previous organisational life, which continue to influence behaviour, decision-making, and identity within the organisation.

According to Cooper et al. (1996), in practice, sedimentation sometimes produces structures with competing logics. For instance, an organisation may adopt new policies or reforms, whilst older practices and underlying assumptions continue to influence interpretations and behaviours. Members may experience tension or inconsistency as different layers of organisational logic coexist, sometimes supporting one another, sometimes generating conflict or incoherence. Importantly, sedimentation highlights that organisational practices are historically grounded and socially constructed because change is not merely technical but shaped by past decisions, entrenched routines, and power relations.

Whilst the concept of sedimentation has been applied in various ways, from Bourdieu's (1991) notion of embodied habitus to feminist theorists' descriptions of layered gender norms, this thesis uses the term sedimentation to refer to the gradual accumulation and normalisation of patriarchal values within organisational practices. In this context, layered conveys how social, cultural, or institutional practices accumulate, creating multiple, overlapping effects. It signals that inequalities or

structures are not single or uniform but are stacked or compounded, often making them more persistent or complex. This usage aligns most closely with the work of Cooper et al. (1996), who conceptualise sedimentation as a historical layering, a process through which norms and values become embedded over time in organisational routines, policies, and discourses, giving the appearance of neutrality whilst reinforcing masculine dominance.

This definition builds on Acker's (2006d) concept of inequality regimes, Crenshaw's works (1991), and Carbado and Gulati's (2013) discussions of structural inequality, highlighting how persistent layers of exclusion shape what is considered rational, ethical, or legitimate. When applied to a gendered context, sedimentation helps explain the persistence of male-dominated practices. It contextualises the process by which ideas, norms, or power structures become gradually embedded and naturalised over time.

Having established an understanding of how the different key terms are understood, the following sections focus on Joan Acker's gendering process framework, which serves as the fundamental basis for exploring the rootedness of the gendered praxes of the study.

2.3 Gender and Organisations

Despite continuous debates challenging the idea of organisations as gender-neutral, this perspective, rooted in organisational theory, persists.

Organisational theory involves exploring how organisations function, are structured, and behave by examining a range of theories, frameworks, and models to understand and analyse the dynamics that exist within organisations and in their surrounding contexts (Rothschild & Davies, 1994). Drawing on Max Weber's conceptualisation of bureaucratic organisations, organisations have been presented as unbiased, gender-neutral structures (Rothschild & Davies, 1994). As an idea, it presents organisations as gender-neutral entities with impersonal tasks, duties, authority, and processes (Acker, 2006b). However, Rothschild and Davies (1994) highlight that this is a significant error and a blind spot, as Max Weber based the idea of rational-bureaucratic organisations on his observations of the Prussian army during a period when gendered integration was not a concern. And it is on this premise that Joan Acker critiques the neutrality of organisations.

Drawing on the foundational research of Smith (1987), Acker (1992b) explains that organisations that govern, administer, and manage society are either the origin of organisational theory or closely related to it. Organisational researchers employ concepts, explanations, thought processes, and pertinent questions that align with those of managers and leaders in their daily thought processes. Most organisations are commonly perceived as gender-neutral entities (Acker, 1990, 1998; Kanter, 1975), despite having a complex relationship with gender. Gendering, a wide range of traditions, attitudes, and practices that support and perpetuate gendered advantages and disadvantages, occurs in these processes that appear to be gender-neutral (Acker, 1992b). They are influenced by gender dynamics, both formally and informally, through mechanisms that reinforce gender roles and symbolically through systems shaped by societal norms and traditional views of masculinity and femininity (Waylen et al., 2018). The setup and operation tend to mirror and maintain gendered norms and roles that exist in broader society. Therefore, organisational systems, operations and structures can reinforce traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and power dynamics, which may contribute to inequalities in the organisation.

Consequently, organisations are not gender-neutral (Acker, 2006b; Kanter, 1975) but reflect and perpetuate gendered inequalities through mechanisms such as job segregation, organisational hierarchies, and cultural norms (Acker, 1990). The organisation nearly always uses masculine analogies to define itself (Acker, 1992b, 2006b; Kennedy et al., 2020). They operate as places where external ideologies, socio-political systems, values, and social inequalities are resumed and (re)produced through institutional practices (Bates, 2021; Dye & Mills, 2012; Mackay, 2014; Parsons, 2017; Parsons et al., 2017) and should not be perceived as gender-neutral establishments (Acker, 1990). Assuming that organisations are gender-neutral, that is, they do not prioritise one gender over another, ignores the reality that discrimination and inequality based on race and gender are universal in organisational settings (Acker, 1998, 2006b; hooks, 1984). Organisations lack objectivity or neutrality (Rothschild & Davies, 1994) when it comes to the dynamics of race and gender. Instead, they mirror and uphold hierarchies and power structures that exist within their broader context.

2.1.1 Gendered Organisation – Joan Acker's Framework

Joan Acker's work on the theory of gendered organisations serves as an essential reference for this study. Initially presented in her ground-breaking article titled "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," her work expanded and established the groundwork for comprehending how gender influences

and is influenced by organisational structures, practices, and processes. She elaborates on this as the 'gendering processes' of organisations and has since become central to organisational studies and gender theory, exerting influence on research and scholarship across diverse fields.

In the introductory section of this chapter, the idea of organisations as gender-neutral was highlighted and contested. In the contestation, it is noted that gender is present in organisational processes. In these processes, further discussed below, Acker (1990, 1992b) highlights them as simultaneously overt and covert in the practices of division of labour, images, ideologies, and interactions, as well as in identities. It shapes how work is organised, who occupies which roles, and how decisions are made (Britton, 2000). Therefore, rather than treating organisations as gender-neutral, they should be recognised as gendered entities with built-in gendered and gendering substructures (Acker, 1990, 1992b, 2006b). Uncontested conventional organisational theorists minimise the role that gender plays in influencing organisational dynamics (Acker, 2006b), which often leads to the persistence of gender inequality, inequities, and biases in organisational practices and structures (Acker, 1990). Assumption of gender neutrality hides the lived realities of individuals who encounter racial and gender-based subordination in their day-to-day encounters with organisations (Acker, 2006d; Carbado et al., 2013). According to Acker (2012, p. 215),

> "Gendered substructures point to often-invisible processes in the ordinary lives of organisations in which gendered assumptions about women and men, femininity, and masculinity, are embedded and reproduced, and gender inequalities perpetuated."

These present forms of formal and informal processes are conducted through experiences and organisational identities that play out in invisible spaces, as noted by Waylen (2018) as 'the hidden life' of an organisation. For Waylen (2018), the hidden life of the organisation, which is often gendered, is not as immediately observable and co-exists alongside the organisation's official rules, behaviours, and practices, but is most likely to be disregarded. It is the less obvious space of gendering praxes that buttresses gendering and thwarts efforts to instil gender-equitable reforms.

Inasmuch as gendered organisation may seem passively defined, it offers that "gender is a foundational element of organisational structure and work life, present in [its] processes, practises, images and ideologies and distribution of power" (Britton,

2000, p. 428). An organisation is gendered when its practices “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (Acker, 1990, p. 146). Consequently, an organisation is considered gendered when gender influences patterns of role allocations, behaviours, and power relations based on gender norms and expectations of femininity and masculinity, shaping organisational life. Acker offers a perspective on how this unfolds in the day-to-day functions of the organisation.

Gendered organisations engage in five gendering processes, which serve as gendering substructures, reinforcing gender norms within their contexts (Acker, 1990). These substructures encompass (a) gendering practice and structures; (b) gendering culture and symbols; (c) gendered and gendering interactions; (d) gendering identity constructs; (e) organisational logic. In this process, it is the organisational logic that informs the other substructures – practice/structures, culture, symbols, interaction, and identity constructs – (Acker, 1990; Bates, 2021). Therefore, through organisational logic, the other substructures are tethered in gendering the organisation holistically (Acker, 1990; Dye & Mills, 2012). It is through logic that fundamental ideas, frameworks, and procedures direct an organisation's operations and decision-making processes. It represents the basic reasoning behind an organisation's structure, policies, and practices.

2.1.1.1 Gendering Practices and Structures

According to Acker (2012), gendering practices are an organising process where both implicit and explicit inequality practices can be observed. Gendering practice and organising processes involve constructing divisions of labour along gendered lines tied to behaviours, physical space, and power dynamics that occur in segmented labour markets, familial roles, and state policies (Acker, 1990; Martin, 2003). They are often visible, patterned practices (Acker, 1992a; Parsons, 2017) that Dye and Mills (2012) raised as the process of defining and demarcating specific tasks, roles, or responsibilities within a workplace based on gender. It describes how certain types of work are allocated or assigned to individuals based on their gender, with distinct roles or tasks being associated with either men or women.

These patterns often create a ring-fenced notion of who does what and where in the organisation, even though it may be presented as gender-neutral. It is the physical allocation and/or location of individuals, which is often evident in hiring

practices and the assignment of duties (Acker, 1990). Gendering practices frequently occur automatically and without deliberate consideration, happening rapidly and spontaneously (Martin, 2003). It is something learnt through repeated actions and behaviours, rather than a fixed or inherent characteristic (Martin, 2003). In-viewing gender as a practice means understanding it as a system of actions that have become institutionalised within society (Martin, 2003). Therefore, it is not just a set of attribute arrangements, but rather a set of actions and behaviours that are reinforced and perpetuated unreflexively.

2.1.1.2 Gendering Culture

Gendering culture involves beliefs, codes, ideologies, images, language, and metaphors that express and perpetuate gendered divisions within the organisation. It is symbols that maintain or justify organisational images of femininity and masculinity (Acker, 1990; Parsons, 2017), which inform the organising. The symbols, whether linguistic expressions, cultural allusions, or visual cues, have an impact on how gender roles and identities are perceived and perpetuated within the organisation. Jobs, duties, and power dynamics are but a few of the parts of the organisation that are structured and organised based on these deeply ingrained ideas of femininity and masculinity. The importance of symbols is in upholding and legitimising organisational views of femininity and masculinity. For instance, the portrayal of hegemonic femininity is characterised by images of passive, emotional, and maternal figures (Kennedy et al., 2020).

A key component of gendering culture is the creation and propagation of symbols and images that either support, articulate, and uphold gender-based boundaries. These expressions are widely used and originate from various sources, including language, ideology, high and popular culture, among others (Acker, 1990, p. 146). It's what is considered standard or divergent in terms of gender relations (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). These representations, both public and private, have a significant impact on the norms and values of society (Dye & Mills, 2012). They are exemplified in organisational symbols, slogans, and elements that significantly contribute to creating an environment and projecting an image that reflects the values and characteristics of an organisation (Dye & Mills, 2012). Therefore, gendering culture often contributes to the perpetuation of societal expectations regarding masculinity and femininity (Parsons et al., 2017).

2.1.1.3 Gendering Identities and Self-Perception

According to Gherardi and Poggio (2007, 2014) and Parsons (2017), the formation of gender identities occurs through positioning and socialisation. Based on biological and anatomical differences, sex roles are created in binary forms of masculinity and femininity that create a bi-system of gender (Kennedy et al., 2020). Through this bi-system, gender identity is both internalised and externalised, and shapes binary understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman, apparent in how people navigate "gender appropriate work and present themselves as gendered" individuals (Parsons, 2017, p. 61). During these interactions, individuals present themselves in ways that are both objectively (observable by others) and subjectively (based on subjective experiences and perceptions) coherent (Davies & Harré, 1990). They actively contribute to creating shared narratives in interactions, shaping identity within a context of singular and joint actions.

Acker (1990, 1992a) characterised this process as the gender construction of identities, where, in addition to being recognised as men and women, individuals also actively acknowledge and perpetuate the physical, biological, implicit, and explicit norms and rules associated with the valuation of masculinity and femininity (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998). It often entails negotiating and understanding gendered identities, which are shaped by social standards for behaviour and appearance, as well as rules that are gender-biased (Dye & Mills, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The navigation functions as a compass, assisting in the replication of identity elements, understanding gendered accountability, opportunities, and work structures, and setting expectations for gender behaviours and attitudes (Acker, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, in this process, individuals strategically place themselves in the gender identity substructures to secure their survival within the organisation (Parsons, 2017).

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's work, Butler (1988, 2002) and West and Zimmerman (1987) add that gender identities are not fixed but instead involve and evolve through repeated social interactions and behaviours. They are the result of context-based expectations and norms, expressed through the repetition of actions and gestures that give the appearance of fixed gender identities. Physical gestures and expressions play a crucial role in the construction of gendered identities in everyday life (Butler, 1988). Despite its appearance of being fixed, gender identities are not innate; instead, they are socially constructed, repeated performances that become habitual.

Just as race, ethnicity, and class are apparent on various levels based on contexts and histories, Hearn (1993) and Fineman (2000) reasoned that gender, femininity, and masculinity also exhibit contextualised influences and interpretations that vary, and impact gender identity constructs. Acker (2004), citing Connell,[4] similarly explained that femininity and masculinity should be used in a pluralised form because different people have different ideas about what these concepts entail. Individual identity, beliefs, and practices impact the variation and interpretation of the concepts. Therefore, the understanding and expression of gender identities, often conveyed through notions of masculinity and femininity, are not fixed or universal but are hegemonically shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. Hence, Butler (1988) argues that gender is flexible and changeable, opposing the idea that it is a constant and intrinsic part of identity. Different contexts and historical epochs give rise to distinct conceptions of gender roles, norms, and expectations, resulting in varied interpretations and experiences of femininity and masculinity, as well as the gender identities they construct.

2.1.1.4 Gendering Interactions and Behaviours

For West and Zimmerman (1987), gender transcends being a mere component of an individual's identity; instead, it is shaped by continuous behaviours and social interactions, a concept Acker (1990) terms "gendering interactions."

Gender, from West and Zimmerman's (1987) perspective, is not a static entity but an ongoing process tantamount to 'doing gender.' The concept of doing gender involves two main aspects: gender performance — the routine accomplishment of gender in everyday life —and accountability, where individuals are judged based on their success or failure in meeting gendered societal expectations (Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This entails actively creating gendered identities through continuous social interactions and behaviours described by Butler (1988, 2002) and Kondo (1990) as a performative act and an expression of gender identities outlined by Gherardi and Poggio (2007, 2014). For instance, a female doctor may face discredit in significant clinical activities because of her gender. In contrast, her profession as a doctor can be used to discredit her dedication to her responsibilities as a wife and mother (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, gender interactions are an extension of gendered identities. Simply put, how individuals interact with each other is influenced by their gender identities, with the interactions between people being

[4] Connell, R.W. (2000). 'The Men and the Boys'. Berkeley: University of California Press.

outward expressions of the gender identity they hold. They are performative acts that play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing gendered identities within a given context (Acker, 1990, 1992a, 2012).

Identities emerge in and through conversations, where identities are rhetorically constructed by claims influenced by language. The manifestations of gendered interactions extend to simple communication exchanges, such as turn-taking in conversations, interpretation of discussions, and the establishment of conversation topics, resulting in the formation of alliances and exclusions (Acker, 1990, 1992a; Butler, 1988; Dye & Mills, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This dynamic process, described by West and Zimmerman (1987) as 'doing gender,' unfolds in real-time and space (Bates, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, in doing gender, a hierarchy is established in interactions that assigns turn-taking in conversations and power in holding the floor (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The assignment of turn-taking in conversations is an essential aspect within the hierarchy of social interactions guided by gendered identities. The way individuals take turns in speaking during conversations is structured by societal norms and expectations related to gender.

As a result, interactions within and between gender groups exhibit patterns that articulate dominance and submission (Acker, 1990). In 'doing gender,' men actively adopt behaviours aligned with dominance, whilst women exhibit behaviours associated with deference (Acker, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Within these interactions, identities that "create divisions" and construct "images of gender" are developed and affirmed (Dye & Mills, 2012, p. 280). The assignment of behaviours related to dominance and deference not only shapes the immediate interaction but also reinforces hierarchical structures, establishing them as an accepted social order. Whilst 'doing gender' assigns assumed behaviours of dominance and deference, it equally reinforces and upholds accepted gender norms, presenting ensuing social structures as 'natural differences' or innate (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This acceptance acts as a potent force, fortifying and legitimising gendered social hierarchies and gender order.

2.1.1.5 Organisational Logic

Various academic studies have highlighted the importance of organisational principles and systems in shaping the gendered aspects within specific organisational structures. Some of these studies are covered by Benschop and Doorewaard's (1998) investigation of the Dutch banking sector; Dye and Mill's (2012) study on Pan American Airways; Parsons' (2017) study on women in family funeral firms; and

Bates' (2018; 2021) exploration of gendering in an Australian trade union. In these respective investigations, the role of organisational logics in influencing how gender dynamics manifest within different contexts is examined. These studies draw from the seminal work of Acker (1990), "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organisation," who theorised on organisational logic. As the initiating source, Acker (1990, 1992b) adeptly states that,

> "Organisational logic is anchored in and helps to reproduce the fundamental structuring of industrial societies, in which the production of things and services for which money is exchanged is clearly separated in time, place, form of organisation and conceptualisation from the reproduction of human beings and everyday life".

Whereas drawing on Acker's assertion, Dye and Mills (2012, p. 280) note that,

> "organisational logic is a dominant set of ideas about organisation that is produced through an iterative process of management practise and organisational theories of those practises… that are located in broad socio-economic phenomena (e.g. the interplay between work and domestic life); a dominant set of structures and processes that come to characterize organisational arrangements, which are manifest in "material forms in written work rules, labour contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools for running large organisations."

Therefore, for Dye and Mills (2012), organisational logic is an iterative process that characterises and encodes rules and organisational arrangements under the influence of broader social and economic issues, such as the relationships between work and home life. For Parsons et al. (2017), it is implicit rules and underlying assumptions about what organisations should be. Foundational assumptions and mapping form the cornerstone of an organisation, manifesting in both material and symbolic forms (Acker, 1990, 1992a, 2006d; Britton, 1997, 2000; Britton & Logan, 2008; Parsons et al., 2017). It reinforces arrangements that inform and are informed by processes of structure, practices, culture, interactions, and identity (Bates, 2021), directing the proclivities and serving as a source of an organisation's passivity. In these proclivities and passivates is a gender order connecting gender dynamics and patterns of behaviour where gender plays a role in shaping how proclivities and passivity manifest.

Whilst organisational logic may appear gender-neutral, it is gendered, working to maintain and (re)produce abstract jobs and hierarchies which assume a disembodied universal worker (Acker, 1990, 1992b, 2006b; Bates, 2021). It affects how work is valued, who has access to power, and what assumptions underpin organisational norms (Acker, 1990; Britton, 2000). As such, organisations are not immune to gender; rather, it actively shapes and perpetuates gendered patterns (Acker, 2006b) through their sense-making processes. Consequently, organisational logic with its gendered proclivities influences everything from job assignments and hierarchies to policies and practices. It is through organisational logic that other gendering substructures are integrated holistically (Dye & Mills, 2012), contributing to the perpetuation of a gender order in organisations and society.

Building on the foundations of gendered organisation theory, Acker's concept of inequality regimes provides a more comprehensive framework for analysing how multiple forms of inequality are systematically reproduced within organisations. The following section outlines this framework and its relevance for the present study.

2.1.2 Inequality Regimes

Scholars in understanding gender in organisations note other vital aspects.

Drawing on intersectionality arguments, Acker (2012, p. 214) notes that "gendered processes do not stand alone but intersect with and are shaped by race and class processes, as well as other forms of inequality and exclusion." Her concept of inequality regimes captures this dynamic, defining them as "loosely interrelated practises, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within organisations" (2006d, p. 443). This perspective emphasises that the constitutive nature of gender is connected to the politics, history, and culture of its surrounding society (Acker, 2006b). As such, one should not analyse it in isolation but must understand it in relation to broader contextual, historical, social, and systemic components and surroundings (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Building on this, scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and Carbado & Gulati (2013) stress the need to examine the interplay of multiple identity markers, pushing organisational research towards more holistic accounts of inequality.

As a result, Joan Acker's formulation of the inequality regimes framework has become central to the study of organisational inequality, reshaping how scholars

conceptualise systemic inequalities embedded within organisational life (Acker, 2006a, 2006d, 2009, 2012; Broadbent et al., 2017; Healy et al., 2019). Whilst earlier and similar metaphors, such as the 'glass ceiling,'[5] 'sticky floor,'[6] 'concrete ceiling,'[7] 'labyrinth,'[8] 'leaky pipeline,'[9] and 'mommy track,'[10] were effective in highlighting particular barriers to women's advancement into senior roles, these metaphors are beneficial for explaining specific features of inequality. Each metaphor isolates a single barrier or dynamic, whereas Acker's inequality regimes framework, by contrast, situates these metaphors within a systemic and intersectional structure. She captures the full range of organisational processes that sustain disparities across gender, class, and race (Acker, 2006a, 2006d, 2009, 2012), positioning organisations as key sites in which wider social inequalities are reproduced, making them crucial to any serious analysis of systemic inequality.

The shift from metaphors to frameworks has been widely recognised for changing focus from individual bias or discriminatory intent to a structural account of inequality (Britton & Logan, 2008; Broadbent et al., 2017; Healy et al., 2019). Extending her earlier work on gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), Acker explicitly emphasises how race and class interact with gender to influence organisational hierarchies, pay structures, and cultures. In doing so, the inequality regimes framework aligns with feminist and critical race traditions that highlight the interconnectedness of social categories (Collins, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1991). This intersectional approach has gained its influence across disciplines, establishing it as an essential tool for analysing

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[5] Highlights barriers to women and minorities reaching the uppermost levels of hierarchy.

[6] Barriers that keep women and minorities in low-wage, low-mobility jobs, preventing upward movement before they even approach a "ceiling. Booth, A. L., Francesconi, M., & Frank, J. (2003). A sticky floors model of promotion, pay, and gender. *European Economic Review*, *47*(2), 295-322. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921(01)00197-0

[7] Used particularly to describe the compounded, harder-to-penetrate barriers faced by women of colour compared to white women. Bell, E. L. J. E., Smith, E. L. J. B., Press, E. L. J. E. B. S. M. N. H. B. S., Bell, E. E., & Nkomo, S. M. (2001). *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*. Harvard Business School Press. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=A2zSQwAACAAJ .

[8] Instead of a single ceiling, women face a complex, winding set of obstacles and detours throughout their careers. Eagly, A., & Carli, L. (2007). Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership. *Harvard business review*, *85*, 62-71, 146. https://doi.org/10.1037/e664062007-001 .

[9] Women drop out at multiple stages of the career path due to cumulative disadvantages, especially in STEM. Clark Blickenstaff*, J. (2005). Women and science careers: leaky pipeline or gender filter? *Gender and Education*, *17*(4), 369-386. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500145072 .

[10] Career paths that sideline women who take time off or reduce hours for family responsibilities, often leading to fewer opportunities for advancement. Gummer, B. (1992). The Management Careers of Men and Women: . *Administration in Social Work*, *15*(4), 111-128. https://doi.org/10.1300/j147v15n04_08 .

how organisations both reflect and reinforce systemic inequalities well beyond gender studies.

Building on her earlier work on gendered organisations, Acker (2006d, 2009) highlights six interrelated components that constitute inequality regimes. Central to inequality regimes are organising processes based on inequality, typically class, gender, and race, though she recognises the salience of other categories such as sexuality, religion, disability, and migration (Acker, 2006d, 2012). These inequalities take different shapes and degrees, from steep hierarchies to subtle wage differentials, and are reproduced through organising processes such as recruitment, promotion, wage setting, and informal interactions.

For instance, work is typically structured around the figure of the "ideal worker," an implicitly white, male, and unencumbered employee who can commit fully to the job without external obligations (Acker, 2009). This model disadvantages women with caregiving responsibilities and perpetuates masculine-coded definitions of skill and competence. Job classification systems, recruitment through networks, and individualised pay-setting further entrench inequality. Informal interactions also play a key role in everyday exclusions and stereotypes, as well as overt harassment (Pierce, 1996; Wright, 2016). Scholars such as Williams (1992) and Benschop and Van den Brink (2013, 2019), among others, have demonstrated how the concept of the ‘ideal worker’ persists even within organisations that claim a commitment to equality, reflecting a deep tension between business and equality goals.

Research applying the inequality regimes framework demonstrates its explanatory power across diverse settings. For instance, Acker’s (1991, 1994, 2006c) case studies of Swedish banks revealed that even where formal wage agreements guaranteed equal pay, individualised increments allocated by male managers favoured male employees, widening the gender gap over time. Similar findings are echoed in Pierce’s (1996) ethnography of law firms, which showed how informal interactions positioned women as “support staff” regardless of their formal job titles, whilst men were groomed as future leaders. And more recently, Wright (2016) and Brown and Woodfield (2024) have extended Acker’s observations by examining how sexual harassment and banter operate as control mechanisms, intertwining sexual with gender and class in ways Acker only partially developed.

The strength of the inequality regimes framework lies in its flexibility. Scholars have used it to analyse organisational restructuring, pay systems, and recruitment practises in contexts as varied as the Nordic welfare states (Seierstad & Healy, 2012), Chinese private firms (Tatli et al., 2017), and religious organisations (Whitehead, 2013). These studies demonstrate that inequality regimes are not uniform across settings, but rather are historically and geographically specific. They also highlight how broader political and economic regimes, neoliberal restructuring, marketisation, or religious doctrine, shape the ways organisational inequalities are legitimised and maintained. Acker emphasises that inequality regimes persist partly because inequalities are rendered invisible or treated as legitimate. Class disparities, for example, are often naturalised as the outcome of merit or effort, whereas gender and race inequalities may be denied or explained away as individual choice (Acker, 2006d, 2009). This resonates with Bourdieu's (1991, 2018) notion of symbolic power, in which dominant groups come to misrecognise their privilege as natural or deserved.

However, resistance does occur, particularly through trade unions, activist networks, and challenges to dominant ideas of merit and quality (Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2013; Bradley, 2008). Oikelome and Healy (2007), and Healy and Oikelome (2007; 2011) show how trade unions have provided space for Black and minority ethnic women to challenge exclusionary practices, whilst Benschop and Van den Brink (2013) demonstrate how debates around quotas in the Dutch police made hidden assumptions about "quality" and "fairness" visible and contestable. However, these openings and equality initiatives often fail to produce transformative change. As Cockburn (1991) and Acker (2006d, 2012) argue, programmes that focus narrowly on representation or family-friendly policies frequently reinforce, rather than dismantle, the masculine model of the "unencumbered worker." Diversity initiatives in corporate settings, similarly, are often criticised for being symbolic, limited to compliance or reputation management, rather than challenging deep structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012; Noon, 2007). This is because organisations are often focused on saving money and maximising profits, whilst simultaneously claiming that they want to be fair and reduce inequality. These two goals conflict because being truly fair often requires spending money, giving people more power, or sharing resources more equitably. As a result, organisations usually end up unable to pursue genuine redistribution of power and resources that make fundamental changes.

Moreover, whilst inequality regimes are widely recognised as a valued analytic tool (Healy et al., 2019; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012), scholars have also

highlighted essential limitations. Acker's initial formulation gave limited attention to dimensions of sexuality and migration, though subsequent studies have shown these to be central to organisational inequality (Healy & Oikelome, 2007; Wright, 2016). As a result, others argue that the framework must better account for the evolving nature of work, the changing nature of organisations themselves, as outsourcing, platform work, and precarious contracts alter the terrain in which inequality regimes operate (Rubery et al., 2018; Rubery & Hebson, 2018). Furthermore, methodological innovations through ethnography and case studies, as well as the examination of how resistance can contribute to meaningful change, are also noted in capturing the lived experiences of inequality, as well as the significance of resistance as a force for organisational change (Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2019; Whitehead, 2013).

Nonetheless, the inequality regimes framework remains profoundly influential because it does not isolate inequality from its organisational foundations. By theorising organisations as active producers of inequality, Acker challenges the myth of meritocracy and exposes the ways class, gender, and race are woven into the fabric of the everyday workings of organisations. Simultaneously, her doubt about the possibility of equality in today's profit-driven organisations raises a big question for future research. If organisations are inherently structured around efficiency and profit rather than equity goals (Acker, 1990, 2006d, 2012), what would it take to imagine and create organisations that are truly fair instead? Even so, the inequality regimes framework continues to expose and unsettle the often-hidden processes that reproduce and sustain inequality, providing an essential foundation for critical scholarship and activism.

Whereas Acker's inequality regime concept provides a robust framework for analysing how organisations reproduce multiple and overlapping inequalities, it primarily focuses on structural and organisational mechanisms. To broaden and complement this structural perspective, the discussion in the next section turns to feminist epistemologies, specifically feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist perspectives. These perspectives shift attention to lived experiences and the insights of those often positioned at the margins of power, creating space to connect structural patterns of inequalities with the ways individuals experience and navigate them. Together, they provide a holistic understanding of gendered praxes in organisations for the study's case.

2.4 Knowing from the Margins: A Feminist Perspective

This section examines strands of feminist theories that contribute to an understanding of gender dynamics. It considers how knowledge is produced, validated, and challenged, especially when approached from perspectives of often marginalised individuals and/or groups. In doing so, the discussion highlights the significance of perspectives from the margins in redefining the dominant understanding of knowledge and its validity in broader contexts.

2.1.3 Feminist Epistemologies

Whilst scholars of feminist theories are divided into several schools of thought, they often share a common understanding that "feminist researchers see gender as a basic organising principle that shapes the conditions of their lives" (Creswell, 2018, p. 28). Moreover, feminist theories commonly argue that various experiences of inequalities are shaped by gender within organisations, even though the experiences are not uniform.

Feminist epistemology offers multiple frameworks for rethinking the relationship between knowledge, power, and social location. Its theorists argue that marginalised social positions, such as those of women or working-class communities, can generate epistemic standpoints that provide critical insights often inaccessible from dominant perspectives (Harding, 1986, 1991; Hartsock, 2019).

Feminist epistemologists argue that knowledge is socially situated (Haraway, 1988) and that the social position of the knower, including their gender, influences what is known, how it is known, and what is accepted as valid evidence (Harding, 1991; Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999). It is those who control knowledge production and the narratives that shape and regulate its creation. In this context, feminist scholars regard the knower (subject) as a collective, strategically built from diverse experiences, recognising that no single standpoint should hold privileged status and that women occupy a wide range of social locations, including class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, among others. Conversely, the known (object) is socially constructed, produced through human activity and history, rather than a fixed, detached entity (Haraway, 1988). Thus, it is essential to consider whose perspectives, experiences, and expertise are reflected in procedures.

Recognition is central to feminist epistemology, which emphasises that knowledge is always socially and historically situated. The notion of situated

knowledge emphasises that the knower speaks from a specific point in history within a particular material and cultural context (Longino, 1990), thereby offering a corrective to both universalist objectivity and radical relativism. The perspective challenges the traditional Western scientific ideal of positivism, which assumes that truth arises from objective, impartial observation and views subjective judgments as barriers to knowledge (Harding, 1991). This leads to a reevaluation of objectivity, suggesting that true objectivity stems from acknowledging and integrating these partial perspectives (Harding, 1991, 1992). This approach maintains that the social location and experiences of the observer are not merely biases to be overcome, but are essential to the knowledge produced.

For this reason, Haraway (1988) argues that the object of knowledge should be seen and treated as an actor and agent, rather than a passive resource to be appropriated, thereby challenging traditional Western analytical frameworks. The goal should not be a universal "truth," but rather to highlight insights from specific, situated experiences, particularly those that have been historically overlooked. She emphasises that an individual's sense of self is complex and contradictory, often reflecting their own position in the world, questioning assumptions, and engaging in rational conversations. For this reason, the knowing self is "partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586).

Haraway's (1988) argument highlights that the split and contradictory self aligns closely with feminist standpoint theory, as it reinforces the idea that one's social position always shapes knowledge. Whilst marginalised perspectives offer critical insights into power and inequality, they do not hold a single, complete, or perfectly objective perspective. Standpoints are never fully complete or objective, as the knowing self is always partial, situated, and influenced by multiple experiences.

By acknowledging both the complexity of the self and the value of situated knowledge, feminist epistemologies highlight how partial perspectives can produce valid and transformative understandings of social structures and injustices. Thus, feminist scholars must acknowledge complexity and imperfection in knowledge, a perspective that requires reflexivity, where researchers should recognise their own positions and biases whilst analysing knowledge production.

For Gherardi and Poggio (2007), the goal of feminist epistemology is to demonstrate that history has primarily been a male-written narrative that captured only a small portion of the human situation. The rest was left out or sidelined; foremost, the history of women, both as individual experiences and as a part of daily existence, a life that, in other words, does not 'make history' (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Experiencing the world as a woman or a man yields different realities, which in turn lead to distinct narratives about these realities. These realities cannot be recounted by a singular body or narrative, as such,

"Women need science and technologies that are for women and that are for women in every class, race, and culture… [hence] it is time to examine critically the conflicting interests in science that women in opposing classes and races may well have; women's interests are not homogenous. Feminism insists that questions be asked of nature, of social relations, and of the sciences, different from those that 'prefeminists' have asked, whether conventional or countercultural" (Harding, 1991, p. 5).

Similarly, Anderson (1995) and Lewis and Baderoon (2021) note that feminist epistemology critique is concerned with changing the social context in which science is produced and applied. However, it has been more successful in recognising and highlighting how gender is involved in knowledge praxes than in clarifying how it influences practices and theories generated (Anderson, 1995). Thus, it is concerned with empowering knowledge production to embrace feminist values and perspectives in the application and creation of theories (Anderson, 1995; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). It generally advocates a plausible form of social constructivism rather than a radical, global relativism (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Longino, 1990), without claiming that justification lines up solely with beliefs that advance feminist aims. Instead, they argue that acknowledging diverse perspectives and their related notions of evidence can lead to more empirically adequate and illuminating theories. It combines the idea of situated knowledge with claims about systems of social oppression, arguing that socially oppressed groups possess unique experiences that can lead to epistemically privileged perspectives.

Therefore, feminist epistemologies collectively emphasise how knowledge production has historically been influenced by privileged male perspectives that prioritise abstraction over embodied experience. They argue for the importance of situated knowledges, especially from marginalised viewpoints like those of Black

women, to develop a more comprehensive and fair understanding of the world. In the arguments, traditional scientific methods are critiqued for their objectifying approaches and their role in social dominance, advocating instead for collaborative and ethically rooted research that incorporates diverse experiences and challenges existing power structures.

Consequently, feminist epistemologies provide the theoretical backbone that connects feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist thought. Essentially, they explain why knowledge is socially situated and how power shapes what is considered legitimate knowledge.

2.1.4 Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory is a robust epistemological framework that redefines objectivity, challenges traditional notions of knowledge production and emphasises the crucial insights gained from the experiences of marginalised groups, particularly women (Collins, 1997; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 2003; Rolin, 2006, 2009). It posits that differences in social locations of inquirers lead to epistemic differences, influencing what they are justified in believing and knowing. Thus, it argues that individuals, particularly those from socially oppressed and marginalised groups, can achieve an epistemically privileged perspective, a standpoint, through critical reflection on their unique experiences of oppression. This understanding can bring epistemic benefits that might otherwise be obscured by mainstream, dominant viewpoints (Harding, 1991) and reveal the true nature of social relations (Hartsock, 2003, 2019).

Nonetheless, this understanding is not automatic; it must be achieved through analysis and struggle. It is a collaborative process, not an individual one, and is also domain-specific, typically most evident in areas concerning social relations.

Drawing on Marxist traditions, Hartsock (1983) argues that, just as the working class has a clearer understanding of social relations due to its position within structures of exploitation, women can develop a standpoint that reveals the gendered nature of power. Knowledge is socially situated, but not all social locations are equally revealing. It is those who occupy marginalised positions, such as women, racial minorities, or the working class, who have an epistemic advantage because their lived experiences allow them to perceive structures of oppression that dominant groups often ignore or naturalise. Therefore, this standpoint is not simply given by being

female or marginalised but emerges through feminist political struggle and reflection on shared experiences.

Harding (1991) develops the idea of 'strong objectivity.' She critiques the positivist belief in value-free science, an ideal that holds scientific research should be conducted without personal beliefs, opinions, or moral judgments, thereby allowing for an objective and unbiased view of the world. She argues that the supposedly neutral standpoint of dominant groups is actually deeply biased. She further asserts that beginning research from the perspectives of marginalised people can lead to stronger, more critical forms of objectivity because these viewpoints reveal the social assumptions that dominant perspectives often take for granted.

Collins (2000b) further develops feminist standpoint theory by noting that Black women, through their experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and class, generate a unique standpoint that highlights the limitations of dominant knowledge traditions. Black women's experiences generate distinctive knowledge that white feminist or Black male perspectives often miss. For example, the roles of Black women in families and communities provide them with a unique vantage point on survival, resilience, and social justice (Alinia, 2015; Collins, 2000b). She emphasises the communal validation of knowledge, noting that ideas gain credibility not through abstract universalism but through dialogue, collective experiences, and their usefulness in resisting oppression. Therefore, from this perspective, feminist standpoint theory asserts that marginalised standpoints offer more critical and comprehensive insights into power and social reality.

In their different presentations, Hartsock (1983), Harding (1991), and Collins (2000b) assert that knowledge is shaped by social position, and that marginalised standpoints offer a critical, epistemic advantage by revealing dimensions of power that are obscured in dominant frameworks. Feminist standpoint theory scholars (Collins, 1997, 2000b; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991, 1992, 2004; Hartsock, 2003; Hekman, 1997; Longino, 1990, 1994; Longino & Lennon, 1997; Rolin, 2006) posit that true objectivity and a fairer society require recognising multiple truths that arise from the intersections of race, class, gender, and other social identity markers, and actively working to redefine knowledge from these previously marginalised and/or silenced perspectives.

2.1.5 Situated Knowledge

Building on the insights of feminist standpoint theorists and arguably a response to the "god trick" of scientific objectivity, Haraway (1988) critiques the residual universalism implicit in claims that marginalised groups have epistemic privilege. This conceptualisation rejects both the positivist universal "view from nowhere" and the radical relativist claim, which treats all perspectives as equally valid regardless of their accountability or empirical accuracy (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Longino, 1990). Instead, Haraway (1988) argues that all knowing subjects are embodied and located in particular contexts, and therefore no perspective can claim transcendence or total objectivity.

Her notion of situated knowledge reframes objectivity, arguing that objectivity arises from transparency about one's position and recognition of the limits of one's perspective. Rather than privileging one standpoint over another, Haraway (1988) argues that all knowledge is partial and embodied, and that acknowledging this partiality is what makes objectivity possible, more accountable and reliable. This epistemological stance calls for humility and accountability in knowledge production, resisting both universalism and "anything goes" relativism. It critiques the view that knowledge can be produced by a detached, disembodied observer from nowhere. For instance, Haraway (1988) demonstrates that technologies of vision (such as microscopes, cameras, or satellites) do not provide direct access to truth but rather mediate and frame what is seen. The scientist, she stresses, is never outside of culture; they are embedded within historical, political, and social systems that shape what they observe. Thus, all knowledge is situated, produced by embodied subjects within specific contexts and biases. Objectivity is only an achievement of accountability to one's partial perspective, and the recognition of this partiality does not undermine objectivity but strengthens it (Haraway, 1988).

Recent scholarship has built upon this foundation. Toole (2024) distinguishes between epistemic advantage and epistemic privilege, arguing that the latter can be achieved through reflexivity and dialogical engagement across perspectives, rather than being tied exclusively to social position. Similarly, Ashton and McKenna (2020) assert that feminist epistemology begins from the assumption that an inquirer's social location shapes what they are justified in believing, and that acknowledging this situatedness is central to responsible knowledge practices. Applied research has echoed this emphasis, with feminist reflexivity literature stressing that positional awareness and accountability to one's standpoint are crucial to producing ethical and

trustworthy knowledge (Wilson et al., 2018). Together, these contributions show that feminist epistemology continues to refine Haraway's insight by framing objectivity not as neutrality but as a practice of situated accountability.

Therefore, Haraway (1988) argues that rather than asking how we can strip away bias to achieve universality, researchers can take responsibility for the perspectives from which they observe, speak and the effects of knowledge in the world. As a result, situated knowledge permits scientific inquiries to recognise that opposing ideas and experiences may coexist without invalidating one another, by instead contributing to a balance of power in ways of knowing and understanding. This epistemic perspective is vital for building reflexive feminist solidarity that advocates equity in acknowledged production and draws on diverse concepts, definitions, and dialogues about women's issues.

2.1.6 Black Feminist Perspective

Extending feminist standpoint theory and situated knowledge insights, Black feminist theorists highlight how Black women's intersectional experiences, arising from racism, sexism, and class oppression, amongst others, produce distinctive ways of knowing that have historically been excluded from mainstream epistemologies (Collins, 2000b; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 2018). Black feminist thought emphasises and centres Black women's lived experiences as sources of critical re-evaluation and challenge for dominant knowledge. It emerges from the recognition that mainstream feminist theories have historically marginalised or erased Black women's experiences.

For instance, in recent years, feminist scholarship from both the Global North and South has shown notable convergence in theoretical orientations and shared concerns, such as intersectionality, reproductive justice, and gendered economic critiques (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021). However, significant divergence remains, shaped by distinctions in historical trajectories (e.g. colonial legacies and postcolonial formations), as well as socioeconomic and cultural contexts that inform specific knowledge systems and regional feminist discourse (Adichie, 2014; Collins, 2000a; Tamale, 2020). These epistemic and conceptual differences significantly shape how feminist agendas are interpreted, prioritised, and operationalised across diverse regional and local contexts. As such, decolonisation must occur in both the terms of the conversation and its content as well (Mignolo, 2011).

As it stands, dominant feminist debates sometimes overlook Black feminist situated knowledge (Chadwick, 2017), positioning Black women at a disadvantage. As Crenshaw (1991, p. 1298) states, "the narratives of gender are based on the experiences of White, middle-class, and the narratives of race are based on the experiences of Black men." Consequently, Chadwick (2017) emphasises the need to integrate Black feminist political and epistemic perspectives on social injustice and bias in current discussions and critiques. Therefore, in the various aspects of feminist theories, it is essential to organise and highlight a wide range of marginalised experiences amongst women that span multiple socio-economic dimensions (Bell et al., 2019).

As hooks (1984, p. 14) notes, "privileged feminists have mainly been unable to talk to, with, and for varied groups of women because they either do not comprehend fully the interconnectedness of sex, race, and class operation or refuse to take this interconnectedness seriously." Even amongst racially homogeneous groups, divergence in experiences and forms of knowledge exists. For example, in the collective global perception, Black feminism is often mainly linked to African American feminism, which limits the inclusive portrayal of the diverse experiences of Black women worldwide (Lewis & Baderoon, 2021). Black and African diasporic literature frequently emphasises the works of individuals of African descent globally, but sometimes overlooks voices from within the African continent itself. This not only mischaracterises Black feminists in all their diversities (such as African American, African diasporic, and Black African feminist, to name a few), but it also diminishes the importance of lived experiences and perspectives shaped by geopolitical privileges and deprivileges, compounded by other contextual identity markers. A persistent marginalisation of the diverse experiences of individuals sustains unjust oppressions of some groups over others, as intersectional theories demonstrate.

In this sense, intersectionality, as theorised by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), can be argued as an extension of Black feminist thought, transforming its insights into a widely adopted analytic tool for understanding complex forms of inequality. Thus, Black feminist thought is both an epistemological and a political project, insisting that knowledge production must account for the intersecting oppressions shaping marginalised lives. Rowland (2021), drawing on the work of Elaine Showalter, argues that Black women, as an intragroup, often face a dual struggle in feminist discourse. They contend with both the sexism present in broader literary work and the dominance

of white women's perspectives within mainstream feminist narratives (Amaefula, 2021), which can result in the othering of Black women within feminist discourse.

Therefore, this study brings together feminist epistemologies, feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist perspectives in what I frame as a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens. This lens not only foregrounds the knowledge and experience of those at the margins of organisational power but also situates these insights within the specific historical, social, and political context of post-Apartheid South Africa. A post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens, discussed in Section 4.2 of the methodology, enables a nuanced understanding of gendered organisational dynamics that is both structurally informed and contextually grounded.

2.5 Concluding Summary

To explore the gendering praxes, the study relies on Joan Acker's (1990) conceptualisation of gendered organisations, inequality regimes and feminist perspectives to provide a basis for the thesis's conceptual framework.

The chapter began by defining key terms—gender, gendering, praxes, and gendered praxes—because clear definitions are essential for a common understanding in empirical studies (Parsons, 2017). These definitions established a shared foundation between the researcher and reader, enhancing the means of effective communication and analysis for the study.

Thereafter, the chapter discussed gendered organisation theory. Highlighted is how it provides a framework for analysing how organisational processes and structures actively produce and reproduce inequalities. Acker (1990) shows that understanding gender in organisations requires examining the central element/s sustaining and (re)producing its inequalities (Acker, 1998; Santos Silva & Klasen, 2021) over time.

The chapter then reviewed strands of feminist epistemologies. Taken together, feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledge, and Black feminist thought highlight that knowledge is always socially located, but they differ in emphasis. Feminist standpoint theory emphasises the epistemic advantage of marginalised standpoints, situated knowledge highlights the partiality of all perspectives, and Black feminist thought foregrounds the collective, resistant knowledge traditions that emerge from marginalised groups, particularly those of Black women.

The final section of the chapter unpacked the conceptual links and relevance. It outlined the contributions and perspectives offered by the theories in exploring the rootedness of gendered praxes within the trade union context.

The next chapter explores the broader context of PublicU as the study's focal point. It provides context, outlines the wider socio-economic and political implications, and presents a historical account of the labour movement.

3. The Interplay between Gender and Socio-historical Processes that Shape South Africa's Labour Movement

This chapter highlights the interplay between gender and South Africa's socio-historical processes.

South Africa's labour movement has been shaped by deeply rooted socio-historical processes that have influenced gender dynamics within trade unions. From colonial rule to Apartheid and the post-Apartheid era, labour structures were built around racial and gendered hierarchies that persist in various forms today (Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011). Under Apartheid, trade unions were almost exclusively male-dominated, reinforcing a labour system that prioritised men's economic participation whilst relegating women to informal and precarious work (Ally, 2009; Britwum, 2013). However, women were not merely salient bystanders. Emerging from the anti-Apartheid women's movement, they actively challenged oppressions and advocated for their rights as both citizens and workers, calling for equality.

First, the chapter briefly elaborates on the context and backdrop of organised labour's landscape within the South African context[11] and its stakeholders. A brief exploration unfolds, tracing the history of the trade union movement and significant moments that have sculpted its present-day context. The background highlights key moments, whilst also shedding light on practices that persist, thereby outlining a journey from the past to the present trade union landscape. This is done to comprehend the trade union as an organisation, examining its historical positionality and role within the broader social and political landscape, as well as the conditions in which it operates and continues to operate. This entails being aware of its origins, its evolution, and the

[11] South Africa's social, political, and economic structures were significantly impacted by colonisation that took place from 1652, imposed by the Dutch and later in the 19th century by the British. This was further exacerbated by the apartheid epoch imposed from 1948 to 1994 under the leadership of the National Party. Apartheid was a state-imposed policy of political, economic, and racial segregation and discrimination, designed to deliberately benefit the White minority population of the country, at the exclusionary expense of other non-White identifying groups. As a result, the system profoundly shaped the country's political economy and present-day socio-economic inequalities. The social-economic-political policies imposed during the epochs of colonialism and apartheid brought about a concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of a few White minority, currently sitting at 7.3% of the population (as of August 2024) and contribute to the long-standing socio-economic inequalities of present-day South Africa. Onyeonoru, I. P., & Hlatshwayo, M. (2020). An Overview of the Conditions of Workers and the Unions in South Africa and Nigeria. *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, *24*(2), 51-76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48630992

external and internal factors that have influenced its development and functioning. This is because the South African trade union movement has a tapestry that has been woven with threads symbolising struggle, resilience, and transformation.

Therefore, this chapter outlines the complex and intertwined relationship between trade unions and the broader socio-economic and political landscape. In the struggle for liberation and democracy, trade unions were not passive observers but active entities in shaping post-Apartheid South Africa. The trade union movement played a critical role in the design, negotiation, and drafting of legal reforms aimed at catalysing social and economic change (Adler & Webster, 1995), presumably inclusive of all forms of equality within these areas of life. As a result, trade unions have shaped the contemporary workplace and the broader socio-economic environment. Understanding the current state and behaviour of trade unions requires looking at their historical background. A historical preview helps illustrate how trade unions have evolved (or remained unchanged) from their early beginnings to their current form. This perspective helps explain the factors influencing their present-day dynamics and practices. It provides insight into the ideological and structural underpinnings that have shaped trade union encounters in the present day.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the overview is not merely a recounting of the past; rather, its purpose is to provide background information for understanding how past practices resonate and shape present-day trade union organisations, an observation that is significant to the study's argument. To achieve this, the implications of colonial and Apartheid histories, social and political alliances, and the role of women in the trade union and liberation movements are explored.

3.1 History of the Trade Union Movement in South Africa

The intricate tapestry of trade unions unfolds across centuries, drawing back to the emergence of the world's first officially recognised trade union in Manchester's textile mills (Cole, 1938). This dawn traces its origins to the early stages of industrialisation, an era marred by harsh and exploitative conditions endured by labourers in the nascent factories of the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, as time progressed and the labour market underwent substantial transformations, trade unions as organisations evolved, adapting to the changing economic, political, and social landscapes, thereby marking a notable evolution in their histories (Wood & Harcourt, 1998). Innately, the evolution of trade unions was not confined to the Global North; it spread its roots to various countries, including those in the Global South.

For South Africa, the genesis of trade unionism can be traced back to the early 19th century, a period characterised by inequality and discrimination within labour markets (Barrett & Mullins, 1990; Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Unknown, 2012). Whilst trade unions globally emerged to champion workers' rights, South Africa's trajectory took a distinctive path, with trade unions entangled in racial stratification and inequalities of workers' rights (Barrett & Mullins, 1990). In the early years, White-led trade unions dominated the scene, organised along strictly segregated racial lines of White, Black, Indian, and Coloured[12] workers, reflecting established racialised spatial, social, and economic divisions of the time (Wickins, 1974; Wood & Harcourt, 1998). One of the most prominent unions, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ), exemplified this trend, primarily representing White workers affiliated with its parent organisation in Britain. Membership restrictions excluded Black and non-English-speaking White individuals, indicative of the stark disparities prevalent during this era.

Nonetheless, a pivotal moment unfolded in 1917 with the establishment of the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), along with the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), founded in 1919 as a Black trade union (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020; Unknown, 2019). This was a turning point, as IWA became the first South African trade union dedicated to organising Black workers (Bikisa, 2016; Gentle et al., 2018; van der Walt & Cole, 2017; Wickins, 1974), and advocated for the representation of all races, marking a shift towards inclusivity and solidarity within the labour movement.

Despite lingering inequalities based on race, IWA was seen as motivated by a broader aspiration for societal and political change, extending beyond the pursuit of better pay and working conditions (Wickins, 1974). Under the auspices of IWA, Black workers gained a platform to articulate grievances, advocate for equitable wages, and press for improved working conditions. As Black workers secured representation within trade unions, a parallel wave of transformation unfolded, marked by a proliferation in the gender demographics of the labour market. The dynamic shift not only heralded the inclusion of diverse voices but also bore witness to the active

[12] In the South African context, Coloured is understood to be both an ethnicity and race. Coloured people are a distinct ethnic group with a diverse heritage, often a mixture of African, European, and Himalayan ancestry roots. As a group of people, they have a unique cultural identity and history within the South African context.

engagement and participation of women in the trade union landscape (Meer, 2005). This milestone was represented by the emergence of the first female trade unionist, Mary Fitzgerald (Unknown, 2011, 2012, 2018, 2023). Her contributions as a trade unionist shattered the glass ceiling, paving the way for the active engagement of women in the labour movement.

Notwithstanding the milestones achieved by Black workers' access to trade union membership in 1917, struggles against the stratified treatment of workers persisted. The labour market remained besieged by legalised job reservations[13] and differentiated pay gaps based on racial lines and gender distinctions. Racial segregation was an entrenched way of life[14] and reflected in the practices and rights afforded to employees based on race. For instance, during the early 1990s, White men held over 96 per cent of the highest positions within organisations, despite constituting only 6 per cent of the population (Bendix, 2019). This glaring disparity accentuated the deeply entrenched racial inequalities prevailing in the workforce. Worker politics were influenced by concerns related to racial-ethnicity and gender, which were tied to socio-economic struggles. The government's treatment and interactions with trade unions varied based on the racial composition of the trade union's membership.

Trade unions advocating for the rights of Black workers (hereafter referred to as African trade unions) faced legal non-recognition and ineligibility for registration, despite not being explicitly prohibited from operation (Levy, 1981). They encountered discouragement in their involvement in labour affairs through both indirect and direct means. For instance, various legislations[15] and requirements made it illegal for Black workers to organise and participate in the internal structures of trade unions and organised labour (Levy, 1981). These challenges persisted throughout the early 1980s. However, a confluence of factors, including a booming economy, an uptake in illegal strikes, and industrialisation, saw the bargaining power of trade unions, both White and African, shift to the advantage of workers. This shift compelled the government to reassess its approach to engaging with African trade unions, marking a pivotal moment in the ongoing struggle for equitable treatment and workers' rights.

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[13] Mines and Works Act of 19 No 12 of 1911; Bantu/Native Building Workers Act No 27 of 1951.

[14] The Class Areas Bill of 1925.

[15] Riotous Assemblies Act of 1942; Suppression of Communist Act No 44 of 1950; Riotous Assemblies and Suppression of Communism Amendment Act No 15 of 1954; Natives Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953; The Natives Act No 21 of 1923; The Industrial Conciliations Act No 11 of 1924; The Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act of 1956; The Minimum Wage Act of 1925.

For this reason, the ethos of the trade union movement in South Africa is ingrained in confronting societal challenges that manifest in both social and labour market spheres. Spanning from the 1920s, the African trade union movement played a fundamental role as a militant and progressive force in the struggle against the political and economic injustices perpetuated first by colonial rule and later under the Apartheid regime. Barrett (1990) notes that three distinct political traditions emerged within the labour movement during the 1970s, each with unique perspectives on the country's broader political issues. Some developed caution towards political involvement, whilst others took a radical approach tied to political organisations. In this period, the labour movement not only championed the cause of enhanced wages and improved working conditions for labourers but also ardently advocated for the political liberation of marginalised groups within the country (Adler & Webster, 1995; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004). Hence, the current capitalist history of South Africa has had an impact on workers' organisations (Gentle et al., 2018; Kenny, 2022).

Simultaneously, the labour movement championed the cause of freedom and equality for all races, particularly during a period when many liberation movements had been banned by the government and were forced to operate clandestinely (Buhlungu, 2005; Eidelberg, 1997). During this time, the trade union movement emerged as a prominent feature in the struggle against Apartheid, assuming the role of advocating for justice and equality when liberation organisations faced suppression and operated in the shadows (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020). The trade union movement was a concerted effort to transition labour concerns beyond traditional union business into the realm of social unionism (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004). Consequently, labour movements extended beyond measures of workers' interest but also endeavoured for socio-economic justice (McQuinn, 2022). This shift epitomised a broader commitment to addressing not only the immediate labour issues but also the pervasive social injustices.

These historical milestones serve as a testament to the enduring spirit of the trade union movement, laying the foundation for the dynamic trade unionism that is witnessed in contemporary South Africa. They serve as poignant reminders of the movement's resilience, adaptability, and its ongoing pursuit of justice and equality within the evolving socio-economic landscape.

3.2 The Tripartite Alliance and Its Impact on Trade Union Leadership Post-Apartheid

Having acknowledged the political dimension of the trade union movement as discussed above, this section provides a concise overview of the alliances that emerged during the period as mentioned earlier.

From 1994, after South Africa's first democratically elected government, the order of the day reflected a racial division in social, economic, political, labour markets, affiliation, and alliances, as well as instituted racial and economic struggles between politics and trade unions (Jordhus-Lier, 2013). A multifaceted relationship and collaborations of interplay between trade unions and various political entities were forged. The result was a nexus of the trade union movement's political involvement and an array of alliances that weaved together labour organisations, political parties, and community-based grassroots movements.

It was the treatment of individuals as employees and citizens, often referred to as 'workers' politics', that gave life to the tripartite alliance (Kenny, 2020). The alliance was not only instrumental in shaping the trajectory of the trade union movement but also played a role in influencing the broader political landscape. A cooperative relationship between trade unions and political entities became a force of considerable impact, fostering collective efforts towards social justice, political emancipation, and the dismantling of oppressive regimes. These collaborations were strategic partnerships that leveraged the collective strength of labour movements and political forces to facilitate a shared platform for advocacy (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013).

The goals of the trade union movement seamlessly intertwined with the political aspirations of various entities. This synergy amplified the impact of their collective endeavours, leading to a convergence of interests that extended beyond the immediate concerns of the labour market. Furthermore, the alliance was not static but evolved in response to the dynamic socio-political landscape. Periods of resistance and upheaval saw intensified collaboration, whilst times of political transition witnessed strategic recalibrations (Friedman, 2015, 2019, 2021). The intricate dance between trade unions and political allies reflected a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness between labour rights, political representation, and societal transformation. The alliance that emerged from the trade union movement's political involvement represents a complex web of interrelated initiatives that show how the

fight for workers' rights is deeply entwined with larger socio-economic and political movements.

As such, the dawn of the tripartite alliance can be traced back to the anti-Apartheid struggle, an alliance formed by the convergence of COSATU – the trade union federation; the South African Communist Party (SACP) – a communist political party; and the African National Congress (ANC) – the face of the liberation movement, joining forces against the oppressive Apartheid regime. Born of this complex web was the tripartite alliance, a collaboration forged between the three organisations as alliance partners. It is noteworthy to mention that the alliance between the ANC and the SACP dates back to the 1940s (Everatt, 1992).

The National Party's implementation of Apartheid marked the catalyst for the ANC and SACP to work together in a concerted effort to counter the government's extreme racial ideologies (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Eidelberg, 1997). The collaboration was further cemented by the ban on political parties in the 1960s, which strengthened the cooperative relationship between these two entities and sparked a common fight against oppressive policies. COSATU's entry into the alliance occurred later. It was in the 1990s that COSATU entered this alliance, as it was only established in 1983.

Derived from a shared history of resistance, these three organisations united under common objectives, seeking to bring an end to Apartheid, establish a democratic South Africa, and champion the cause of workers' rights and social justice. With COSATU representing the labour force, SACP advocating for socialist ideals, and the ANC spearheading the liberation movement, it was a cohesive front against the racial segregation and discrimination enforced by the Apartheid regime. As recognition of their shared goals grew, the formalisation of the tripartite alliance became inevitable, leading to the establishment of the trilateral partnership (Eidelberg, 1997). This collaboration played a significant role in dismantling Apartheid, culminating in the ANC's historic victory in the 1994 elections, marking the onset of the post-Apartheid era. It not only facilitated the triumph over Apartheid but also laid the groundwork for an era, highlighting the interplay between political movements and trade unions in shaping a path for the country. This interplay remains evident in the conduct of trade union affairs in contemporary South Africa. It is an aspect that inspires the study's exploration of developments and historical moments that established lock-ins.

The collaborative endeavour faced challenges and obstacles. The partnership, whilst formidable in its shared goals and aspirations, encountered complexities that tested its resilience and efficacy. These challenges emanated from diverse sources, including divergent ideologies, external pressures, and internal dynamics within the collaborating entities (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Friedman, 2021). Whilst the alliance collectively endeavoured for social and economic freedoms, the way it was approached was the source of contention. For instance, a significant contention of this divergence is the post-Apartheid government's (led by the ANC) neoliberal policies, whereas trade unions advocate for expansionary fiscal policies aimed at boosting economic activity by increasing government spending, reducing taxes, and investing in public services and infrastructure (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020). A neoliberal approach not only contradicted the trade union's goals to increase the state's role in social welfare, but it also went against the welfare principles that the ANC adopted after Apartheid as essential steps for social reform and development. This created a conflict regarding the role of the state, ownership of key public entities, and the allocation of public funds.

Whilst each organisation (trade unions and political parties) retains its autonomy, the ANC, as the political arm, assumes a predominant role in the alliance. This dominance was established by the ANC's role as the face of the liberation struggle against the Apartheid government, thus creating a power imbalance between the alliance partners. As a result, the reality of the tripartite alliance is that the partners are not equals (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Ka-Soko, 2023; Quintal, 2015). Instead, a hierarchical nature of the relationships amongst them exists, with a distinction in roles and levels of influence.

And according to Buhlungu and Ellis (2013), in the alliance partnership, there is no denying that the ANC assumes a 'senior' position, whilst the SACP and COSATU are positioned as the juniors. The alliance operates with a fundamental understanding that the ANC plays a leadership role by virtue of its centrality in the liberation struggle, positioning it as the driving force behind the collective aspirations and goals of the alliance (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Eidelberg, 1997). This hierarchy is further emphasised by the ANC's position as the partner that controls the government's purse (Ka-Soko, 2023; Quintal, 2015), and its unique position as an exclusive gateway for opportunity to participate in elected governance structures (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013). Consequently, the hierarchy implies a certain level of deference and a power dynamic in favour of the ANC within the alliance. As the singular avenue for involvement in

government structures, it not only solidifies the ANC's prominence but also amplifies its dominance within the alliance.

As it stands, the SACP deliberately identifies trade unions as its primary source of new members and recruitment, a method based on its historical goal of organising and mobilising the working class (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013). They serve as platforms for connecting with and enlisting individuals who embody the highest levels of class consciousness (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013). They are seen as the gathering point for individuals committed to advancing class-related causes under the umbrella of solidarity, challenging exploitation, and inequality. As such, for the SACP and ANC alike, trade unions are not merely labour organisations but integral components of their broader missions. By actively engaging with the working class through trade union structures, the political parties (SACP and ANC) cultivate a cadre of individuals who not only invest in the interests of the labour force but also align closely with aspects of their ideological principles as organisations. This is one of the reasons behind the existence of the tripartite hat. The approach of political parties to preserving and growing their political power is primarily embedded in the labour movement, as trade unions serve as fertile grounds for recruiting individuals who are perceived as the vanguard of the working class, embodying a heightened awareness of class issues (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013).

Adding depth to the intricacies of the alliance is that, intriguingly, the partnership exists outside a formally signed agreement that establishes its relationship. Instead, the alliance exists as an informal arrangement, based on strong historical ties and camaraderie amongst its leaders and members (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013). It is based on the intangible ties of friendship, loyalty, and trust that have been painstakingly developed over time and based on the foundations of ‘once’ shared values and common visions (Buhlungu, 2005; COSATU, n.d.; Friedman, 2021). The parallel overlap of leaders holding positions across organisations also serves as an additional glue holding the alliance together outside of a legally signed agreement. However, tension over the years has developed that threatens continued allegiance.

In the aftermath of the 1994 election, South Africa’s first democratic election, the landscape for trade union leaders within COSATU underwent a transformative shift as they ascended to influential positions within the ANC-led government following the elections. The post-Apartheid era was marked by a paradigm shift in political, social, and economic endeavour (Phaswana, 2021), where the focus of trade

unions evolved from the anti-Apartheid struggle to confronting pressing socio-economic challenges and rectifying historically entrenched inequalities under an ANC-led government that was the trade unions' ally. This juncture marked a shift for trade unions from being advocates for socio-economic equality with an outsider perspective relative to the government to becoming advocates with an insider perspective aligned with the government as allies. This necessitated an adaptation to the new political and economic realities, as well as the conflicting interests that accompanied them.

For instance, the tripartite alliance specifically served as a conduit for trade union leaders from COSATU and the SACP alike to actively participate in shaping the post-apartheid agenda (Eidelberg, 1997). This collaborative platform provided an avenue for those in leadership to assume crucial high-level administrative roles within the new government, including positions as government ministers, parliamentarians, or key figures in state institutions (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Friedman, 2021; McQuinn, 2022). In their new roles, trade union leaders actively engaged in formulating policies related to labour, economic transformation, and social justice (Wood & Harcourt, 1998). The impact of COSATU's involvement in policy formulation was tangible, resulting in labour reforms following the end of Apartheid. Key legislative changes, such as the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, bore the imprints of the alliance's influence, reinforcing protections for workers' rights and contributing to a more equitable and just socio-economic framework.[16] This also inadvertently presented a trend, wherein trade union leaders transitioned into highly paid, politically appointed administrative roles in government. As a result, for the decades that followed, trade unions have become increasingly quiescent, merging into the very elite they were initially tasked with restraining (Friedman, 2021; Wood & Harcourt, 1998), as evident in the career paths of trade union leaders and their connections to political parties.

[16] This however is not always a popular view as arguments have been raised that the Labour Relations Act of 1995 is a modified version of a system that was first implemented in 1924 for members of racial minorities. Friedman, S. (2015). The Janus Face of the Past: Preserving and Resisting South African Path Dependence. In C. Soudien, H. Mokena, J. Netshitenzhe, L. Blum, M. Swilling, N. G. Jablonski, S. Friedman, S. Pillay, V. Gumede, & X. Mangcu (Eds.), *The Colour of Our Future: Does race matter in post-apartheid South Africa?* (pp. 45-64). Wits University Press. https://doi.org/DOI: undefined ; Friedman, S. (2019). The More Things Change … South Africa's Democracy and the Burden of the Past. *Social research*, *86*, 279-303. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2019.0012

The transition of trade union leaders into government roles presented a complex challenge, as they had to balance the interests of workers against the broader political agenda of the ANC. Neoliberal policies, particularly those related to privatisation and labour market reforms, became contentious issues, adding layers of complexity to the relationship (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Tshoaedi, 2013b). In the post-Apartheid era, trade union leaders found themselves navigating the intricate terrain of aligning their members' interests with the governance responsibilities of the ANC. Once union leaders are recruited into the ANC and join its ranks, their focus on advocating for the working class's interests is diluted and overshadowed by the priorities of the ruling party. The recalibrated landscape required trade union leaders to strike a delicate balance between the original goals of the tripartite alliance, rooted in the anti-Apartheid struggle, and the shifted focus towards addressing socio-economic challenges in a post-Apartheid government led by the ANC. However, economic constraints and global influences further complicated matters, impacting the implementation of policies aligned with trade union expectations. These challenges gave rise to debates within COSATU and SACP regarding the effectiveness of the alliance in addressing socio-economic issues (Ka-Soko, 2023; Kotze, 2016; Tshoaedi, 2013b).

In recent years, strains within the tripartite alliance have become more pronounced, characterised by differing policy perspectives and leadership dynamics within the alliance. Increasing disagreements on policy matters, coupled with perceived neglect of workers' concerns, have heightened tensions (Eidelberg, 1997; Ka-Soko, 2023; Kotze, 2016; Meer, 2005; Tshoaedi, 2013b). Some trade unions and SACP leaders have advocated for a more independent stance, emphasising the need to prioritise workers' interests over political affiliations. Calls within both COSATU and SACP for greater independence from the ANC underscore the importance of representing workers without being solely aligned with political agendas (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Friedman, 2021). Debatably, the tension within the alliance has left a lasting impact on the identity of trade unions in South Africa. Whilst remaining significant in advocating for workers, the entanglement with political dynamics has prompted introspection within the trade union movement (Webster & Buhlungu, 2004).

3.3 The Implication of Colonialism and Apartheid on Black Women

Following the profound repercussions of colonisation, the plight of Black women continued in the establishment of an Apartheid state. "Apartheid literally

means separation of people" (Nolde, 1991, p. 205), a separation that was based on racial and ethnic lines; socio-economic-political privileges and depriviledges in the South African context. True to its definition, from 1948 until 1994, the South African society was methodically segregated in this arrangement. The segregation was established and reinforced in all spheres of life, on social, legal, political, and economic levels. It was institutionalised and strictly enforced, where race and gender were used to assign hierarchical life roles that pre-set privileges, deprivileges, access to employment, social standing, and achieved levels of education, inter alia, that were racialised and gendered (Nolde, 1991).

This led to a hierarchical ladder and order for privilege and deprivilege arranged by race and gender. In this ladder, Black women were at the bottom of this socially engineered system of oppression and constructed hierarchies in social, political, and economic spaces. For instance, in productive labour, White women were typically assigned to clerical roles in organisations. In contrast, Black women were relegated to positions such as domestic workers, nannies and cleaners (often referred to as the 'Tea Girl') (Barrett & Obery, 1985; Cock, 1985; Jaga et al., 2018). In the intersections of racial, class, and gender hierarchies, Black women found themselves subjected to the triple yoke of subjugation. They were reduced to subservient roles, even among women, as an intragroup, with constrained opportunities for advancement or autonomy in roles outside those aligned with reproductive duties (Meer, 2005; Nolde, 1991). As a result, this continues to shape the axis of privilege and deprivilege that White women enjoy in the labour market compared to Black women. Racial hierarchies endure in favouring White women over other racial groups, reaffirming the interlocking web of oppression(Phaswana, 2021).

As such, colonial and Apartheid policies were cordial, particularly towards the subjugation of Black women. Black women faced compounded struggles because the interconnected triple yoke challenges of their experiences were shaped by the intersectionality of colonisation and Apartheid, which impacted their social, economic, and legal standings. This complex relationship led to several difficulties and injustices that Black women had to either endure or overcome with resilience and willpower. For instance, under the Natal Code of Zulu Law (1891, 1932 and 1967) which emerged in the initial phases of colonialism, women were considered as perpetual minors with no autonomous power in their right, unless released from guardianship or exempted from Bantu Law (Bennett & Pillay, 2003; Dlamini, 1983; Hlophe, 1984; Lupton, n.d.; Nolde, 1991; SALRC, 2004). Noted in the Black Administration Act 38 of 1927,

guardianship and authority were bestowed on her father, brother, or husband, entrusting them with the decision-making power and control over various aspects of her life (Bradford, 1996; Dlamini, 1983; Hlophe, 1984; Nolde, 1991; SALRC, 2004). This practice established a patriarchal power where male figures held the legal and societal authority, thus limiting the agency and self-determination of women.

Nonetheless, in later years, its counterpart, the KwaZulu Act on the Code of Zulu Law of 1981, formulated during the Apartheid era, alleviated this perpetual minor definition with some subjugation withheld. Hlope (1984) argues that the KwaZulu Act, which re-enacts the Code of Zulu Law of 1981, constitutes a re-enactment of the Natal Code of Zulu Law; therefore, it reiterates certain elements found in the original Natal Code of Zulu Law. It is worthwhilst to note that several scholars (Dlamini, 1983; Hlophe, 1984; Nolde, 1991; SALRC, 2004) have explored the ramifications of the Natal Code(s) of Zulu Law and the KwaZulu Act on the Code of Zulu Law of 1981 in relation to Zulu women. However, within the scope of this brief discussion, an in-depth analysis of these implications will not be pursued. The objective of the introduction of these legal codes is to showcase, in brief, the functional and structural relationship between colonial and Apartheid laws relative to their impact on Black women. This perspective offers a fleeting glance at the extensive ramifications that lie below the surface, particularly in the context of path-dependent[17] colonial and Apartheid eras concerning Black women's subjugation.

One way to interpret the effects is that colonial and Apartheid structures, aside from racial and political disparities, developed economic and gendered fault lines. They resulted in what could be considered as gendering Apartheid socio-economic fault-lines. Inasmuch as Apartheid was a racial, economic, political, and ethnic segregation policy, it was equally a gendering policy. For instance, under apartheid, Black women were viewed as individuals whose role primarily was to give birth to and raise future labourers who would serve the needs of the white ruling class, whilst Black men supplied cheap labour (Phaswana, 2021). This reflects how Apartheid policies controlled and exploited Black people[18], not just through racial segregation

[17] Sydow and Koch (2009) note that "path dependency can be defined as a rigidified, potentially inefficient action built up by the unintended consequences of former decisions and positive feedback process." Sydow, J., Schreyögg, G., & Koch, J. (2009). Organizational Path Dependence: Opening the Black Box. *Academy of Management Review*, *34*, 689-709.

[18] 'Black people' is a generic term which refers to African, Coloureds and Indians as per the South African Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998.

but also by enforcing gendered expectations. These eras—colonial and Apartheid—brought about far-reaching consequences, influencing every facet of life, from legal structures to interpersonal relationships.

Even though the status of women may have transitioned, present-day women still grapple with the enduring legacies of historical subjugated inequalities. For this reason, women were equally invested in the call for and activism for South Africa's freedom that erupted with the dawn of its first democratic elections.

3.4 Women in the Liberation Struggle and Trade Unions

As acts of resistance, South African women, predominantly those of Black descent, have engaged in numerous protests and boycotts throughout their history. As early as 1910, women played roles that contributed to the withdrawal of a discriminatory practice under the 1893 law, which required all African and Coloured women to present work permits upon police request (LaNasa, 2015; Nolde, 1991). A few of these prominent figures included Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Charlotte Maxeke, Frances Baard, Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and Fatima Meer, among others (LaNasa, 2015). Their defiance and that of many others was witnessed in the escalated pass protests of the 1950s, with events exemplified by the notable march of 9th August 1956.

This historic event was a direct response to the Apartheid government's legislation, specifically the Pass Law,[19] which sought to restrict the movement of Black women in urban areas (Gentle et al., 2018; Nolde, 1991). In present-day South Africa, this day is commemorated as a National Women's Day, honouring the courage and tenacity displayed by women in their fight against oppression.

In subsequent years, women continued to actively participate in acts of activism and defiance, becoming a formidable force in challenging the repressive policies of the Apartheid government (Barrett & Obery, 1985). These collective efforts and acts played a crucial role in bringing attention to the plight of marginalised communities and fostering a spirit of resistance that contributed to the eventual dismantling of Apartheid (Barrett & Obery, 1985; Cock, 1985). Women, as such, were

[19] Historically, Black male migrants worked on the mines and wore passes to govern travel, whilst African women were restricted to the Reserves. Gentle, L., Callinicos, L., Jansen, M., Noor, N., & Jordi, R. (2018). *A History of Trade Unionism in South Africa* https://lrs.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-history-of-trade-unionism-in-South-Africa.pdf

not bystanders to the liberation struggle and calls for freedom for the disenfranchised Black majority. The ideological underpinnings, institutional frameworks, and mobilisation initiatives that propelled the fight against oppression were equally influenced by women (Tshoaedi, 2012, 2013b). Their involvement transcended the conventional notion of bystanders, as they emerged as key architects and driving forces behind the movement for liberation. Their tenacity and dedication played a significant role in the history of the liberation movement (LaNasa, 2015), proving that they were active change agents committed to bringing equality and justice to the oppressed Black majority rather than merely being spectators.

Moreover, the quest for defiance and equality also unfolded and was fought in workspaces, owing to the connections between politics and trade unions. Women sought not only economic justice but also equality in the broader social and political context (Barrett & Obery, 1985). Trade unions and politics have come together to highlight the close relationship between these two domains, demonstrating how the fight for equality extends beyond the workplace to encompass wider socio-political spheres (McQuinn, 2022). For instance, when the liberation movement's political parties were banned, trade unions became a crucial frontline as forums for negotiating and advancing the rights of workers against oppressive policies. In this way, the fight for defiance and equality became a holistic endeavour, addressing both gendered, economic and racialised workplace injustices and the broader systemic issues that perpetuated inequalities and oppressions.

Nonetheless, despite women's contributions to the liberation and labour movement struggles — the most celebrated being the 9 August 1956 march against pass laws — debates about liberation and trade union politics in South Africa often use language that is male-centric and acknowledges men as its sole champions (Tshoaedi, 2013b). From slogans to the emblematic imagery of trade unions, which often defined men as workers and champions of the workers' struggles, trade union conversations have been tailored in this image (Tshoaedi, 2013b). These images marginalise women as role-players, thereby creating viewpoints and interests seldom included in mainstream trade union discourses. As Meer (2005) and Cock (1985) point out, women's struggle for liberation was continuously under threat not only from the oppressive Apartheid regime, but also encountered resistance from within the liberation struggle, primarily the aversion of men involved in the movement.

Nevertheless, women were able to successfully mobilise and change the dynamics of this resistance by organising within political and community-based entities. For instance, the Malibongwe Conference, held in Amsterdam in 1990, was organised by the ANC women's section, women from UDF-linked organisations, and the Women's Committee of the Dutch Anti-Apartheid movement. It called for women's liberation as an integral part of the broader struggle for national liberation (Meer, 2005). The conference advocated for the equitable sharing of household chores and childcare responsibilities between men and women, asserting that only through such collaboration could women actively engage in political activism (Barrett & Obery, 1985; Cock, 1985; Meer, 2005). Moreover, noted in calls made was that women's freedom would not be a product of the national liberation struggle (Nolde, 1991), but also required challenging cultural and traditional practices that oppressed women and a shift in societal attitudes (Barrett & Obery, 1985; Cock, 1985; Meer, 2005).

With the end of the Apartheid regime, the country witnessed varied impacts, with not all impacts resulting in positive outcomes. Whilst the political landscape underwent a significant transformation, women's organisations rooted in local communities, once vibrant agents actively involved in confronting challenging gendered disparities, encountered a process of demobilisation (Meer, 2005). In the post-Apartheid era, women's organisations have lost their impetus. They are no longer a major player in actively confronting and contesting gendered disparities in the machinery of the democratic state (Meer, 2005). As Van Wyk (2017) points out, women's movements and/or women's post-liberation structures can be and often are co-opted by what is referred to as the 'first lady syndrome.' The 'first lady syndrome' involves women's interests being relegated to the status of pet projects initiated and often led by the first lady (Van Wyk, 2017), which frequently acts as a form of structural control. As a subtle form of structural power, the active participation of women's organisations in addressing gender inequalities is often marginalised, as their agendas become intertwined with the political dynamics surrounding the First Lady's initiatives.

Similarly, Gouws and Coetzee (2019) offer an alternative perspective on how the active participation of women's organisations may be co-opted. For Gouws and Coetzee (2019), one of the biggest hindrances to substantive gender equality advocacy in South Africa post-Apartheid was the failure of the ANC's women's league to continue contributing to a radical gender equality movement. Having been at the

vanguard of challenging the Apartheid regime and bringing about a democratic transition, post-Apartheid, the ANC women's league and broader community-based women's movement lost its championing voice and advocacy. The inability to engage the post-Apartheid state on evolved feminist issues is key to this marginalised voice (Van Wyk, 2017). Being able to engage with a state that is no longer an antagonist on feminist issues was an invaluable process for advocating and achieving substantive gender equality. This would ensure that state agendas include and take into consideration women's interests, thus enabling "political solution[s] for developmental problems" (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019, p. 1). However, women's interests are frequently overshadowed by larger battles for socio-economic-political liberties (Kiguwa & Langa, 2011), a project that plays out in the South African context. Devaluation of women's interest is often justified by arguments that nation-building and economic issues take precedence, given the exploitations and displacements caused by colonialism and Apartheid legacies (McQuinn, 2022). This is similar to how, in other contexts (see Rianne Mahon, 2002), struggles for gender equality have consistently been regarded and addressed as secondary and separate from the fight for class justice (Ledwith, 2012)

The post-Apartheid national development objectives minimise the establishment of a feminist perspective in government (Meer, 2005). The economically focused and driven national development agenda, rightly so, places minimal importance on addressing gendered narratives and reforming gendered relations within broader national developments. According to Phaswana (2021), this is because the racial implication of apartheid history led to a strong focus on addressing racism, whilst sidelining other forms of oppression. As a result, even in the post-Apartheid era, women continue to face discrimination and disadvantages. Minimal attention is focused on comprehending and addressing the power dynamics that continue to disadvantage and subordinate women in organisations (Meer, 2005), as Friedman (2015, 2019, 2021) elaborates on a path-dependent post-Apartheid state. In the lack of a relationship between the state and feminist interests' agendas, women are likely to be excluded from state-adopted micro and macro-level developmental approaches (Gouws, 2014; Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). When feminist movements are not privy to a relationship with the state, it often results in feminist agendas being ostracised from micro- and macro-level developmental agendas adopted by the government (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). This results in gender inequalities and gendering relations concerns being noted as soft issues (Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019) compared to the economic agenda.

However, this does not have to be the case, as gendering issues can shift dramatically when they are politically acknowledged. Politicising gender issues could significantly alter how they are perceived (Sen, 1990) and addressed, as part of broader development projects. It does not have to be one or the other. An interaction between the state and women's interests can lead to a governmental structure that substantively prioritises advancing gender equality in socio-economic environments. The interaction can foster a solidarity that establishes 'acting-in-concert' (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021) with the feminist movements. The framing of the national development objectives highlights how hierarchical privileges continue to disadvantage and marginalise others, especially women (Acker, 1998), even in the post-Apartheid era. The post-Apartheid national development objective for economic liberties is isolated from the needs of women; thus, the women's struggle post-liberation has been reduced to a mere footnote (Jaga et al., 2018). Therefore, in the broader political economy, women's challenges are often relegated to lesser concerns. The women's movement that was instrumental in the fight against the Apartheid regime, post-Apartheid, has lost momentum due to a marginal relationship with the government and trade unions, who have the ear of the government.

Notwithstanding the importance of a relationship between the state and a feminist agenda, the feminist movements should be wary of bureaucratic interference and implications of external relations on their agenda. Movements can be co-opted and supplanted by external relations and the politicisation of the environment (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019; Hartmann, 2019). Just as they can be impacted by the inability to adjust to new environments, as discussed in the next section.

3.5 The Inertia of the Struggle

In the diverged realm of the South African political discourse and activism, 30 years of democracy are characterised by a dichotomy where opinions on post-Apartheid South Africa's progress diverge sharply. Whilst some claim that everything has changed, others maintain that not much has changed (Friedman, 2021). As things stand, both viewpoints capture some truth and some falsehoods, and summarise the complexities of the aspects and enduring difficulties the country faces.

In 1994, South Africa's fledgling democracy grappled with a distinct social and economic dichotomy that divided its populace into insiders and outsiders. The distinction was stark, with insiders exclusively comprised of White individuals, whilst

the outsider category predominantly encompassed Black citizens. Nonetheless, the post-Apartheid era witnessed a transformative shift, wherein some erstwhilst outsiders successfully navigated their way to becoming insiders (Friedman, 2021). Friedman (2021, p. 6) explains this insider-outsider paradigm as follows,

> "…think of South Africa in 1994 as a country whose economy and society were controlled by an exclusive club, composed of only White people. Since 1994, the club has taken on new Black members. But it remains an exclusive club because many cannot gain admission! – and most of the new members lack the same powers and privileges enjoyed by the old ones."

The breakthrough shattered long-standing barriers, enabling Black South Africans–those previously discriminated against under Apartheid–to ascend to senior leadership roles that had once been exclusively reserved for the White minority. A series of political developments led to a shift in labour market needs and the political climate that dictated new archetypes. However, despite these advancements, the insider-outsider paradigm persisted for most of the country's Black population. The outcomes of the democratically elected government of 1994 had not shattered the social and economic dichotomy of the insider-outsider model; it merely opened admission for a few Black elites (Friedman, 2019). As such, democratic adjustments and developmental reforms did not completely alter the racially and gendered socio-economic antecedent conditions (Phaswana, 2021). The antecedent systems of inequalities based on race and gender continued to exist and contribute to the unequal distribution of advantages (privileges) and disadvantages (deprivileges). Historically, systemic disparities have continued to create divisions by providing some groups with more opportunities and resources. Systematic racial and gendered apperception patterns had entrenched themselves. The locked-in conditions solidified distinct patterns resilient to change in social and economic dynamics.

Nonetheless, this does not mean there were no changes. For instance, in 1994, Black South Africans were granted universal suffrage. The new democratic South Africa abolished the once-legalised system of oppression. The South African Constitutional Act 108 of 1996 replaced it, establishing a legal framework for a democratic, equitable, and inclusive society (Steytler & De Visser, 2007). As a result, there have been gradual situational adjustments brought about by the democratic development, even though historical residuals continued to exist (Friedman, 2021)– what Brunninge and Melin (2010) refers to as "continuance change… a continuity that

denotes change" (2010, p. 99); whereas for Mackay (2014; 2010) it represents 'nested newness.'

Friedman (2021) argues that the selected socio-economic paths post-Apartheid were a conscious choice, marked by sediments of both nested newness and continuance change. The emerging political elite aligned with the established economic and social power holders on a fundamental principle. The objective of the new democracy was to extend to all what was previously enjoyed exclusively by the White minority during Apartheid (Friedman, 2021). The intent was not to disrupt existing systems; instead, it was an aspiration to broaden access and extend opportunities and benefits to the Black population. In this aspiration, a consensus emerged that the new democratic order would make privileges and opportunities accessible to everyone. It was not focused on fundamentally altering established practices within the economy and social institutions (Friedman, 2015, 2021), but rather on expanding the inclusivity of existing systems. It did not seek to dismantle systems that privileged specific segments of the population.

As such, the goal was not radical transformation but a deliberate move towards a more equitable and inclusive system that would enfranchise the Black population as well, thereby adopting a path-dependent stance, where a historical phenomenon regulates the process of change. Consequently, the post-Apartheid government's transformational objective was established on path-dependent social and economic patterns that had defined South Africa before 1994. Post-1994 praxes merely expanded the scope of access to existing patterns. In the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) negotiations, the continuity of core structures was attributed to the mutual agreement/compromise between the new political elite and the existing power holders not to overhaul the established systems (Adler & Webster, 1995). There were agreements on maintaining the status quo in terms of how economic and social institutions operated before 1994, which remains a crucial factor contributing to the persistence of pre-1994 patterns in the post-Apartheid landscape.

Consequently, the advent of democratic governance did not dismantle entrenched social and economic divisions inherent in the insider-outsider model. It simply expanded entry opportunities for what would be a select group of Black elites (Friedman, 2015, 2019, 2021). The shift in leadership demographics marked the inclusion of some Black individuals into elite circles but did not address the systemic inequalities that defined the insider-outsider paradigm. This resulted in the ascent of a

few Black elites, who accessed positions of influence and affluence that were previously reserved for the White minority (Friedman, 2021).

Whilst the political transformation was instrumental in dismantling Apartheid policies and opening opportunities for the previously disenfranchised, the overarching structures of privilege and inequality remained. The broader societal and economic framework remained largely intact, with most of the population, especially those in marginalised communities, still grappling with the enduring impacts of historical discrimination and limited access to resources (Friedman, 2015, 2019, 2021). The democratic transition took a step towards inclusivity, but it did not dismantle the deep-rooted structures that perpetuated the insider-outsider model. A substantial portion of the population was left on the fringes of socio-economic advancement.

Therefore, the 1994 democratically elected state marked a critical juncture in the nation's political history. The event altered the country's political trajectory, with a lasting impact on future political developments. However, many aspects of the economic and social trajectories from antecedent eras — colonialism and apartheid— remained unchanged. Social and economic systems were still structured in gendered and racialised hierarchies. Individuals' social status, roles, and economic opportunities were, and continue to be, heavily influenced and determined along these lines. As a result, the social and economic sphere of inequalities remains largely undisrupted, an unfinished project where the cultural preference and privilege of the White minority still dominate (Friedman, 2021). When the political critical juncture dust had settled, the realities of an economic and socially path-dependent trajectory emerged unscathed and locked in.

Nonetheless, arguing that democracy did not bring about change would be both amiss and misdirected. South Africa currently finds itself in a state of dichotomy between change and continuity, with many of the feasible political ruptures having already occurred. The next phase of the unfinished project needs social and economic ruptures. The inertia and lock-in of the economy and social praxes cannot be altered and disrupted by its present path (Friedman, 2021). The social and economic organising logic of the country needs to be disrupted, starting with organisations that operate in these spheres.

3.6 Navigating South Africa's Labour Movement Post-Apartheid

Forged on the foundations laid in the early 1990s, leading up to the first democratic election, the contemporary labour market bore witness to a transformation. With the new political regime came a shift in labour markets, which necessitated a renaissance of the labour movement to avert the risk of being obsolete and irrelevant (Webster, 2015). However, workers' engagement in politics remained intrinsically linked to social struggles, with issues of race and gender exerting considerable influence. The interplay of social dynamics and politics prompted the trade union movement to retain its dual role as both a social movement and an advocate for the rights of the marginalised, even post-Apartheid. This dual function resonated with the historical role played by trade unions, in collaboration with political parties, to overthrow the Apartheid government (Adler & Webster, 1995; Webster, 2015). But this also meant that the grassroots composition of the trade unions and their focus persisted along historical lines.

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of Apartheid, the parameters that once defined union participation, union democracy, and employee mandates faced notable erosions (Kenny, 2020). The cohesive force that trade unions once embodied in representing the collective subjectivity of workers had diluted into self-serving institutions catering to a select few, leading to an increased surge in dissatisfaction among members (Kenny, 2020). As Webster (2015) notes, a decline in traditional unionism and institutionalised industrial conflict signals fragmentation of the labour market along new fault lines and the emergence of alternative employment representative movements. The Marikana Strike of 2012, marked by the tragic loss of 34 Lonmin mineworkers and injuries to seventy-three others, starkly illustrated the evolving dynamics of South Africa's industrial relations. What sets the Marikana Strike apart is that the miners went against the advice and stance of their union, the National Union for Miners (NUM), and chose to demand improved wages and living conditions independently of NUM's representation (Online, 2013). The breakdown in communication between the miners and NUM aggravated the situation, highlighting a disconnect between the trade union and its members.

Despite the lack of NUM's official support, the miners continued to voice their grievances and assert their demands for better working conditions and improved livelihoods. This incident illuminated a noteworthy departure from the traditional union arrangement. Consequently, trade unions today grapple with multifaceted challenges stemming from both internal and external factors. The globalisation of the

labour market, the rise of precarious working conditions, a rise in unemployment, dwindling membership numbers, internal discord, and the emergence of alternative employment representatives all contribute to the complex landscape (Higher Education Institution, 2020).

Moreover, the landscape grapples with a myriad of challenges that have cast a shadow over its integrity and effectiveness. Notably, the mismanagement of membership funds, corruption allegations against union officials, corporate business objectives eroding trade union ethos, and trade union officials exploiting their positions and access for personal advancement (Higher Education Institution, 2020; Kenny, 2020). A report by the Higher Education Institution (2020) highlights that a noticeable skills gap exists among union officials and shop stewards, making it difficult for these challenges to be managed. The lack of crucial skills among these representatives contributes to internal strife and mismanagement, as key skill shortages within trade unions revolve around critical competencies necessary for their optimal functionality. Conflict management skills, dispute resolution, labour and negotiation skills, leadership abilities, gender sensitisation, fundraising, and financial management, among others, are predominantly technical and specialised expertise (Higher Education Institution, 2020). Ordinary shop stewards often lack this expertise, as they struggle to grasp its intricacies. Therefore, there is an urgent need for skills development and training to address existing gaps and enhance the overall effectiveness of trade union operations.

Whilst the above presents the state of the labour movement challenges, not all is bleak and gloomy. Despite a decline in membership and dissatisfaction amongst members, there has been a notable rise in the number of registered trade unions and union federations nationwide (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023). As of September 2023, the country had 218 registered Trade Unions and 24 Trade Union Federations, with only one trade union facing deregistration during this period (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023). This suggests that, although trade union members might feel dissatisfied with their own or a particular trade union, they have not lost faith in the institution. When dissatisfied with one trade union, they switch to another. Additionally, there has been an increase in membership amongst both lower-skilled and highly-skilled workers, defying expectations despite the proliferation of employment opportunities and the rise of the precariat class of workers (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Consequently, the decline in trade union membership does not solely serve as a barometer for the relevance of trade unions. Compounded factors contribute to this trend, including but not limited to high levels of unemployment, increased levels of precarious employment, and alternative employment representation forums. And unemployment figures support this observation. As of the third quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate stood at 31.9% for actively job-seeking workers, whereas when the discouraged group of workers within the working-age population is considered, this rate increased to 41.2% (Kenny, 2020). The trade unions' inability to effectively organise the precariat class of workers also acts as a factor. The union's aversion towards organising precarious labour poses limitations, as starkly illustrated by the Marikana Massacre. The fourth industrial revolution has reshaped the workplace and blurred the traditional concept of work.

Despite the hurdles, the rise in registered trade unions and federations signals a resilience that is crucial in navigating the complexities introduced by unemployment and a changing working class. Trade unions must adapt and redefine their role in an evolving landscape. As a result, the labour movement must refocus to better meet the needs of a diverse labour market and invest in the varied types of workers and forms of work that exist.

3.7 Concluding Summary

This chapter offered a contextual background for the study's scope. Noted in this background is a labour market historically stratified by conditions of gendered and racialised male dominance. Discrimination was ingrained as a way of life, mirrored, and enforced through policies and legislations offered to individuals based on gendered and racialised job reservation systems and pay disparities.

The chapter also explores the role of women within this tapestry, unfolding their socio-political involvements and advocating for workers' rights and socio-economic change. These advocacy measures were spearheaded through the tripartite alliance, a collaborative partnership among the ANC, SACP, and COSATU. The alliance contributed to the collective endeavours aimed at combating systemic injustices in South Africa, further strengthening the alliance's united front against prevailing challenges.

Moreover, the implications of colonialism and Apartheid histories on Black women's social standing are examined. Colonisation and Apartheid eras marked a

significant role in assigning positionality in the socio-economic-political landscape for Black people, especially women. The triple yoke subjugation effect fundamentally shaped and altered the dynamics of power and social relations of Black women in all levels of political economy, characterised by a system of institutionalised segregation, discrimination, and patriarchal relations. However, Black women were not bystanders as they challenged the subjugation.

Additionally, the chapter also explored South Africa's labour movement dynamics and its evolution since the end of Apartheid. The current state of the labour market was also discussed, highlighting how a democratically elected government post-Apartheid did not alter the existing social and economic trajectories. Structures and trends of economic and social systems of power, positionality, exchange, and interaction endured. Thus, the exploration accounts for the shift that the labour market underwent following the country's democratically elected political regime, and the altered position of trade unions.

In the next section, the methodological approach used to answer the research question will be outlined and discussed.

4. Methodological Arguments and Approaches

This chapter discusses the methodological justifications and strategies, whilst highlighting their application and implications for the study.

In a research endeavour, understanding the distinction between methodology and methods is essential. Methodology serves as the compass that provides the overarching direction for a study, much like a well-thought-out blueprint guiding the entire research process (Babbie, 2016; Bailey et al., 1996; Bryman, 2007). It refers to the overarching strategy, or the big-picture plan, used in the research. It outlines the general principles guiding the research process, including the logic behind the chosen methods. Methods represent the hands-on tools and techniques employed to collect and analyse data within the big picture, making it the practical execution of the research plan (Babbie, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). It is the articulation of the specific techniques employed to gather and analyse data; as such, it represents the steps, avoidance and practicalities taken to carry out the research. Therefore, it means the individual instruments used to conduct the study, much like the canvas and paintbrushes used to create a picture.

According to Babbie and Mouton (2016; 2001), and Babbie (2001, p. 52), "all human beings are engaged in the process of making sense of their (life) work. We continuously interpret, create, and give meaning to define, justify, and rationalise our actions." As such, the acquisition of knowledge is an inherent part of the lived experiences of individual lives. Individuals rationalise the world by drawing inferences and meaning from experiences (Roberts, 2020), and conclude on the world based on the interpretations and the view lens they take. Research and academic undertakings are part of this process. Scientifically diverse networks and scholarly experts continuously endeavour to answer boundless questions by adopting heterogeneous approaches to assess the integrity and soundness of knowledge acquisition processes in the form of research designs (Babbie, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Given the focus on understanding inequalities and inequities, this study is essential to highlight the researcher's inferences and the lens taken.

4.1 Conceptual Underpinning - Ontological and Epistemological Influences

In the existing literature, various approaches have been proposed for conducting feminist research, specifically in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Similar to the broader social sciences, feminist research navigates paradigm wars that shape its debates and developments, albeit with a feminist lens in the application of methodologies. The diverse perspectives are evident in the varied use of terms such as 'ecosystems in a business context' (Hakala et al., 2020); or ‘paradigm wars’ (Shepherd & Challenger, 2013) in some contexts, debates capture Marxist, Liberal, Intersectional, Postcolonial, and Post-Modern feminist theories, often understood as varied feminist waves. For instance, first-wave feminism focused on suffrage for women; the second wave focused on social and cultural inequalities; the third wave focused on intersectionality, addressing criticism experienced by the second wave. Lastly, the fourth wave questions the rigidness and binary forms of gender classification (Kiguwa, 2019; Kiguwa & Langa, 2011; Kiguwa et al., 2022). As such, feminist scholarship encompasses a wide range of debates on how to conduct feminist research, depending on the taken perspective. Some perspectives are argued from a positivist perspective, whilst others adopt an interpretivist standpoint.

And it is during these varied debates that feminist research started to engage with reflexivity (Ortlipp, 2008; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019), recognising the impact of a researcher’s positionality on the research process. For this reason, reflexivity is a critical self-awareness process in feminist research (Lather, 2009; Pillow, 2003), as it aligns with the objective of critiquing power hierarchies within research processes. Nonetheless, this study is particularly interested in feminist standpoint theory, which encourages the use of perspectives that allow for the exploration of situated knowledge and views from otherwise marginalised groups in knowledge production (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 2003, 2019).

Rodrigues et al. (2016) and Creswell (2018) support a pluralistic approach in undertaking feminist research. According to Rodrigues et al. (2016, p. 205), scholars in work and organisation studies frequently approach research investigations from a 'functionalist epistemology and positivist methods’ perspective, which does not always accommodate the fields’ subjective and structural intersections. The functionalist epistemology and positivist methods approach focus on identifying efficient and effective organisational structures and processes (Rodriguez et al., 2016), but overlook the intricacies of power dynamics, social interactions, and cultural influences within the organisation. It tends to generalise findings without accounting for the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals within the organisation. Whilst the approach has its merits in specific research contexts, it may not fully acknowledge the

subjective and structural intersections in understanding the complexities of work and organisation dynamics. Functionalist approaches prioritise objective and quantitative methods that aim to identify causal relationships and generalisable patterns (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Considering the several components of work organisations that overlap, the social constructionist approach should not be discounted. To comprehend and research these dynamics, it is beneficial to consider and employ a social constructionist approach, given the numerous connections and intersections that exist within the organisational environment.

Whilst not contending that positivist methods have no value, positivist paradigms have a significant impact on the individualistic view of a subject of inquiry (Kiguwa & Langa, 2011). It effectively isolates the subject of investigation from its contextual setting, which is not ideal for feminist research that positions gender as a basic organising principle (Creswell, 2018), shaping the conditions of lived experiences (Acker, 2004; Creswell, 2018), or studies with postcolonial residuals. Isolating the subject of enquiry in feminist and postcolonial-inspired research can be problematic, given the intersectional dynamics that context and environment often play in these types of research enquiries (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984). Therefore, feminist research enquiries ought to adopt varied forms of methods and approaches in undertaking research that acknowledges the context of the subject of inquiry (Kiguwa & Langa, 2011). This approach has been the inspiration for this study.

This study draws perspectives from social constructionism and Black feminist perspectives, applying both standpoint theory and situated knowledge. These approaches require reflexivity on the part of the researcher and emphasise that knowledge production is inherently shaped by power dynamics and social positioning (Anderson, 1995; Schwiter et al., 2021). These influenced the question posed, as well as the methods used to gather, examine, evaluate, and analyse data. The perspective impacted every step of the process, from developing the research question to analysing and interpreting findings. This meant that the research design focused on diverse perspectives, particularly those from marginalised groups, ensuring that their perspectives were heard. For data analysis, as a researcher with a dichotomy of insider and outside perspectives (see 4.5.1 *Interviews with Pre-existing Peers and Using Collegial Relationships* and *4.5.2 Reflecting on Self and Positionality* for detailed discussion), I reflected on how my own background and positionality might affect the gathering and interpretation of data, and engagement with participants (see 4.5.2

Reflecting on Self and Positionality). Through this process, informed by frameworks from social constructionism and feminist standpoint theory, as the researcher, I do not claim to have a neutral observer status, but rather that of an active participant whose perspectives, biases, and social position influence the research process (Rose, 1997) (see 8.5 *Autobiography Reflection*).

Social constructionism acknowledges that knowledge is constructed through social processes, interactions, and cultural norms, thus emphasising how meanings and realities are co-created by individuals within a given context (Creswell, 2023). It recognises that realities are fluid and varied based on several factors, cultural and historical contexts and epochs (Mandelbaum, 1979). As Trivedi (2020) notes, truth is fluid, shaped by social interactions and the subjective experiences of individuals. Therefore, truth, reason, and morality evolve and transform as individuals undergo various life experiences. What is real and authentic for someone may differ for another. The knower's truth and reality serve only as a looking glass and an expression of the knower's experiences. Consequently, reality is subjectively relative, contingent on the person who lives, experiences, or observes it. The evolution of this reality is influenced by interactions with the environment, depending on whether experiences are accepted, comprehended, or rejected (Chen et al., 2011; Galbin, 2014; Trivedi, 2020).

The feminist standpoint theory perspective emphasises that knowledge is socially situated, and marginalised groups, such as women, have unique and valuable perspectives on social realities (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1991; Hekman, 1997; Rolin, 2006, 2009). It posits that knowledge is socially constructed; hence, knowledge and perspective are also shaped by social positions, based on intersectional factors such as gender, race, class, etc. Marginalised individuals' experience and understanding of the world is different, thus offering a distinct and valuable perspective to critique dominant social norms. As a result, the integrative feminist perspective adopted is what I call a post-Apartheid feminist reflective orientation, one that accommodates the epistemic stances of social constructionism, standpoint theory, and situated knowledge. This perspective advocates for a knowledge approach grounded in the realities of Black South African women, treating their perspectives as valuable and central to the understanding of their experiences. Dosekun (2021a, p. 3) argues this as the politics of knowing that "starts from and seeks to act upon the necessarily intersectional and vernacular ways of seeing, knowing and imagining that emanate from black women's lived experiences."

4.2 Post-Apartheid Feminist Reflective Lens

Inspired by feminist epistemologies, feminist standpoint theory, situated knowledges and Black feminist theories, a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens considers the socio-economic-political context, impact, and implications of colonial and Apartheid history (see 3.3 *The Implication of Colonialism and Apartheid on Black Women* and *3.4 Women in the Liberation Struggle and Trade Unions* for more details). I did this to add to the feminist and postcolonial lenses, providing more focus on the intersectional context and positions of women and men (in their diverse cohorts) and their gendered experiences within a South African context, as well as those of the researcher. This approach or reflective move, was important because different feminist lenses hold different power dynamics and ontological and epistemological assumptions in generating and validating knowledge. As Dosekun (2021a, p. 1) notes, "the central concern is to define a feminist politics and praxis for [South] African women, one that speaks to their lives and challenges." In other words, feminist research conducted in the African context, specifically in a South African context, should emerge from and be rooted in its local realities, rather than being imported from other parts of the world (Dosekun, 2021a).

South Africa's structural and systemic oppression is distinct and should be considered within this context. It represents a unique postcolonial case because, unlike many other former African colonies, it did not simply transition from colonial rule to national independence. Whilst most African nations transitioned to independence for their majority population after the end of colonial rule, South Africa transitioned from colonialism (1652-1961) directly into Apartheid (1948-1994) (SAGov, n.d.), a period that continued the oppression of its Black populace. This continuity resulted in dual, back-to-back eras of oppression, as Apartheid not only borrowed from but also built upon colonial policies, intensifying social, gender, racial, and economic disenfranchisement. Consequently, Black South Africans endured over 350 years of subjugation, shifting from one oppressive system to another without the immediate political and economic liberation seen in many post-colonial African states (Cloete, 2023; Mamdani, 1996, 2015).

Furthermore, following the end of the colonial and Apartheid rule, South Africa emerged from the aftermath with both settlers and the indigenous population becoming "survivors," with the former perpetrators legally expected to live in harmony with and amongst the former victims as equal citizens in a non-racial democratic society (Mamdani, 2020). In this new era, former perpetrators and victims were to

coexist, a transition that arguably masked a deeper continuity of the persistence of structural advantages for the former oppressors and reflects the historical social order, where historical inequalities continued to shape the present.

Given South Africa's historical trajectory, a postcolonial lens alone is insufficient to fully capture the implications. Postcolonial theory primarily examines the consequences of colonial rule and the struggles of formerly colonised societies in the aftermath of independence. However, South Africa's experience is distinct because, as noted above, colonialism did not simply end; it transitioned into Apartheid, which extended and institutionalised racial and economic subjugation rather than dismantling colonial power structures (Mamdani, 1996; Mbembe, 2001; SAGov, n.d.). This continuity of oppression meant that traditional postcolonial frameworks, which often focus on decolonisation and nation-building, have a shortfall in accounting for the additional forms of oppression that take place after their era, such as that endured by South Africa's Black population. To understand South Africa's unique historical and socio-economic realities, alternative frameworks are necessary.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that alternative theories capable of capturing and addressing such nuances do not exist. The argument highlighted by Wolfe (2006) on settler colonialism may offer some relevance to the impact of colonialism, even after the coloniser has left.[20] It's particularly relevant, as it explains how European settlers established a system not just of exploitation but of permanent occupation and dominance, which differed from extractive colonial systems that primarily sought to control resources from afar (Wolfe, 2006). South Africa's settler colonialism led to the displacement, dispossession, and systematic exclusion of Black populations from political and economic power. This exclusion persists structurally in modern-day systems of power. Unlike extractive colonial systems, settler colonial systems allowed former beneficiaries of colonial and Apartheid eras to continue benefiting from established systems as they remained in the country after the end of these eras. Additionally, racial capitalism was popularised by Cedric Robinson (1983), who provides a crucial lens for analysing how race and economic exploitation were deeply intertwined, with Apartheid ensuring that Black South Africans remained a cheap labour force for white-owned industries and landowners (Hall, 2022; Robinson et al.,

[20] This is one of the reasons South Africa's post-colonial and post-Apartheid experience is unique because, unlike many other formerly colonised nations in the African context, the colonisers, Apartheid beneficiaries, and leaders did not leave after the system was dismantled. Instead, they remained and continued to live among the broader population as legally equal citizens.

1983). Nonetheless, these theoretical arguments do not address the double bind and the gendered nature of South African history.

For this reasons, South Africa's persistent racial, gendered, and economic inequalities cannot merely be framed by an independent perspective of postcolonial legacies; racial capitalism; and or settler colonialism - it is the result of a combinations of these theories, and others, that have extended continuous structure of racial, gendered, and economic dispossession that span both through colonial and Apartheid eras (Magubane, 1996). Therefore, to critically engage with South Africa's historical and ongoing injustices, a multifaceted analytical approach is necessary. It necessitates a strategy that goes beyond postcolonialism but incorporates insights from settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and gendering regimes; hence, the proposed adoption of a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens. Adopting a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens offers a valuable tool for achieving this, particularly when informed by Black feminist theories.

In adopting a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens, the study also aligns with the observations of Jaga et al. (2018), Anderson (1995), and Lewis and Baderoon (2021a) regarding the need for feminist epistemology to change and understand the social context in which science is produced and applied. According to Dosekun (2021a), a gap exists in feminist theories regarding the African context, creating a space to develop approaches that are not only applicable to the African context but also emerge and speak to its specific realities. There is a need to rethink gender from a Global South perspective, where women's needs and experiences are analysed according to context-specific relations (Connell, 2014; Jaga et al., 2018). As Biana (2020) points out, oppression in poorer countries, the so-called "Third World countries," encompasses different types of oppression that are all connected. These forms of oppression are deliberately built into the system and are linked to the history of how nations and their people have been dominated and controlled. Postcolonial feminist thought, particularly the work of African feminist scholars such as Mama (2001), Horn (2025), Tamale (2020), and Mohanty (2003a, 2003b), among others, reminds us of that knowledge production in formerly colonised contexts is never neutral. It is always political, often contested, and profoundly shaped by colonial residues in institutions, epistemologies, and interpersonal relations (Smith, 2021; Tamale, 2020).

Phaswana (2021, p. 200) notes this as "the intersectionality of apartheid oppression," and I contend it is also of colonialism. Under both colonialism and Apartheid, Black women faced three layers of oppression: being women, being Black, and being poor. This made their struggles different from those of Black men (who did not face gender oppressions) or those of White women (who did not face racial oppression) (hooks, 1984), and those of Black women as different ethnicities. Black men arguably contributed to the gender oppression of Black women, just as White women played a role in the racial oppression of Black women (2025). As Horn (2025) notes, even as other aspects of Black men's traditional authority were stripped away under colonial rule, they still held an advantage over Black women within the new political and economic systems introduced because of gender.

On the other hand, as an intragroup Black woman (and people holistically) within their varied ethnicities experienced both colonialism and Apartheid differently, manifesting in what I note as 'the otherness between Black people in South Africa.'[21] This otherness, which is essentially heterogeneity within homogeneity, can be situated within the confluence of intersectionality, postcolonial theory, and Black feminist thought, revealing the layered and contested terrain of Black identity (Collins, 2000c; Mama, 2019). This otherness gives rise to complex, layered identities and positionalities, as well as nuanced differences, with inherent tensions. Thus, research studies exploring such context ought to consider these interconnected forms of tensions, heterogeneity within homogeneity, varied oppressions, their implications, and the lasting impact that may persist long after the oppressors have left or the oppressive laws have been abandoned.

The proposed post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens also highlights the multifaceted impact of historical factors on the present day and the context-based, intersectional relationships that have shaped and continue to shape power dynamics. It makes space to take into consideration how Apartheid, with its predecessor colonialism, as a socially engineered system of oppression, rooted in gendered and racialised socio-economic-political inequalities, continues to shape the South African society. It recognises that the effects of colonialism and Apartheid didn't simply disappear in 1994 when South Africa became a democratic state (Friedman, 2021; Jaga

[21] Under the Apartheid legislation's Group Areas Act, based on race, and ethnicity, people were assigned to different geographical locations and provided different resources. Even though collectively they were classified as Black, their sense of identity, location, and cultural references made them feel "other" to the other, a process that was essential to the divide and conquer.

et al., 2018), but persist in ways that intersect with and exacerbate racial, economic, and gender-based exclusions. The limited progress in achieving gender equality, three decades into democracy and despite the implementation of some of the world's most progressive legislation, can be attributed to the enduring impact of both colonial and Apartheid era praxes (Friedman, 2015, 2019). These historical epochs established deeply entrenched social, economic, and political inequalities that continue to shape contemporary South Africa. As a result, legal and policy reforms alone have proven insufficient in dismantling the perpetual inequalities.

A post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens acknowledges that interactions between individuals and groups of diverse backgrounds are scaffoldings of inequalities that are influenced by the historical context. It captures the nuances of the otherness experienced by Black people in South Africa, specifically that of Black women, for this study. The experiences of Black men and women, those of White women and Black women, and those of Black women as an intragroup significantly vary (Edwards-Bianchi, 2024) based on the country's historical relationship with these groups (Jaga et al., 2018). A post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens helps to understand how and why predispositions, perceptions, and behaviours might emerge and differ based on specific situational factors of the context that affect solidarity. It offers a nuanced analysis of interactions and intersections by emphasising the importance of the particular environment and historical context. This is a context-based understanding of women's experiences, particularly Black women impacted by the triple burden of discrimination (Edwards-Bianchi, 2024) in South Africa.

The lens also addresses the critique that feminist standpoint theory is often narrated from Western feminist perspectives (Chadwick, 2017; Connell, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991, 2018). A post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens allows the study to explore the complex interplay shaping realities, beliefs, and existence within the context, enhancing the study's depth. As Lewin (1942, p. 62) explains, "the properties of the 'life space' of the individual depend partly upon the state of that individual as a product of his history, partly upon the non-psychologic[al], physical and social, surroundings." Therefore, reality encompasses interacting systems that are participant-predisposed and dependent for knowledge generation and acquisition. This approach acknowledges the impact of Apartheid on various aspects of human life and understanding, with a particular focus on women. This is because an individual is not exclusively the product of a social construction process (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Instead, they are also an ongoing entity moulded and remoulded continuously by the

different discursive practices that exist in society (Parsons et al., 2017). The moulding is by its very nature relational and situated, therefore contextual. The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is thus inextricably linked to lived experience (Priya, 2021), both individually and collectively.

For this reason, the epistemological issue raised by Britton (2000) regarding how gender is constructed, impactful, and understood, particularly in realities co-created by the viewpoints and individuals involved, is considered (Carminati, 2018). Departing from gendered organisations theory, this study assumes that gender is socially constructed and pervasive in social norms, suggesting a pre-existing assumption that all is gendered. Given this assumption, feminist perspectives, considered through a post-Apartheid feminist reflective stance, provide a valuable lens to explore the social construct nature of gender by centring the perspectives of Black women as the marginalised group. It provides a useful lens to analyse how gender in a context that is historically built on intersecting oppressive praxes is constructed as a form of privileging and deprivileging. This provides a nuanced examination of how gendered experiences vary according to social, economic, and racial contexts. Consequently, the analytical framework operates from a perspective that gender is an integral aspect of all social structures and interactions, thus central to the analysis. This framing is necessary to explore how gender influences power dynamics and social norms in a South African context.

This is because a single phenomenon, event, solution, or epistemology cannot explain the study's research problem and question. The research problem and question are connected by chains of fragments, processes, events, and interactions that have produced the conundrum, influenced by both collective and idiosyncratic lived experiences. Knowledge is a by-product of human interactions, which occur in a given context and history through social processes that take place (Howell, 2016; Vinney, 2019). For this reason, approaching social phenomena as 'trivial machines' hinders the ability of the research process to comprehend the complex reality of the phenomena (Wenzel et al., 2016). A trivial approach simplifies the complexity to a straightforward narrative, which is erroneous and a form of erasure. The way social phenomena operate is deeply rooted in their reality and environment, and it is a half measure to attempt to appreciate them outside of their operational standpoint (Wenzel et al., 2016).

The following section presents the research methods explicitly adopted to mitigate a trivial approach and to support robust data collection.

4.3 Adopted Research Methods

Considering the ever-evolving realities of social phenomena, qualitative research is often better positioned to investigate the different perspectives (Miles et al., 2020) and ever-changing realities of the subject in question. It can capture different viewpoints, interpretations, experiences, and the lens of individuals within their respective environments. Qualitative research allows for adequate responses to inquiries about "why an experience, occurrence, or event occurred, how it developed, what it was like, and/or what it meant" (Roberts, 2020, p. 3190). It enables researchers to address how and why related questions, which often necessitate contextual understanding (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021), particularly when the contextualised environment entails observing and interpreting inequalities, social norms, and socio-economic issues that may not be readily apparent in quantitative approaches. This rationale underpinned the selection of methods adopted for the study, which are effectively adaptable and able to respond to emerging developments (Marshall, 2006; Miles et al., 2020) during the research process.

According to Koch (2011), an interpretive qualitative strategy may be adopted to comprehend how particular paths are engraved in an organisation. A qualitative case study enables a focus on understanding a phenomenon within a subjective setting (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014), making it a suitable strategy for probing gendered praxes. It acknowledges that individual perceptions and experiences are unique and do not necessarily represent universal truths, but rather provide valuable insights into the diverse perspectives that co-exist within a particular context (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Frechette et al., 2020; Marshall, 2006; Priya, 2021; Ravitch, 2017). This study provides insightful considerations on gendering and gendered praxes in the context of the trade union, as perceived by the participants and interpreted by the researcher.

Trade unions possess structural and organisational features that make them particularly suitable for exploring gender dynamics, as most are highly male-dominated environments (Webster, 2015; Webster & Adams, 2022), with women having slowly entered the sector. Consequently, this study adopts a case study approach to exploring how and why the trade union, as an organisation, is rooted in gendered praxes. The emphasis is on understanding the case in a situational context (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021) and exploring the circumstances, settings, and conditions that surround the trade union. Both the contextual variables and their

interactions provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon of interest, gendering praxes (Babbie, 2016; Babbie, 2001; Yin, 2014). As a result, the methodological approach adopted was designed to account for these contextual variables and their interplay. Qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and focus group discussions, were utilised to elicit situated insights into gendering praxes. However, before discussing the study's data collection methods, it is important first to outline the sampling strategy to which these methods were applied.

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy and Population

Understanding and contextualising the chosen sampling strategies played a vital role in informing the development of the research. Because the unit of analysis presents specifics on what is being researched and analysed (Babbie, 2016; Babbie, 2001; Creswell, 2018), there is an interplay between it and the population sample. It influences the decisions made during the research design (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014). Unlike a linear research design with sequential stages, in this study, the researcher revisited and adjusted strategies based on insights, feedback, and information extracted in the scoping stages. These were influenced and considered within the context of the research question, objectives, and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2014). As a result, before settling on the unit of analysis and sampling strategies, an iterative approach was used, which refined and improved the final research design.

As a former South African public sector employee, I initiated the research process with scoping interviews that involved a small, select group of former associates (hereafter referred to as the original participant pool). The original participant pool was contacted directly, as they were former associates and colleagues within the researcher's existing networks. This pool of participants had a sample involving 11 participants from across the public sector's organised labour and employer bodies. These were union members, union officials, employer representatives, and collective employer representatives in labour platforms.

These scoping interviews become an iterative process of making continuous improvements to the research plan based on practical factors, such as what is possible, the availability of resources, the accessibility of potential research participants, and what can realistically be done within the timeframe. By actively considering feedback from these early stages, particularly scoping interviews, the process was adapted to changing circumstances and unforeseen encounters, as mapped out in Figure 1: Data Collection Phases and Adopted Methods and discussed in the *Going to the Field*

Reflections. This flexibility enabled continuous improvement of how the unit of analysis and participants were later chosen, how data were gathered, and the conceptual theories used as the study progressed.

As a unit of analysis, a public sector trade union organisation, PublicU, was settled on. PublicU was chosen as the case for the study due to the organisation's historical significance and its status as one of the largest trade unions in the public sector. PublicU, as a trade union organisation, operates within a sensitive and politically contentious environment. As such, to navigate the complex and potentially turbulent environment around the organisation, anonymity and confidentiality of the organisation and participants' names are adopted. Assuring anonymity and privacy in this manner adheres to the research's ethical principles, as it is essential to conduct research with extra care and sensitivity towards participants (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014).

Researchers are expected to conduct themselves respectfully, without deceit or wilful intention to harm participants of the study (Marshall, 2006). Thus, a commitment to anonymity was explicitly adopted to ensure the sensitivity and protection of participants, thereby creating an atmosphere of trust and candour in their contributions (Babbie, 2016). The decision to withhold participants' identities and the organisation's identity is not an arbitrary act of discretion; it is a safeguarding mechanism to honour the pledged confidentiality and prevent any inadvertent compromise of anonymity. Identifying the organisation could potentially jeopardise the confidentiality assurances extended to the participants; therefore, the organisation is referred to as PublicU, and participants are cited by their roles.

Having settled on the unit of analysis, this process helped identify the study's target population. In recruiting the final participants, the original participant pool played a central role, as the recruitment of the final participants for the study occurred through a snowball sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where a researcher begins with a small population of known individuals and expands the sample by leveraging networks and referrals to build a broader sample (Crossman, 2020). This sampling approach allowed conversations with participants that would ordinarily be marginalised, inaccessible, or not readily identifiable (Babbie, 2016). Similarly, it allowed the researcher to utilise the knowledge acquired from initial contacts as sources of referral and/or directions for further identifying suitable participants (Priya, 2021).

Leveraging existing networks of the original pool proved instrumental in expanding the study's reach and building and maintaining a participant base. This approach not only facilitated the seamless inclusion of new relevant individuals but also fostered a sense of continuity. It created a linked network that increased the number of participants, resulting in a chain referral process that identified relevant participants in a self-sufficient and cost-effective manner. Consequently, in line with a case study approach that seeks to explore a situational context, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure a selection of participants who were meaningfully situated within the context where gendering praxes are actively constructed and negotiated.

To access a participant pool and gather data that would be the centre of answering the research question, during scoping interviews, the researcher asked the participants to recommend others who met the study criteria within their networks. The original participants obtained verbal agreement from their contacts, and, with the identified individual's approval, their contact details were shared with the researcher. This approach ensured that all individuals were approached respectfully and in accordance with ethical guidelines. As a result, initial participants became a bridge between the researcher and would-be participants, as initial contact was often made by participants of the original pool on behalf of the researcher. It was only upon individuals providing consent for their details to be shared that the researcher would contact the referred individuals.

From this process, a total of 24 participants were contacted and engaged through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Participants were contacted via email or WhatsApp messaging, and in some instances, both methods were used. Of the 24 participants, 15 consented to taking part in the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted online due to geographical differences. As a result, 15 online interviews were conducted with participants from PublicU, who were either salaried trade union officials or elected shop stewards, predominantly from national and regional leadership structures. Demographically, six females and nine males were interviewed, varying in terms of sexuality, age, years of experience, geographical location, and roles occupied in the trade union (See *Table 1: Interviews Sample Overview*). The participants' pool was homogeneous in that,

legislatively, they are all classified as 'Black'[22] as they form part of the previously disadvantaged groups of South Africa's Apartheid era. Nonetheless, they differed in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and language. Four participants identified as Coloured and 11 as Black African.

As expected, the participants were predominantly male and had been actively engaged in the organisation for an average of 10 years, indicating a substantial level of experience and involvement. A select few of the participants had been with PublicU since its inception, which contributed to their long-standing familiarity with the organisation's history, practices, and operations under different leaders and epochs. The participants were from all structures of the organisation–local, regional, provincial, and national levels, spanning across various geographical areas of the country. The result was a total of 1852 minutes, equivalent to 30 hours and 52 minutes' worth of collected data. On average, interviews lasted between 80 and 90 minutes per session. Some interviews had a follow-up conducted in phase two of data collection (*Figure 1: Data Collection Phases and Adopted Methods*), both online and in-person.

Reviewing the initial data and drawing preliminary insights from it guided the follow-up interview conversations. The objective of the follow-up interviews was to gather further details and elaborations on the themes. It provided the researcher with a second opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of participants' opinions and nuances (Roberts, 2020), which helped fill in data gaps and develop a deeper understanding of what may have been overlooked in the initial interviews. It helped address what Roberts (2020) and Creswell (2018) anticipate as challenges that could be encountered by novice researchers, whilst also allowing the researcher to reassess and redevelop the initial interview guide (Saldaña, 2021).

With a narrowly defined research question, data saturation was achieved with 15 interviews, making the sample size reasonable for the study's purposes. At this point, new data no longer provided additional insights (Creswell, 2023; Frechette et al., 2020; Glaser, 1999, p. 166) or, as Guest et al. (2017) note, significantly alter the existing codes. New information merely reinforces the established themes rather than introducing new ones. From the data, recurring themes included role allocations,

[22] 'Black people' is a generic term which means African, Coloureds and Indians as per the South African Employment Equity Act, No. 55 Of 1998. This legislative categorisation can often obscure the ethnic heterogeneity within this group.

bargaining negotiations, and the impact of social reproductive roles on women's trade union activities. And unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research can achieve its objectives with smaller sample sizes (Babbie, 2016; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Forrest-Lawrence, 2018). Granted, the larger the sample size, the more likely it is that the study's insights will provide a more accurate representation of the population being studied.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions provided supplementary sources of data. The recruitment of the focus group participants took a different format from that of semi-structured interviews. I initially contacted three employer organisations known to have high concentrations of PublicU members. Of the three employer organisations that were contacted, only one responded to the researcher's request. Gaining access to the employer organisation that responded was facilitated by the researcher's former employment status, having previously worked there. Moreover, during this time, the researcher had been invited to deliver a presentation to the employer's Women in Leadership internal structure.

Similar to the process of leveraging former associates to access interview participants, the researcher used this invitation to gain access for the research study. The recruitment criteria specifically targeted female employees who were members of PublicU, rather than officials of PublicU. Participants had to be salaried at the lower levels of the organisation's hierarchy, defined as earnings below a specific grade threshold. Members in lower occupational roles were the target, as they are most likely to be active participants in trade union activities. Moreover, this approach allowed participants to feel at ease, as they were not only familiar with each other's roles but also encouraged a frank and open conversation. In the absence of occupational-level role-based power dynamics, the discussions provided a safe space for the women to share their experiences, challenges, and perspectives related to gendering and gendered issues within the trade union. As a result, the focus groups sample consisted of PublicU's female members (elected and non-elected) who met these criteria. This targeted approach ensured that the voices of women situated in lower-paid positions were central to the exploration of gendering praxes.

Because only one organisation responded to the call, the focus group discussions were from a single employer organisation. Two online focus group discussions were conducted with the responding participants, encompassing both the perspectives of locally elected women trade union leaders and their members. Females,

as the key participants, were organised to gather the best information on how women have been represented by the trade union and their perspectives on the matter. Each focus group interaction consisted of 5-6 participants to foster healthy group dynamics and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The demographics of the group were less complicated to decipher, as most participants had their cameras off, either because they used mobile phones and desktops without camera facilities or because they were not asked to identify themselves during the process. Group sizes of 5-8 participants allowed for reasonable diversity in perspectives and opinions, whilst still being manageable to facilitate and conduct within a reasonable timeframe, with fewer resources, in terms of paid time-off permitted by the employer and budgetary limitations. With smaller groups, participants could express their thoughts, share their experiences, and contribute to the discussion. This format also reduced the possibility of participants feeling intimidated, not being heard, or experiencing anxiety and stress from having to speak to a large audience.

The study's sample also included fieldwork observations. With the easing of COVID-19 travel restrictions, opportunities to meet participants face-to-face in their natural environments became feasible. Observed were events and meetings to which PublicU was a party. In the initial planning stages of the research, before arrival in the fieldwork, the preliminary plan was to visit five constituency meetings arranged through a key informant responsible for organising and chairing these engagements. However, this did not pan out as planned, as these plans had to be adjusted due to a lack of meetings (see appendices on *Going to the Field Reflections* for a reflexive discussion on what unfolded). The adjusted plan resulted in three visits: a constituency meeting, a local labour forum (engaging the employer and trade unions operating in the sector), and a trade union rally organised by the federation. In these proceedings, observations were made on how members (officiated or not) engaged with other organisations, how they interacted with one another, the points of interest and discussions as per the agenda, and the general atmosphere during rallies/proceedings. As such, in these uncontrolled natural settings, behaviours and interactions were points of interest. This approach aimed to capture the variety of PublicU's activities and relationships across various events, offering a perspective on the organisation's overall dynamics.

As a result, three observation-focused activities were conducted as part of the study. Each session was between 90 and 120 minutes, with the trade union rally being the longest. During the constituency meeting and local labour forum, participants were

informed about the researcher and her purpose. In line with ethical research practices, consent for observations was obtained before the meetings and on the day of the meeting, before each proceeding. Permission to observe was revisited with the researcher excused from the room when this decision was made, and participants were informed of their right to decline the request. During the observation, care was taken not to disrupt or participate in any of the activities that transpired, as the researcher's presence was purely that of an observer. Field notes were discreetly captured during these observations and helped shape some of the analytical memos. These memos later served as a critical guide for broader reflections, interpretations, and sense-making of the collected data.

Collectively, these datasets, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations complemented each other to develop a layered understanding of gendering praxes. However, this is not to suggest that these methods were without drawbacks. The following section outlines the strengths and limitations of the methods, along with a rationale for their use. Before that, the table below summarises the population sample of the interviews.

Table 1: Interviews Sample Overview

Participant ID	Type of Position	Gender	Race	Age Range	Levels in the Organisation	Sampling Method	Collection Phase	
							One	Two
P1	Salaried	Female	Coloured	50-59	Head Office	Snowballing		✓
P2	Salaried	Male	African	Unknown	Head Office	Snowballing		✓
P3	Salaried	Male	African	50-59	Head Office	Snowballing		✓
P4	Elected	Female	African	50-59	National	Snowballing and by Convenience[23]		✓
P5	Elected	Female	African	60-69	National	Snowballing and by Convenience		✓
P6	Salaried	Male	African	50-59	Provincial	Snowballing		✓
P7	Elected	Female	African	Unknown	Provincial	Snowballing		✓
P8	Elected	Male	African	40-49	Regional	Purposive and Snowballing	✓	
P9	Salaried	Male	Coloured	60-69	Regional Organiser	Purposive	✓	✓

[23] Participants were identified via snowball sampling, but the convenience arose when these individuals happened to be attending a meeting closer to where the researcher was physically located, making interview arrangements easier. This is what is noted as "eating interviews" in Figure 1, as the initial interviews happened over lunch breaks and had later follow-ups.

Participant ID	Type of Position	Gender	Race	Age Range	Levels in the Organisation	Sampling Method	Collection Phase	
							One	Two
P10[24]	Elected	Female	African	40-49	Regional	Purposive	✓	
P11	Elected	Female	Coloured	50-59	Regional	Snowballing	✓	
P12	Elected	Male	African	60-69	Regional	Purposive and Snowballing	✓	
P13	Elected	Male	African	40-49	Local Shop Steward	Purposive	✓	
P14	Elected Officials	Male	Coloured	60-69	Local Shop Steward	Purposive		✓
P15	Elected Officials	Male	African	50-59	Local Shop Steward	Snowballing		✓

[24] This participant willingly identified as lesbian during the interview and noted that, to her knowledge, she was the only openly lesbian individual in a leadership position within the organisation. She explained how she frequently had to educate others about her sexuality, as awareness and understanding appeared limited. Interestingly, she also reflected on how, once initial apprehensions had subsided, her sexuality was not an issue and sometimes facilitated integration into the environment. She was often perceived as "an honorary mate," which subtly altered interpersonal dynamics in her favour.

4.3.2 Data Collection Methods

The above section summarised the population samples of the different data collection methods adopted in the study. This process employed a two-phase strategy, involving multiple methods, including semi-structured interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions, which spanned a total of six months. Adopting a two-phased strategy was necessitated following the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted aspects of the initial data collection planning. Since this was initially considered a drawback, the adjusted approach offered leverageable benefits. For instance, the first phase allowed for exploring methods, identifying challenges, and refining the research approach. By maintaining flexibility and openness to adjusting research methods as new insights emerged, I was better able to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges and capitalise on opportunities (Creswell, 2023). This strategy helped navigate the challenges often encountered in the research process and experienced by the researcher as well (see appendices on 'Going to the Field Reflections'). Braun and Clarke (2022) note that when planning a research study, there should be a careful alignment between the data collection methods and the study's research question, theoretical framework, analytical approach, and the specific characteristics and needs of the participants.

This section discusses the various methods — semi-structured interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions — along with their respective strengths and limitations, considering the critical aspects of the study. The methods were selected for their individual strengths and complementary nature, particularly in how they align with the study's objectives and conceptual framework, insofar as they engage with the complexity of gender as a relational, situated, and dynamic concept.

The study's conceptual framework informed the methodological choices. It draws on social constructions and supports a diverse exploration of how gender is constructed, negotiated, and performed within institutional and social structures (Britton & Logan, 2008; Butler, 1988; Lorber, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987) of PublicU. This meant they worked in tandem to uncover both subjective and collective practices, an epistemic view that aligns with the study's standpoint and goals. The multi-methods also allowed for triangulation of data, which helped navigate the limitations of the individual methods whilst drawing on their strengths to balance the drawbacks (Babbie, 2016; Babbie, 2001; Bryman, 2007; Yin, 2014).

4.3.2.1 Interviews

Given the exploratory nature of the study, semi-structured interviews were particularly suited to capture both individual and collective perspectives (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Saldaña (2021) notes that interviews give voice to experiences and the flexibility of participants to elaborate on issues with contextual insights. Methods such as interviews employ a flexible and fluid style of engagement, mirroring the often-messy natural flow of conversations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The participant shares their views, and the researcher probes accordingly. The objective is not to generate data through uniform accounts that adhere to positivist conceptual underpinnings (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022), but rather to engage each participant in a conversation of depth, whilst aligning with the study's objectives. This can sometimes involve following a participant's train of reasoning and sense-making to gather high-quality data.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher can probe and clarify issues related to the conceptual frameworks (Creswell, 2018, 2023; Roberts, 2020), thereby generating data that extends beyond surface-level engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Interviews permit an exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences of the trade union's gendered and gendering praxes. This was also one of the reasons follow-up interviews were permissible. After engaging with and consulting the initial data, which is a form of retrospective probing (Trainor & Bundon, 2021), the researcher conducted follow-up conversations to probe further. Follow-ups supplemented the in-depth data and provided clarifications on topics that emerged during the first phase of interviews, offering further opportunities to explore issues that had been briefly touched upon during the initial data collection phases. This approach also facilitated a fuller understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. As a result, this is a crucial design consideration for research studies that adopt a social constructionist perspective and for producing high-quality data aligned with it (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023).

Interviews, as the primary source of data collection, offer a means to explore multiple realities (Roberts, 2020), but they are not without their challenges. Interviews can be time-consuming (Creswell, 2018) and focus on capturing an individualised subjective perspective. The challenge with subjective perspectives is that they can be limited by participants' memory recall, ability to self-report, and social desirability (Saldaña, 2021). Furthermore, some drawbacks arise from the researcher's actions. For instance, inexperienced researchers may encounter some blunders and difficulties

when conducting qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2018). They may miss critical opportunities to probe and/or ask leading questions that cause the interview to validate the researcher's preconceived conceptions rather than eliciting participants' perspectives (Angrosino, 2007; Roberts, 2020). This line of enquiry often causes the researcher to digress from the study's focus.

The researcher's in-depth understanding of the area of inquiry, the philosophical underpinnings of the methodologies available, and the process of creating knowledge through dialogue become significant factors in navigating these potential pitfalls (Roberts, 2020), a process that novice researchers may not always be able to navigate easily. By being aware of these areas, the researcher is better able to effectively direct conversations, ask pertinent questions, and collect rich data (Creswell, 2018). As Saldaña (2021) and Roberts (2020) advise to navigate these potential blunders and to guide the data extraction process, qualitative researchers can use interview guides. As a contingency plan, this approach was adopted in this study. The researcher heeded Creswell (2018), Saldaña (2021), and Roberts (2020)'s advice and used interview *Guides* to help guide, organise, and direct the interview conversations, whilst offering a starting point and a compass to aid in gathering valuable and pertinent data.

Nonetheless, interviews remain an individually centred form of data, laden with participants' biases, sense-making, and forms of knowing. To capture a collective form of learning, focus groups were also used.

4.3.2.2 Focus Group

Whilst interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences and perspectives (Trainor & Bundon, 2021), focus group discussions facilitated the simultaneous capturing of collective reflections, perspectives, and group dynamics on gendering and gendered issues within the PublicU. As a method of data collection, it aligned with the theoretical emphasis of social constructionism and collective sense-making.

Focus group discussions are a valuable technique for learning about participants' views and feelings in a group context (Barbour, 2018; Guest et al., 2017), and for generating fresh insights and ideas outside of the individuals' interviews. They can reveal shared and/or contested views (Babbie, 2016) and investigate the variations and parallels between participants' perspectives and experiences within a singular

frame. This study offered means to learn about the social and cultural influences on participants' viewpoints and behaviour (Babbie, 2016; Babbie, 2001; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Gibbs, 1997; Guest et al., 2017) in relation to gendered and gendering experiences. Similarly, it provided manageable means for a group of individuals to discuss and offer input on a particular subject collectively (Babbie, 2016; Babbie, 2001; Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Guest et al., 2017).

As a result, focus group discussions serve as a powerful tool for understanding how opinions evolve in a social context and provide insight into how individuals collectively negotiate meaning and construct reality (Barbour, 2018; Guest et al., 2017). They can demonstrate how opinions are formed, challenged, and reinforced in a social setting (Babbie, 2016). As group participants interact, they shape each other's views, a phenomenon Morgan (1997) refers to as collective reasoning. This is similar to the conversational impact and the fusing of either language and/or ideas noted by Gherardi and Poggio (2007, 2014) (see *Reflecting on Responses* for the researcher's experience on this). Through interactions, participants are exposed to diverse perspectives that can either reinforce their existing beliefs or prompt reflection on those beliefs (Barbour, 2018; Morgan, 1997). This process is especially evident where group dynamics and social pressure play a critical role in shaping individuals' responses and actions, as seen in the phenomenon explored in the study. Different scholars, such as Ledwith (2013), West and Zimmerman (1987), Butler (1988), and Kondo (1990), among others, have highlighted that gender is a performance. Therefore, in focus group discussions aimed at exploring issues on gendered and gendering praxes, there is a possibility that the nature of the responses may be performances shaped by the social pressures of the phenomenon.

Consequently, since focus group discussions enhance the ability to test and explore collective perspectives, they can also generate drawbacks that are limiting. Power dynamics within the group can generate undesirable effects. Dominant voices can make it difficult for some individuals to express their viewpoints, notably when their perspective diverges from the collective reasoning expressed by the dominant group/individuals. This can affect some responses with social desirability, particularly if the facilitator has limited knowledge and skills to address this effect during the discussion. If not carefully managed, focus group discussions may produce socially desirable responses, resulting in data shaped by an unchallenged "herd" mentality.

This was one of the details taken into consideration when deciding on the sampling strategy for the focus group discussion sample (see *Sampling Strategy and Population* for details). The inherent characteristic of coordinating and organising focus groups can be a delicate process that requires a balancing act. For instance, PublicU is a large organisation with different levels of members, elected officials, and salaried officials. These groups of individuals have different power dynamics and perspectives on issues. For instance, salaried officials often advise elected officials, and both elected and salaried officials frequently represent their constituents. Therefore, in group settings, salaried officials are commonly seen as the lead and experts on topics, thus can dominate conversations, and be points of deference. For these reasons, this dynamic was taken into consideration in organising the focus groups.

4.3.2.3 Observation

Non-participant field observations were adopted to complement data collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Rooted in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and human geography, it involves researchers embedding themselves directly with the environment or phenomenon they seek to study (Creswell, 2018, 2023). According to Angrosino (2007, p. 53), "observation is the act of noting a phenomenon, often with instruments, and recording it for scientific purposes." It presents an opportunity for a researcher to immerse themselves in the context and to witness the processes as they unfold, rather than relying on second-hand accounts.

For this study, a closer exploration of gendering and gendered praxes (Benschop, 2009) was undertaken in various uncontrolled environments. The proximity allows researchers to use senses such as "sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste" (Creswell, 2018, p. 166) to observe non-verbal signals, environmental factors and unarticulated norms that participants themselves may be unaware of or unable to articulate in interviews or focus group discussions (Angrosino, 2007; Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, observations allow for adaptive inquiries. Observers can adjust their focus based on emergent insights, following unexpected paths of inquiry that structured methods might miss, which essentially respects the complexity and unpredictability of human life. It is in this complexity and unpredictability that the contextual depth lies. The intricate interactions and interplay between individual actions, collective actions, and broader system structures become visible. Thus, offering a contextually situated observation of the synergy and/or antagonism of the

phenomenon as it unfolds. This often permits gathering of authentic data that is captured unobtrusively (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2012) and can limit social desirability and conscious or unconscious framing.

However, like any other method, it comes with limitations and challenges, which, according to Creswell (2018), are influenced by the researcher's role in the process – 'participant, non-participant, or middle ground position.' Whilst authentic and unpolished behaviours and actions may be captured, the interpretation of these observations is researcher-dependent, thus highly subjective (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2012) and dependent on the researcher's limitations, conscious, and unconscious (Angrosino, 2007). The researcher's assumptions, positionality, worldview, and subjectivities constantly impact what they notice, attach significance to, how they interpret observed behaviours and actions, and what observations they record. As a result, reflexivity becomes an essential component for researchers who undertake observational research.

Furthermore, since participant conscious or unconscious framing can be limited, it is not eliminated. Observed participants can alter their behaviours and actions (Angrosino, 2007; Pauluzzo, 2020), particularly in observations that span a limited timeframe. Hence, it is recommended that this span be over a prolonged period of time. However, this recommendation introduces additional drawbacks, as it highlights the resource-intensive nature of fieldwork observations. It often requires a significant investment of time, materials, financial resources, logistical resources, emotional and physical labour, and sometimes, depending on the context, can impose personal risks — particularly in volatile environments. Nonetheless, observations remain a valuable tool for access to authentic, context-based data and should be utilised where possible.

For this study, observations unfolded across three distinct contexts of PublicU's orientation. The interaction between PublicU and its members delves into the internal workings and dynamics within the organisation. This offered a lens on how the organisation engages with its constituencies and members. Next was the broader external landscape encompassing its interactions with other organisations, particularly the employer and competitor trade unions. This process shed light on the dynamics of the trade union's relationships beyond its immediate membership and internal settings. The observation journey reached its pinnacle when I visited a rally where PublicU's interactions with its affiliate organisations were of interest. In this context, insights

were gained into how the trade union engages with its network of affiliates, where both collaborative efforts and tensions were noted. The rally environment served as a dynamic platform to observe PublicU's role and position within this broad network of alliance and affiliate partners, as well as the collective impacts/efforts generated within the setting.

Directly observing PublicU within some of its natural, uncontrolled elements provided an unfiltered understanding of its dynamics. The observations offered firsthand experience and an account of activities and exchanges that would be challenging to capture through interviews and focus group discussions, due to the self-reporting nature of participants. Similarly, it also allowed an understanding of the social, cultural, and environmental context in which interactions take place, thereby opening avenues to verify the quality of premises derived from interviews and focus groups.

As such, the data collection methods followed a first phase, during which virtual/online semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of three months, as this was during the COVID-19 contact restrictions. This initial phase enabled the exploration of participants' perspectives and insights. Following online interviews and an initial analysis of the data from this phase, a second phase of fieldwork visits was conducted to establish a deeper connection with the participants, spanning over an additional three months. In the second phase, both face-to-face and follow-up online interviews were conducted with the initial and new participants to explore the findings further and cross-reference the preliminary results. In this phase, focus group discussions and observations were also added to enhance the depth of the data. This approach enabled a layered understanding of gendered praxes by capturing both individual experiences and group-level interactions, whilst observations provided contextual grounding in the everyday enactment.

Each method added different dimensions of gendered experiences. Interviews provided personal accounts and introspections, observations revealed performative and structural aspects, and focus groups captured collective meaning (Guest et al., 2017; Roberts, 2020; Saldaña, 2021). Together, these methods provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the research topic, captured through individual accounts (interviews), observed behaviours (fieldwork), and group discourse (focus groups). The triangulated findings helped deepen the understanding of key themes, such as the prioritisation of interests, dynamics of interactions, and exchanges in PublicU. This

enriched the analysis and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2023), whilst ensuring a robust analysis of both spoken and unspoken dimensions of gendered praxes in PublicU. This approach enabled the consideration of gendered praxes from multiple angles, leading to a deeper understanding (Clark-Saboda & Lemke, 2023), despite the constraints of time and resources. Moreover, the different methods balanced the limitations of the individual techniques, such as social desirability bias, where participants provide responses that they believe are socially acceptable, and managing memory recall errors that can influence the reliability and validity of self-reported data, among other considerations.

Below is an illustrative account of the data collection process, which showcases the two distinct phases and the array of methods employed through an iterative process. This illustration provides an overview of the process followed in navigating the research process. By visually summarising the data collection journey, the figure serves as an essential reference to understand the intricacies of the data collection approach. It provides the reader with a visual of how non-linear the process unfolded, as noted in the outline above.

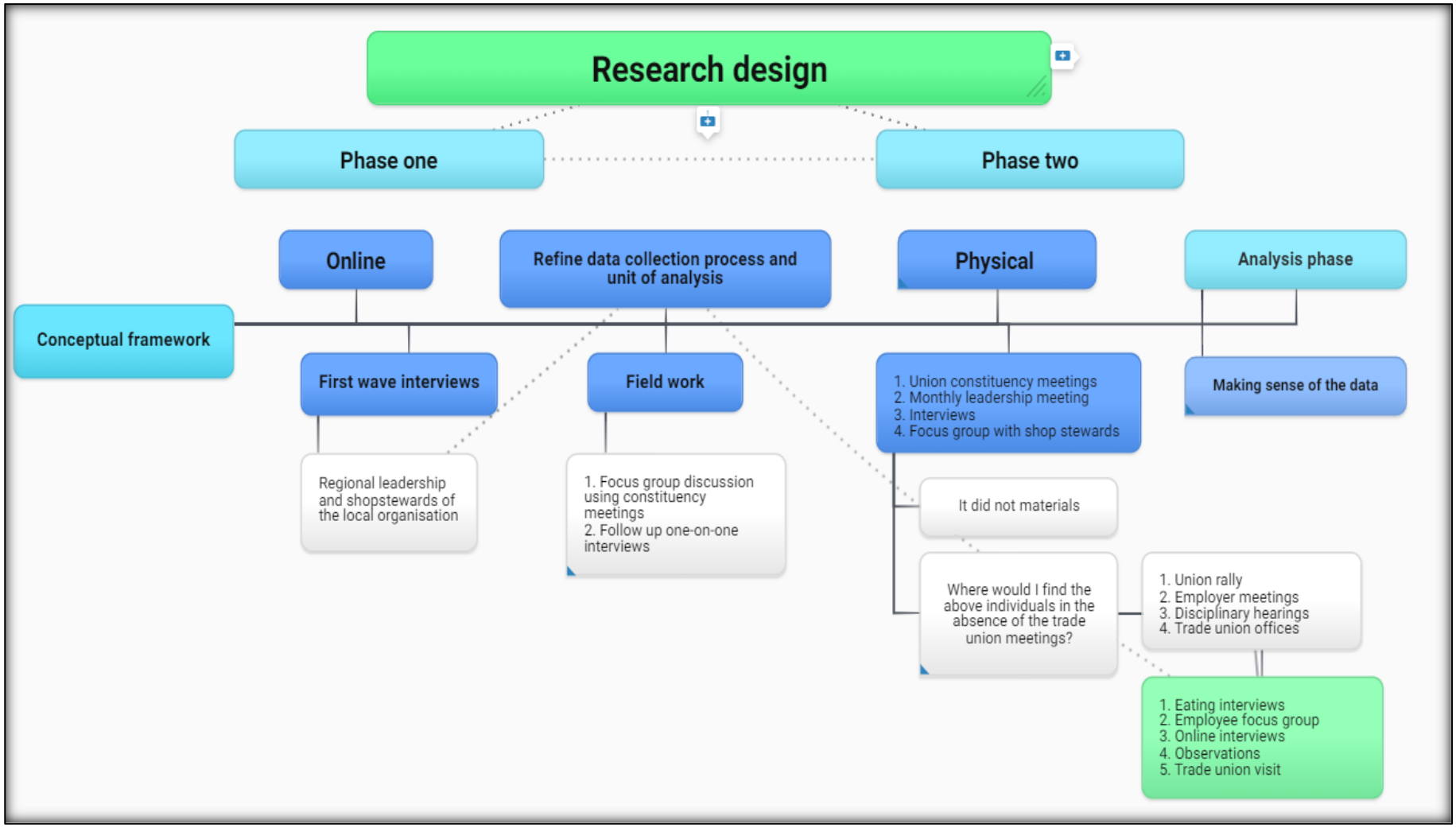

Figure 1: Data Collection Phases and Adopted Methods

4.4 Coding and Analysis of Data

Having collected the data, the next phase was to make sense of it, a process that required reflexivity and introspection.

To analyse the data collected from interviews and focus group discussions, the coding and data analysis process followed the study's epistemic feminist lens. This process entailed adopting a reflexive thematic analysis, which moved the coding and data analysis process beyond a mechanical exercise, but an exercise that also emphasised the active role of the researcher in the construction of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This approach supported a feminist standpoint epistemology, which recognises that knowledge is situated and shaped by both the participants' and the researcher's positionalities (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1991; Rolin, 2006). This meant firstly engaging with data preparation and familiarisation by transcribing all interviews and focus group discussions, as recommended by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This process involved scrutinising, cleaning, transforming, and interpreting data to discover meaningful correlations and associations amongst various factors, patterns, trends, relationships, and inferences (Creswell, 2018). The aim was to ensure that the data is categorised in a way that reveals insights into gendered dynamics, intersectional experiences, and rootedness as historical persistence.

Drawing on Miles et al.'s (2020) advice and Edwards-Bianchi's (2024) demonstration, the analysis began with an engagement of the interview transcripts, which followed repeated readings alongside replays of the recordings. I read through the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the content, making initial notes on possible emerging themes and patterns related to gender dynamics, power relations, intersectional experiences, participation, and the essential factors that shaped how and why gendering praxes formed. This involved a spiral process (Creswell, 2018), utilising diagnostic and descriptive strategies as needed, which followed iterative cycles that built upon each step by exploring the same ideas more deeply at each iteration. The descriptive aspect examined the account of the phenomenon being analysed by compiling and presenting the data. In contrast, the diagnostic lens involved studying the gathered data to identify patterns, causes, linkages, or problems that contributed to the observed occurrence. And often, this was largely intuitive (Creswell, 2018), developing as the process advanced. It allowed for an understanding of the underlying causes that might explain the present condition. As such, the analytical techniques clarified the situation, explaining it and drawing conclusions about its

underlying reasons, whilst also considering potential results based on the gathered data.

During this process, I paid attention to pauses and phrases that signalled emotional and intellectual variations, noting diplomacy, distance, and/or uncertainty in the participants' accounts. These, amongst others, were phrases such as "*I don't know what to call it; to be honest; for a lack of a better word; I am not going to sugar coat this; between us,* or how participants moved from *"we"* to *"they"* based on the account. I also created analytic memos, both in NVivo Memos and through voice notes, to document initial impressions, emerging patterns, and moments of reflexivity regarding the researcher's own assumptions as I combed through the data. After completing this phase, at least for the first time, as this was a continuous and non-linear process, the next step was the formal coding of the data.

To align with the study's post-Apartheid feminist reflective orientation, latent coding was applied to capture underlying meanings instead of manifest, explicit, or semantic meaning (Saldaña, 2021). Developing codes was not only based on explicit references to gender but also considered historical memory shared by participants, and that of the researcher in the research process. For instance, participants' accounts often made references to Apartheid history to explain certain contexts. Noted were historical accounts in statements such as, "… *trade unions have not evolved through time, we still want to have the same solution and the same tactic that was there during apartheid…",* or "… *I'm just giving you that broad observation to say that the some of the mechanics into how we could unlock sometimes is based one on the history…"* So rather than using categories that are generally broad, like gender discrimination, the codes distinguished between structural, cultural, and interpersonal gendering practises to reflect the complexity of participants' accounts.

Similarly, during the data analysis, I encountered recurring statements such as "*women do not like each other*" and "*women do not support each other*." Drawing on a post-apartheid feminist reflective lens, I considered why this is the case. I interrogated the origins and implications of these claims within the South African context. I considered whether there were historical nuances that could offer explanations for these statements. Could historical factors, such as the Group Areas Act and the broader racial and ethnic segregation imposed by Apartheid legislation, have contributed to the intragroup tensions these statements reflect? These assertions illuminated the complexities of intersectionality among women as a social group,

revealing how race, ethnicity, culture, and language mediate women's experiences and relationships with one another. As a Black woman researcher, I often found myself personally implicated in the research process, as a participant remarked, "as a Black woman, you yourself know this." This shared identity highlighted the importance of reflexivity in examining how intersectional experiences shape both data collection and interpretation (in section 4.4, there is a further discussion acknowledging and expanding on the researcher's positionality, recognising how their background, assumptions, and engagement with feminist research impacted the data collection and analysis process).

Thus, engaging with these narratives required examining their broader implications for gendered praxes within the study's organisational contexts. I asked whether such statements merely perpetuate reductive gender stereotypes and/or whether they perhaps obscure the historical and structural sources of the divide amongst women (other generally other intragroup in South Africa). As one participant noted, sometimes the narrative about women not liking each other gets pushed a "tad bit too much", suggesting that such claims are often uncritically accepted and used to frame women as inherently antagonistic toward one another, without acknowledging the nuanced social and historical dynamics at play.

This approach distinguished the different ways gender praxes occurred within the organisation, whilst also addressing the "how" and "why" aspects of the research question. As a result, these distinguished gendered praxes yielded themes such as 'gendering practices and processes', which captured structural practices, and 'gendering identity dynamics', which encompassed cultural and interpersonal practices. These also captured the hegemonic arguments covered by the literature on gendered organisation and feminist theories.

Consequently, coding was conducted using a mixed-methods reasoning approach and reflexively through NVivo. It was used to assign labels to segments of data that represented themes, identifying similarities and differences in the data essence (Creswell, 2018, 2023). NVivo allowed for the data to be condensed into manageable categories, making it feasible to comprehend. Once the data was coded, the relevant information was extracted from the coded segments and summarised into key data points, highlighting the insights. Extracting data in this way effectively allowed it to be organised and presented in a coherent, meaningful way, enabling a

comprehensive analysis and interpretation. As such, through NVivo, data was distilled into manageable categories, facilitating a trackable and logical engagement with it.

This was part of developing a coding framework based on both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework, predominantly gendered organisation theory, whereas inductive codes were patterns emerging from participants' responses that were not predefined by theory. These patterns were predominantly captured and acknowledged, reflecting differences and history. This approach was guided by the research objectives and the nature of the data, as it proved suitable for a mixed-methods approach. However, rather than treating these themes as fixed discoveries, a contextually iterative process of theme development was followed. Themes were co-constructed through an ongoing engagement with the data and the conceptual literature. After the initial coding phase, which involved memo-taking as noted earlier, I revisited the initial codes and themes through the conceptual framework adopted. In the second iteration of data review and coding, attention was also given to data that held significance but could not be mapped onto the initial codes informed by the conceptual framework. Thus, the combination of an iterative process enabled a thorough and rigorous assessment of the noticed anomaly, resulting in an understanding of the complexities inherent in the data within the unique organisational setting of PublicU. Nonetheless, other studies dealing with gendering frameworks have proposed alternative approaches elsewhere.

Drawing inspiration from the work of Saetre and Van de Ven (2021), Bates (2021) proposed an abductive approach when applying Acker's gendering framework. The proposed approach involved a step-by-step process that begins with the observation and confirmation of an anomaly in the data that does not fit the framework (Bates, 2021). Following this phase, the researcher would generate and evaluate data to understand the detected abnormality. Therefore, the approach would be to transition between a deductive phase, where tentative explanations are formed using pre-existing theories, and an inductive phase, where assumptions constructed about the data are examined. For Bates (2021), an abductive approach better reflects the dynamics and adaptive research strategy that recognises the complexities of organisational phenomena, particularly those related to gender dynamics as defined by Acker. By first recognising and confirming anomalies, researchers can delve into the exploration of potential explanations through the generation and evaluation of hypotheses. Nonetheless, despite recognising the value of this approach, it has not been adopted for this study.

The researcher's existing knowledge, informed by literature, specifically on gendered organisations theory, influenced how themes were condensed and interpreted for the analysis. This process echoed Miles et al. (2020), Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) and Saldana's (2021) argument that themes represent patterns of meaning shaped by both the data and the researcher's interpretive lens. Nomenclature themes informed by existing literature, such as organisational logic, gendering identity dynamics, and gendering practices and processes, influenced some of the resultant themes. For instance, the theme of organisational logic draws from Acker's work on gendered organisation and captures the interplay between participants' lived experiences, accounts of PublicU's praxes, and the researcher's observations. Thus, a feminist perspective informed this process by prioritising, based on gender and power dynamics, the interpretation and condensation of data into themes.

The next process involved a thematic analysis, where patterns and relationships were developed, with key themes emerging within and across participants' accounts as the focus. This approach ensured a synthesis of themes linked to the conceptual framework and an organised narrative. This narrative was initially organised according to "how and why" gendering praxes are rooted in the trade union, but later adapted to better articulate the research aim and objectives, aligning with the findings of the research question. This ensured that participants' accounts remained central whilst still engaging with hegemonic literature on gendered organisations, inequality regimes and the post-Apartheid reflective feminist lens. Simultaneously, it allowed for emergent themes that challenge or expand existing theories to be covered.

Lastly, in presenting and discussing research insights, it was important to specify the gender of each participant. This clarification is valuable in that it addresses the aspect of the research necessitated by understanding how members' gender classification affected their actions and viewpoints in the operationalisation of the trade union. As a result, insights explicitly note who said what based on gender. When the data was analysed, what was said, when it was said, and how it was said were all considered. This meant that the researcher's positionality and identity, as a young Black woman, conducting research in a predominantly Black African male-dominated environment, carried implications, as evident in some participants' responses (see *Reflecting on Interactions* and *Reflecting on Responses* for more detail). Consequently, the chosen analytic approach was well-suited to capture both the broader, macro-level trends, experiences, and practices within the trade union.

Below is a visual outline of the codes and themes that developed from the process noted above, aligned with the conceptual framework and the data condensation process.

Table 2: Coding Framework Overview

Descriptions	Codes	Sub-themes	Theory-based themes	Broader Themes	Objectives
Persistent traditional narratives or ideologies that shape current gender discourse	Historical residual	Rhetoric	Gendering Culture	**Organisational Forms and Institutionalisation of Gendered Praxes**	Highlight the underlying rationale and motivations behind the established gendering practices within the trade union.
Sentimental references to the past used to reinforce or challenge gender norms	Nostalgia				
Efforts to educate individuals about political structures and how gender influences political participation	Political education	Sensitisation			
Efforts to raise gendered awareness and general activities for members through education or activism	Sensitisation	Gender awareness			

Descriptions	Codes	Sub-themes	Theory-based themes	Broader Themes	Objectives
Emphasis on efficiency and economic gain over social justice affects inclusivity	Business unionism	Politics affecting organisational practices	Gendering Externals, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Inequality Regimes	**Embedded Praxes of Organisational Logic, Economic Incentives, and Historical Continuities**	Explore the specific organisational arrangements, actions, and patterns that support and strengthen the gendering practices within the trade union.
External partners or umbrella organisations shaping gender dynamics within	Influence of affiliates				
Personal or collective drive for leadership roles, often influenced by gender expectations and economic mobility	Leadership ambitions	Representation and activism			
Access to support systems and tools that affect participation and visibility	Networks and resources				
Roles of women are traditionally expected to fulfil, influencing identity and involvement in trade union activism	Wives and Mothers	Gendered roles of women	Gendering Identity Construct, Inequality Regimes and Feminist Standpoint Theory		Highlight the underlying rationale and motivations behind the established gendering practices within the trade union.

Descriptions	Codes	Sub-themes	Theory-based themes	Broader Themes	Objectives
Self-doubt is shaped by socialisation and cultural norms	Lack of confidence	Internalised gender norms		**Layered Gendering Identity Dynamics - Internalised and Assigned**	
The process through which gender roles are taught and learned	Socialisation	Social learning			
The expectation of economic provision often intersects with masculinity	Breadwinners	Economic expectations			
Individuals perceived as needing protection, given levels of violence in the social context, are often women	Vulnerable members	Structural Violence			
Pathways through which individuals challenge or resist gender norms	Avenues of disruption	Agency	Gendering Interactions	**The Interactional Persistence of Gendered Norms**	Explore the specific organisational arrangements, actions, and patterns that support and strengthen the gendering practices within the trade union.
Acts of resistance within constrained structures	Agency	Resistance			
Manoeuvring that maintains or contests gender power dynamics	Psychological games	Power dynamics			

Descriptions	Codes	Sub-themes	Theory-based themes	Broader Themes	Objectives
Mechanisms that regulate participation and maintain hierarchies	Internalised control mechanisms	Control mechanisms			
Assignment of tasks based on gender identities	Division of labour	Gendered division of labour	Gendering Practices and Structures and Feminist Standpoint Theory	**Organisational Forms and Institutionalisation of Gendered Praxes**	Identified and explored how gendering inequality practices are embedded in the underlying rationales that contribute to the overall daily operations and functions of the trade union.
Persistent ways in which roles are assigned based on gender	Patterns of role allocation	Gendered role allocation			
Visibility of women in leadership	Leadership representation	Visibility in leadership			
Whose needs and goals are foregrounded in decision-making	Prioritisation of interests	Decision-making priorities			
Persistent ways of knowing and framing praxes in the organisation	Nested Newness	Locked-in perspectives	Organisational Logic	**Patriarchal Sedimentation**	Identify and explore how gendering inequality practices are embedded in the underlying rationales that contribute to the overall daily operations
Norms and practices embedded in the organisation that reflect male-dominated	Patriarchal Practices	Organisational norms			

Descriptions	Codes	Sub-themes	Theory-based themes	Broader Themes	Objectives
values and influence organisational practices					and functions of the trade union.

4.5 Reflections

In feminist research, the practice of reflexivity, where the researcher actively engages in introspection and contemplation throughout the research process, is crucial (Creswell, 2018). Instead of seeking to disregard the researcher's preconceptions and predispositions, the objective is to disclose and take note of how the researcher's predispositions, shaped by their positionality and other factors, impacted the research process (Ortlipp, 2008; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Consequently, it was essential to recognise and acknowledge the researcher's background and the partialities that came with it. The following sections reflect on this process.

The significance of positionality and reflexivity, particularly in the researcher-participant exchange, the data collection process, and the analysis, is addressed. In conducting this qualitative study, an approach that required continuous reflexivity and self-awareness was integral to understanding the dynamic that unfolded during the processes. And it was reassuring when some participants shared similar reflections. As a participant expressed,

> "*…the more I talk to you, the more I actually have more to say to the trade union movement, to say that [there is] actually very less that we are doing as a trade union movement to protect the interests of women in the workplace. If you look at the way we negotiate, we are not putting a gender aspect to it*" Female Participant 01, 26 January 2023.

As the researcher, I remained mindful of my own positionality and its potential impact on participant responses and accounts (see *Reflecting on Self and Positionality*). The power dynamics inherent in qualitative research were acknowledged and continuously reflected on, as social sciences include a component of symbolic hegemony between participants and researchers (Priya, 2021). An intriguing facet of this reflexivity emerged through participants' efforts to align with the researcher, creating a unique interplay between roles. This enriched the data and collegiality of the exchange, affirming Nolde's (1991) argument that the most effective way to determine knowledge is through individuals within the local context. Individuals with contextual relevance can provide insights that are directly applicable to the unique challenges, dynamics, and intricacies of the regional setting (Miles et al., 2020). Researchers, as locals, can offer and are often best placed to understand perspectives that consider cultural nuances and sensitivities, given their immersion in the community's cultures, traditions, and social norms (Fleming, 2018; McDermid et al.,

2014). From an insider's perspective, relationships and trust within local networks facilitate open and honest communication, enabling a deeper exchange of knowledge and experiences (Fleming, 2018). In this study, the data analysis process often benefited from this perspective.

As I endeavoured and navigated the research process, I committed to following the rules of academic writing at every turn. This meant expressing ideas and insights in an objective manner that distanced the researcher from the subject matter. This approach was designed to uphold the established standards of objectivity and scholarly rigour. Nevertheless, as I transition into addressing reflections, where I conduct a retrospective examination of the journey, I will momentarily switch to a first-person perspective. This shift is not a stylistic choice; it is a deliberate one that allows for a subjective, firsthand narrative of my journey as the researcher, a journey infused with the partialities inherent in my lived experiences and observations of the process. I will begin by outlining my position in relation to the participants, followed by a reflection on the challenges encountered in the field. Finally, I will reflect on the experiences of interactions and responses received.

4.5.1 Interviews with Pre-Existing Peers and Using Collegial Relationships

Despite the significance and widespread use of qualitative data approaches in research studies, there is a dearth of literature on researchers who perform qualitative research with participants they presently, formerly, or probably have professional ties with (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010; McDermid et al., 2014). The common assumption, or at least as far as literature is concerned, is that there are no prior or ongoing relations between the researcher and the participants, which may not always be the case. However, there are several instances where the researcher and participants have pre-existing, dual, and/or future relations, depending on various factors. Even in circumstances devoid of pre-existing, former, or potential relations, the researcher's background knowledge and viewpoint influence the process of interaction between the researcher and the participants (Anderson, 1995; Chadwick, 2017; hooks, 1984; Roberts, 2020; Wine, 2007). The researcher's identity has ramifications in circumstances where they have contemporary, historical, or probable affiliations. McConnell-Henry et al. (2010) identify this as ‘role conflict,’ arguing that researchers sometimes find themselves in a dual positionality, simultaneously occupying two roles with the potential for conflicting interests and perspectives. This dual status involves adopting both an insider and outsider perspective, creating a situation where

researchers navigate the complexities of their roles with duality of viewpoints (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

By definition, an insider researcher (endogenous research) possesses prior situated knowledge, having belonged to or currently being a native of the setting and the social grouping that constitutes the community being studied (Fleming, 2018; McDermid et al., 2014; Saidin, 2017; Woods, 2019). Conversely, the outsider is considered to have no prior situated knowledge, previous relations, or possible connections to the settings and social groupings beforehand (Fleming, 2018; McDermid et al., 2014; Saidin, 2017; Woods, 2019). The choice between an insider or outsider perspective depends on the research goals and the nature of the study. Given the nature of this study, which explores gendering praxes in an organisation, the researcher's positionality is dual, combining both insider and outsider perspectives.

This positionality arises from my previous role as a public sector employee, during which I engaged in numerous, often adversarial exchanges with some participants. At that time, my responsibility involved representing the employer in arbitration proceedings, where I was tasked with rebutting cases brought forward by the participants' organisation, PublicU. As a result, I often found myself on the opposing side of the table, in some ways akin to a nemesis to their success. However, I have since left that role. Due to this history, I see myself as occupying a dual positionality; on one hand, I possess insider knowledge of the organisation's internal workings, and on the other, I remain an outsider having once been perceived as a nemesis. This unique perspective has shaped my approach to the research, enabling me to understand the dynamics from both an internal and external viewpoint.

It is important to note this because the existence of pre-established relations can elicit mistrust if the participants believe that there is an element of sinister and non-disclosure in the study (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010; McDermid et al., 2014). This perception can have an inverse impact on the positive effects enjoyed by insider camaraderie and can cause drawbacks to the participants' candour and depth in the data exchange. To minimise the drawbacks of familiarity, I engaged participants as an individual who lacked familiarity with the sector, organisational dynamics, jargon, and scenario-based nature of the profession. I would request that participants explain concepts, acronyms, and probed areas, and adopt follow-up interviews to manage and moderate these potential drawbacks. This approach helped me break down my own assumptions and preconceptions, fostering a more open and insightful exchange of

information and fostering cordiality. The implication of this approach is discussed further below (see *Reflections*).

4.5.2 Reflecting on Self and Positionality

Conducting research within a broader context and organisation I formerly had relations with positioned me in a complex and shifting space of dual positionality that required constant negotiating. As noted in the epistemic argument above, a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens not only demands contextual and situational views but also a self-reflexive stance from the researcher that recognises how the researcher's identity, background, and social positioning influence the researcher's process.

As a young Black Woman researching gendering praxes in a male-dominated environment, I was simultaneously what Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Woods (2019), Fleming (2018), and Saidin (2017) respectively note as an insider and outsider on the continuum. I was familiar with the culture, language, informal norms, and social codes of the space, yet my return as a researcher with a critical agenda produced new distances. These tensions were particularly pronounced in my interactions with participants, the majority of whom were Black men, many older than me, and a smaller group of Black women with whom I shared more visibly overlapping social identities. This highlighted the "insider-outsider continuum" that challenges the binary between researcher and the participants, as it recognises the fluidity and context-dependence of positionality (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Fleming, 2018; Saidin, 2017).

Whilst my insider status allowed me access that may have been denied to a complete outsider, it also reactivated pre-existing dynamics shaped by age, gender, and institutional memory. Several participants, particularly older Black males, initially approached and framed our conversations through a lens that was possibly meant to be affectionate or protective. In contrast, female participants exhibited a kind of solidarity. I sensed paternalism, objectification, and authoritative corrections, a phenomenon that reinforced and affirmed well-documented stereotypes in studies of gendered power dynamics within organisational and research contexts (Acker, 2006d; Phoenix, 2000). These interactions reproduced the very gendered assumptions my research sought to interrogate. These moments of discomfort were not incidental, as they reflected broader power dynamics that shape both organisational life and the research process itself. As Pillow (2003) argues, it is in the spaces of discomfort and contradiction that reflexivity becomes most valuable, not for resolving the messiness but for engaging with it critically. As a result, rather than neutralising and disregarding

the discomfort, I viewed them as data that reveals embedded rules around gender, age, and authority that govern interpersonal interactions in space (Haraway, 1988; Hooks, 2014). These assertions resonated in my interactions with both female and male participants, highlighting the gendered nature of the research process.

Interestingly, from the perspective of Black feminist thought, my experience embodies what Collins (2000c) describes as the epistemic value of the 'outsider within.' My closeness to the organisational culture gave me insight into informal rules, whilst my marginality as a young woman and a former nemesis-turned-researcher also allowed me to see contradictions and silences that may have gone unnoticed by those more embedded in the status quo. My past participation in the organisation's work culture, one that I now read critically through a feminist lens, raises uncomfortable questions around complicity. As Lather (2009) argues, feminist research requires that we do not exempt ourselves from critique but instead confront how we may also be implicated in the structure we seek to dismantle. Having occupied a professional role that engaged some of the participants, which I now interrogate, I was at times a participant in upholding a practise I now seek to understand. This complicates any simplistic positioning of myself as detached and purely an empathetic insider (Pillow, 2003). Instead, I had to reckon with the entanglement of my own historical role within the space and how this history shaped not only how I was seen and received, but what participants now felt able and willing to share. This intriguing aspect surfaced in how I both engaged with and responded to participants during interviews (see 'Reflecting on Interactions and Responses' for detailed examples).

Interviews were not neutral exchanges; they were laden with social and political encounters shaped by race, gender, history and power (Rose, 1997). This resulted in an exchange of reciprocal and symmetrical power between the participants and me, as the researcher. Rather than a simple hierarchical distribution of authority in the engagement, the interactions were characterised by mutual influence (see *Reflecting on Interactions* for further details), where the engagement actively shaped each other's actions (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007, 2014). A relational view of power developed, wherein power and authority in the exchange did not solely reside with me as a researcher or with the participants, but were instead negotiated and co-constructed through ongoing interaction.

This exchange of power and authority was intriguing, as in many African professional settings, gendered norms often remain pronounced, with deference to

elders and patriarchal expectations about women's roles continuing to shape interactional norms (Elaine & Mama, 2001; Mama, 2001; Tamale, 2020). My role as a young Black woman questioning dominant masculinities positioned me precariously.[25] Participants may have viewed me as simultaneously legitimate and transgressive, as I dared to ask questions and analyse organisational practices that have always been. As a result, this shaped both the data collection process and the emotional labour involved in sustaining rapport, particularly with male participants. At times, I found myself softening questions or strategically adjusting my tone to maintain the flow of the conversation, choices that reflect the embodied, negotiated nature of feminist research (Letherby, 2003; Puwar, 2004).

This indirectly highlighted my complicity in the gendering dynamic, one that I had to critique and confront as recommended by Lather (2009) and Pillow (2003). In softening questions and what I introspectively identified as leveraging emotional labour — consciously or unconsciously — I contributed to the very gendered dynamic I had endeavoured to question. This was a step I had to take to address the recommendations of Mama (2001) and Mohanty (2003a) in feminist and postcolonial research. Mama (2001) and Mohanty (2003a) caution against distancing oneself from colonial or patriarchal structures under critique and instead advocate for a situated and accountable engagement with power, a process that requires reflexivity. Reflexivity, therefore, demands more than confessions (which I do when reflecting on interactions and responses); it requires confronting how I, too, am embedded in the organisation's narratives and power structures that shape my research (Lather, 2009). It is not simply a matter of acknowledging who I am in relation to the research. It is about analysing how power, shaped by history, identity, and institutional structures, flows through the research process (Rose, 1997). It involves the willingness to sit with discomfort and contradiction, and to be transparent about how my own presence shaped the knowledge that was produced. It allows for the space to interrogate how power circulates through the research process, and how my own partiality shapes both the production and interpretation of the knowledge produced.

Consequently, in keeping with feminist methodological and postcolonial critique commitments, I understand my position and research not as an objective account, but as a situated, partial, accountable, and open account, subject to ongoing

[25] Interestingly the notion of questioning the dominance of masculinity even in private spaces has earned me the badge of the lazy one with a lot of questions in my family – see *Autobiography Reflection* for details.

re-evaluation. I recognise that research is not a neutral activity, but one embedded in social and political relations that I have tried to interrogate at every stage (Crenshaw, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Smith, 2021).

4.5.3 Reflecting on Interactions

In a study exploring implications of gender in a trade union, as a young Black woman who formerly worked closely with trade unions, I had both a strong connection and personal interest invested in the study's focus. My background played a significant and influential role in both the selection of the research topic and the perspective taken on the matter. Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexive practices. I kept an audio research journal to document my thoughts, biases, feelings, and moments of self-awareness that emerged during the data collection and analysis process.

During my fieldwork, I took both descriptive and reflective fieldnotes and voice notes, focusing on my reactions to the events I attended, the conditions I observed, and the exchanges I had during interviews. The descriptive notes captured the subtleties and nuances of observed occurrences, offering an account of the background, behaviours, and interactions within the environments and exchanges. These also included reflections on my own feelings and responses to the observed occurrences. This introspection provided a deeper understanding of my subjective feelings and perspectives, whilst also adding a layer of reflexivity to the data collection process.

Through reflection, I was able to not only capture the exterior components of the observed environments but also acknowledge and examine my own interpretations, biases, and emotional responses, thereby forcing myself to be self-aware. For instance, it was often interesting to observe the difference and shift in how people engaged me the moment they realised I was based outside of the country as an international student, as this was associated with prestige. It was as if, suddenly, I was taken seriously and worthy to converse with. And this was often nuanced in expressed comments, such as “you are not what I expected” or “you must be smart if you live and can study overseas.”

In qualitative research, and most importantly, feminist research, researchers need to be aware of these dynamics to manage potential biases and implications for data collection and analysis. Being reflexive about the research process and acknowledging the possible influence on both participant and researcher can enhance

the credibility and validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2018). Hence, the approach and rationale for the methodological and philosophical perspective adopted were rooted in an awareness that emphasised this approach. I acknowledged the importance of the social, cultural, and historical context in which the research is being conducted. This meant understanding how context influenced the subject, hence the participant's reception of me. Therefore, reflections needed to be examined as a whole, considering multiple factors and their interconnections, rather than isolating individual variables.

By prioritising the participant's comfort and needs, I aimed to create a safe space that fosters genuine dialogue and introspection. This meant acknowledging the fluidity and dynamic nature of the subject matter, which encouraged respectful and courteous interaction with participants. Building rapport and trust was crucial to obtaining rich data. It created an atmosphere that encouraged candour and openness to the point that interviews felt like conversations, as captured in some responses. For instance, a female participant shared their frustration,

> "*I sometimes get to a point where I am very frustrated, frustrated in a sense that I sometimes feel that I'm alone in this battle, and sometimes I feel people are not understanding me, and sometimes I feel that I could be wasting my time."*

In contrast, during a conversation about the pervasiveness of gendering practices in the trade union, a male and a female participant expressed what appeared to be earnest opinions with a degree of candour that surprised me.

> *"The system that we're operating in has not been transformed, and who is in charge of transformation? …would somebody that is benefiting from the higher position easily understudy Marcia to take over the position?... your oppressor of yesterday cannot be your liberated today or tomorrow. The likelihood of drafting a disruptive policy that will liberate the system is very minimal*."

"*Between me and you*…" [to protect the integrity of the conversation, I will not share what was said thereafter as it was between us.]

Therefore, allowing for vulnerability and offering a space to express one's feelings were important, more so, allowing the participants to go through the motions.

This ultimately led to the acquisition of insightful findings and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, allowing for repeated conversations with participants.

The above comments highlighted the importance of a cordial relationship between the researcher and the participants. Having a solid connection with each other is essential to the research's performance because it fosters more open communication, improved teamwork, and robust data. Wine (2007) notes that from a feminist practice viewpoint, the relationship between the researcher and the subjects should be characterised by cooperation, honesty, and respect, rather than deceit or exploitation. The nature of the engagement and the relationships between the researcher and the researched should be devoid of epistemic power relations (Creswell, 2018; Wine, 2007). As such, to disrupt patterns of epistemic subjugation in methodologies, the researcher should be aware of their own behaviour in the research process and the engagement of participants (Chadwick, 2017).

Similarly, as an actively participatory tool for gathering data in the research process, the researcher should be aware of how their assumptions about the subject under study may affect their role (Roberts, 2020). A researcher's worldview may affect how the study is interpreted and what conclusions can be drawn from it. Therefore, as I immersed myself in the participants' world and experiences through their narratives, I noted how participants occasionally referred to me as a sister, daughter, a wife, a dear, a darling, and my favourite, a ‘comrade.’ The use of 'comrade' was particularly interesting, given how ideologically laden the connotation is. It signalled a deliberate effort to establish a sense of allyship and mutual understanding between the participant and me. Talking with someone, as Gherardi and Poggio (2007, 2014) highlight, creates a sense of closeness or distance that affects the identities of the speaker and the listener. Likewise, how individuals talk during an interview is influenced by their interaction with each other (Benschop, 2009).

Engaging in conversation can elicit a range of responses that influence the relationship between the speaker and the listener. This interaction can create a sense of intimacy and connection, fostering a feeling of closeness or distance (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007, 2014). Therefore, it is sensible that some participants familiarly referred to me as engaging in meaningful dialogue, sharing personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, which often leads to a deeper understanding of each other and a sense of mutual connection. This exchange was evident in how, at times, I was even incorporated into the personal narratives that participants shared. Whether it was

through addressing me as a comrade, their child, and a sister, employing comparisons, or weaving narratives that used me, the researcher, as a reference point, there was a noticeable effort to establish a sense of alliance between the participants and me as the researcher.

The dynamics of being referred to as a comrade and the incorporation of personal narratives in conveying points highlighted a deliberate attempt to forge a connection. It was as if the participants sought to align our roles, emphasising a shared understanding or common ground. These instances blurred the traditional boundaries between the researcher and the participants, creating an interplay that went beyond the typical researcher-participant relationship. In these moments, the participants viewed me not solely as an objective researcher but as someone aligned with their cause or perspectives. This alignment, whether intentional or subconscious, influenced the nature of the interactions and added layers of complexity to the research dynamic. The exploration of these interactions enhanced my understanding of the relationships that can develop in the context of qualitative research, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the researcher-participant alliance.

Nonetheless, this approach was not solely reserved for the participants. Reflecting on these engagements, I also discovered my role in them. I had adopted a similar approach by addressing and referring to participants as ‘Ma’ (mom), ‘Sis’ [sister], and ‘Bhuti’ (brother). From my personal background, these are generic terms commonly used as a gesture of respect when addressing individuals of senior status and someone older than me. The use of these terms was instinctive on my part, as I have been conventionally nurtured to observe and use them when addressing individuals of seniority. As such, despite being in a research setting where the researcher typically held a hierarchical position (Creswell, 2018), I found myself unable to switch off this mode of interaction, which levelled the inherent hierarchical positioning between myself (as the researcher) and the participant. As I reflected on the data, I frequently contemplated the potential impact this had on the participants' willingness to engage with me. Did this affect their view of me, particularly as a female participant noted, ‘*you know, when I initially agreed, I was like oh, she's doing a PhD, she's my sister, let me help*.’ I believe this unconscious approach potentially reduced the perceived difference in status between the researcher and the participants, making the dynamic between us more balanced.

Moreover, I also noted an unexpected fusion of language, where a natural blending of their expressions and mine occurred. For instance, I found myself mirroring the verbal habits, signals, and phrases used by participants in conversations, such as 'for a lack of a better word' and '*per se*.' It was interesting to see how my use of language and communication style were influenced by the participant's responses, mannerisms, and language patterns. Echoed in my experience was Gherardi and Poggio's (2007, 2014) observation that the use of language and its meaning are closely tied to our physical actions and experiences. As such, one person's actions or behaviour affect the behaviour of another, and that decision on how to relate to the other is always made by both sides during this interaction (Gherardi & Poggio, 2014). The conversations had indeed influenced my use of language. Although unexpected, it was evident that the participants' replies and the researcher's own behaviour throughout the encounter were influenced, following the conversational mechanics of reciprocal influence and mirroring of behaviours between two people.

Lastly, given that most participants were males in a research study focused on gender dynamics within a predominantly male-dominated setting, navigating the interview process was a crucial element in gathering data. In navigating the dynamics, I relied on the soft approach, emotional labour, to make male participants feel comfortable and at ease with the research focus. The task required them to reflect on their role within the organisation, thus establishing effective icebreakers became vital, as methods to 'unfreeze' initial reservations were crucial. It was imperative to approach this with an understanding of the context and the specific type of 'ice' that needed to be unfrozen. The contextual problem was dealing with a delicate subject; thus, caution was needed to prevent participants, particularly males, from becoming defensive or shutting down during the conversation. As a researcher who does not share the same gender identity as most of the participants, I could not rely on a presumed sense of comradeship. In fact, being an individual who identifies as a Black woman introduced an additional layer of complexity, as the topic of gendered praxes within the trade union was often perceived as a self-inflicted phenomenon that women enable and/or impose on themselves in the trade union landscape.

Ultimately, the data collection process through fieldwork employed both descriptive and reflective approaches, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the observed occurrences and my responses. By combining detailed descriptions with introspective analysis, a more profound comprehension of subjective feelings and perspectives was achieved, enhancing the reflexivity of the data collection process.

Through prioritising participant comfort and agency, rapport was established that fostered candid dialogue and introspection. This approach not only facilitated the attainment of insightful findings but also levelled traditional boundaries between the researcher and the participant. Additionally, the fusion of language and the mirroring of communication styles highlighted the reciprocal influence between the participant and me during interactions. Navigating the interview process within a male-dominated setting required careful consideration and a subtle approach, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within the organisation. Overall, this research journey highlighted the importance of reflexivity, rapport-building, and sensitivity to context, thereby enriching the exploration of complex social phenomena.

4.5.4 Reflecting on Responses

In conducting the analysis, I reviewed the data and its collection process, focusing on meaning and nuances. Throughout the process, I paid attention to moments of silence within conversations, as these often revealed unspoken sentiments or underlying concerns. I noted instances where participants appeared to disassociate themselves from the organisation emotionally. I scrutinised these instances even where individuals vehemently defended certain viewpoints or concepts, which may indicate areas of contention or significance within the context of gender-related practices within the trade union. Moreover, I paid close attention to any qualifiers or justifications that participants offered regarding the gender dynamics within the organisation.

For instance, observing how participants approached the subject of gender within the trade union context revealed intriguing insights. Whilst it seemed seamless to reflect on and engage with the topic from an external perspective (what the employer is not doing or doing), particularly as shop stewards representing employees to employers, an introspective scrutiny of their organisation, PublicU, unveiled a less seamless process of self-evaluation. For most participants at the regional levels of the trade union, discussing gender issues organically proved to be a challenge. I found myself grappling with unaddressed questions: attempting to understand the trade union's stance rather than solely focusing on the employers, as participants often redirected the discussion in that direction. A discernible pattern emerged where the participants often engaged in reflecting on the employer's perspective. Efforts to foster sincere and open discussions about gender-related trade union practices were met with resistance, or their responses unintentionally shifted back to the employer. This ongoing process shed light on the difficulty faced by lower-level leaders in gaining a

nuanced understanding of gender-related dynamics within the trade union itself. Their voices were often eclipsed by conversations that leaned heavily towards an employer-centric viewpoint. The process of introspection highlighted the complexities inherent in addressing and resolving gender-related issues within their organisational framework. It became apparent that navigating these challenges required a degree of candour and scrutiny that was not always readily embraced.

As a result, a subset of participants initially appeared hesitant, as if grappling with unspoken thoughts lingering in the background. These moments of hesitation, characterised by pauses and silences pregnant with meaning, hinted at the sensitivity and complexity of the topic at hand. It is inferred that participants may struggle to articulate their ideas or concerns. The pause in the conversation indicated an internal struggle, highlighting the significance of the forthcoming statement. Consequently, I surmised that these subtle pauses accentuated the importance of the subsequent remarks, prompting a closer attention to the emotions and thoughts the participant may have been processing before voicing their statements.

In contrast, some participants responded cautiously when faced with the reality of gendering in the trade union. The significance of qualitative research is highlighted by the participants' careful sharing of their insights. Beyond just realities, the qualifiers and subtleties offered more profound insights into participants' viewpoints. For instance, cautionary phrases such as '*I don't know what to call it;' to be honest*; or '*I'm going to say this and it's very unpleasant as well*' often showed up in these conversations. I rationalised that these cautions stemmed from an apprehension that their organisation would be perceived as prejudicial or from an aversion not to address internal issues openly, which some would consider airing its dirty laundry to the public. I also considered that the participants might have been concerned that acknowledging these gendering praxes would tarnish the organisation's reputation, as it would be tantamount to bringing the organisation into disrepute. Consequently, they adopted a cautious stance, either denying or downplaying the existence of gendering praxes, albeit paradoxical. They rationalised gender disparities as isolated incidents or attributed them to personal choices by women rather than recognising them as systemic issues. In doing so, they sought to preserve and protect the organisation's reputation. Nevertheless, these defensive responses could also be understood as a tenet of denial and deflection within the organisation, considering how often it was cited that members of the trade union are seen, treated, and represented as workers irrespective of their gender.

Conversely, some assumed the role of enthusiasts, praising the expressive qualities of women, and downright calling out the trade union as a gendered organisation (even though they did not use the term). These participants echoed the general sentiments that women are inherently better than men but are held back by societal norms and gender expectations (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). I had to consider whether this perspective represented an extreme reaction to the cautionary stance adopted by others. Was it a genuine admiration for women or merely a way to align themself with the subject of inquiry? Could it be the Hawthorne effect? Whilst reflecting on this inverse perspective, it was crucial to assess whether it genuinely acknowledged women's strengths or merely reflected a desire to be politically and socially correct for the context of the study. In other words, did this admiration stem from earnest experiences and viewpoints, or was it merely a reaction to the defensive attitudes of others?

I also found myself reflecting on the significance of certain phrases used by participants. I explored the meanings behind expressions such as '*let me be honest*' and '*for a lack of a better word*.' These phrases prompted questions about participants' communication styles and thought processes. Did the use of these phrases suggest a lack of honesty in previous engagements, or were they simply verbal habits with no implied nuances? Whilst there are numerous ways to interpret these observations, I chose to consider them as indicators of participants' sincerity and straightforwardness in their responses. For instance, the phrase '*let me be honest*' seemed to signal a forthcoming candid response, often accompanied by a change in tone or a pause, suggesting an emphasis as if one were deciding whether to trust the information being shared. This interpretation, however, does not preclude the possibility of other meanings or intentions behind the use of such phrases.

Similarly, the expression '*for a lack of a better word*' raised questions about participants' struggles to articulate their thoughts accurately, particularly in a non-native language context. Whilst this phrase could be interpreted as a form of self-censorship in previous statements, it may also reflect genuine attempts to convey thoughts as precisely as possible, given the use of a second or even third language in these conversations. By considering these nuances, I aimed to deepen my understanding of participants' perspectives and communication styles. In addition to these interpretations, it was important to acknowledge that alternative viewpoints and counterarguments may exist. Whilst I primarily focused on interpreting these phrases

as indicators of sincerity and linguistic challenges, other interpretations are possible and warrant consideration. Overall, by examining participants' language use in context and considering various interpretations, I gained valuable insights into the complexities of communication within a research setting.

Furthermore, I noted various points where participants exhibited an inclination to disassociate themselves either from the overarching organisational structure or from specific groups within it. The use of expressions such as *"…try and talk that to them*" or *"[y]eah, for me, I am this type of a person, and not a man - a person, who do not affiliate on these favours*." These statements highlighted a form of disassociation wherein individuals consciously separate their identities from conventional gender categorisations and/or group affiliations. By expressing a preference for being seen as a person rather than strictly adhering to gender norms, these individuals emphasise a desire to transcend traditional affiliations and expectations within the organisational context. It was these individuals who were generally less cautious and more critical of gendering praxes in the trade union.

In conclusion, an analysis of data gathering methods yielded insightful information on gender dynamics at PublicU. Examining participant reactions, emotional disassociation, and silent periods carefully demonstrated how difficult it is to handle gender issues in an organisation, particularly when introspection was key to the process. Reactions varied from a circumspect denial to fervent sharing of viewpoints. The viewpoints and mental processes of the participants were further revealed by analysing the use of language. These discussions emphasised how crucial it is to promote candid communication to address gendering praxes successfully.

4.6 Limitations and Challenges

Alongside fieldwork encounters, other factors presented challenges and limitations to the study. These concerns are primarily centred on race and generalisability.

Research conducted in a South African context is often laden with racial perceptions. And unsurprisingly, the issue of race emerged when considering gendered interactions inside the organisation. As a participant noted, "*I am of Coloured [mixed race in a South African context] culture and the majority of cultural representation in our organisation [PublicU] is African. And my specific background is I am an independent thinker and all of that*." The participant expressed that, in contrast to other

cultures and racial identities, her socialisation (as a Coloured woman) formed her to be an independent thinker. She held the notion that she was prone to breaking from traditional gender standards because of her 'Colouredness.' And it was her race and culture that played a part in the socialisation process that produced traits like independence, insistence, and defiance of gender norms. This viewpoint represented the participant's anecdotal perspective and experiences rather than objective, verifiable facts within the scope of the research. Due to the constraints imposed by the study's nature and timeframe, it was not feasible to explore this aspect of the topic in depth.

Nonetheless, the observation is noteworthy to acknowledge, as race dynamics often intersect with gender dynamics (Acker, 2006d, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984). And as captured through other comments, racial tension had implications in trade unions, suggesting a complex interplay between class, race and union membership compositions that warrant further investigation. As different participants explained,

> *"...race is still an issue because you'll find that the minority - a remnant of White union members - feel they are still aligned with [opposition Union], so you can see that the race is still an issue."*
>
> *'...most of the members of PublicU are Africans'*
>
> *"...you will find that most of the members are general workers as opposed to [the opposition Union]. [the opposition Union] has a range of office-based membership who are managers, a lot of them are schooled as compared to PublicU's membership."*

Therefore, trade unions within the sector are divided along racial and class lines. This division resulted in significant consequences for the composition and representation of union members. The racial and class arrangements influenced the types of workers it represented, affecting both their social class and racial demographics. The sector's trade unions' compositions are still residually impacted by racial and class lines that reflect and perpetuate existing societal divisions, similar to those of the pre-1994 trade unions arrangement discussed in the section on the *History of the Trade Union Movement in South Africa.* This meant that trade unions representing different racial groups were also representing different socio-economic classes, as race and class are often closely intertwined.

Consequently, the issues and priorities each union addressed were shaped by the unique experiences and needs of its racially and economically distinct membership. As a result, PublicU's primary representation of workers from a marginalised racial group might focus on combating racial discrimination and advocating for better working conditions that disproportionately affect their members. An opposition trade union representing a more privileged racial and social group might prioritise different issues, reflecting the advantaged position of their members. This arrangement not only reinforced racial and class divisions within the workforce but also influenced the effectiveness and focus of the trade unions' advocacy. It limited the potential for a unified labour movement that could address broader systemic issues affecting all workers, regardless of race or class. Nonetheless, a detailed discussion on these insights is beyond the scope of this study. Despite the inability to delve into this aspect thoroughly, acknowledging its relevance is important as it highlights the multifaceted nature of the organisational context and the potential complexities involved in understanding the intersectionality of class, race, and gender dynamics within trade unions broadly. Therefore, whilst the study acknowledges race and class, it primarily focuses on gender without deeply exploring how race and class intersect in ways that influence the trajectories of gendered praxes.

Lastly, as a case study, the research insights carry limitations, as the insights and conclusions drawn cannot be generalised to other settings. However, this is not to say the study offers no value, as its value is found in the breadth of the analysis and the knowledge it adds, both of which are important in the context of the organisation it covers. Inasmuch as it is not the objective of this study to generalise the findings, when a theory is previously developed and used as a framework to compare and analyse empirical findings from a particular case study, case studies can facilitate analytical generalisations (Creswell, 2023; Priya, 2021). This study has benefited from previous studies, such as Acker's gendering framework. The approach enhances a case study's capacity to explain events by linking findings to more comprehensive theoretical frameworks, even when the conclusions might not be generalisable to other examples (Creswell, 2023; Yin, 2014). Such generalisability, Priya (2021) reasons, strengthens the clarifying power of case studies. Therefore, case studies are credible and helpful in explaining phenomena when they can demonstrate how their conclusions relate to larger settings or circumstances beyond the example they are studying. As such, avenues of broader impact of case studies exist, albeit limited.

Having discussed the study's methodology, the following three chapters present, interpret, and discuss the empirical insights. Discussed first is the ‘how’ part of the research question.

5. Exploring the Rootedness of Gendering Praxes

This chapter explores the organisational mechanisms underpinning the 'how' dimension of the research question, analysing findings through the lens of the conceptual framework adopted. The data reveal how masculine norms are embedded in the trade union routines and interactions, reinforcing gender hierarchies even in ostensibly neutral contexts. Drawing on participants' narratives, the chapter explores how and why the trade union is rooted in gendered praxes, guided by the adopted conceptual framework.

The findings are organised around distinct 'substructures of gendering', each discussed separately to emphasise their specific importance, before being brought together to show how they collectively sustain gendered praxes. Using interview extracts, themes are presented as part of a broader narrative, treating participants' accounts not just as data but as dialogical insights that add meaning and coherence to the analysis (Bekker & Clark, 2018; Bingham, n.d.). This framing sets the scene for interpreting how gendering praxes are institutionalised within the trade union, paving the way for analysing the data to answer the research question.

5.1 Organisational Forms and Institutionalisation of Gendered Praxes

After a brief introduction and exchange of pleasantries about PublicU as an organisation, the discussion shifted to the makeup of its leadership. Participants discussed gendered dynamics within organisational practices and structures, noting that gendering was most noticeable in accessing leadership roles and in how certain interests were prioritised. Participants' accounts showed that roles and opportunities were not distributed equally but often reflected gendered divisions of labour that reinforce a gender hierarchy.

5.1.1 Division of Labour and Role Allocation

5.1.1.1 Deputies and Treasurers

Participants often highlighted the gender distribution in leadership across different levels of the organisation and the progress made towards fulfilling the organisation's constitutional requirement that women should hold one-third of elected leadership roles. All participants agreed that women do achieve leadership positions, but they are often few in number and tend to repeatedly occupy the same roles. Leaders and members generally favour male candidates, which reinforces certain stereotypes about which roles suit each gender. In this context, women are frequently assigned to Deputy or Treasurer roles.

> *...most of the positions that women have, [that] they are being elected to [are]positions such as your Treasurer and Deputies. So, they are mostly deputising. We only have one female provincial secretary who is in the Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) province, and other than that, everyone else they are deputising, or they are the Treasurer. It seems as though these are the positions that are reserved for women* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

The findings emphasise that organisational structures reinforce gendered expectations and identities. Leadership roles are often implicitly reserved for men, whilst women are encouraged towards supportive positions. These patterns depend on existing ideas about what a leader should be, which often follow traditional masculine norms. Through these everyday practices, gendered roles are reproduced, limiting women's access to key leadership positions and maintaining inequality in representation.

Some participants characterise this practice as a form of communal reasoning, in which women are assumed to be inherently skilled at managing financial affairs and supporting roles.

> *I do not know who said deputies are female, should be female. I do not know who said the Treasurer should be female, probably because our mother's counted money. They were good with money; we trusted them with money. So, we relegate this position to females, which is wrong from a personal perspective, it is wrong. We do have females who are more capable of being chairpersons and secretaries of provinces or regions, yet they are not there…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

The participant's observation that women are often assigned to Treasurer or Deputy roles highlights a persistent gendered perception in organisational leadership. Historically, in African families, men commonly entrusted their earnings to their wives for safekeeping, driven by concerns that men might squander the money (Hunter, 1933). This historical pattern seems to influence current organisational practices, where women are viewed as suitable for treasurer roles. Similarly, the Deputy position is often assigned to women, reflecting the expectation that they serve in supportive roles, much like traditional views of wives supporting their husbands.

Participants also described how PublicU, as an organisation, privileges men and reinforces gendered hierarchies, with leadership built around a male-centric framework that views members as abstract, disembodied "workers" rather than individuals with gender-specific needs. As a male participant noted,

> *... we do not necessarily look at members as female or male, we look at them as workers… probably that is why we find ourselves in a situation wherein we have low representation of women in key positions of power or positions of leadership within the Trade union because we have looked at everyone as a worker more than anything else, but as seen there are consequences to that. Consequences being that issues which affect women are not adequately addressed at the negotiating table* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

However, this abstract worker perspective meant that gender-specific issues, such as menstrual leave, were often dismissed as irrelevant to collective bargaining (see 5.1.2), reinforcing a male-dominated understanding of members' priorities. Women's concerns were treated as secondary, whilst men were implicitly assumed to represent the "default" worker. Even the language used reflected these norms. Men were addressed simply as "leaders," whilst women were specified as "female leaders," signalling their deviation from the assumed norm. Participants described this pattern as an "age-old patriarchal issue," reflecting deeply entrenched practices that prioritise men in leadership and decision-making.

> *When we address female leaders, we differentiate to say - she is a female leader, … for males, we don't say male leader, we say leadership; because it is common cause that males are the ones that must lead* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

Female participants further confirmed that women are notably more likely to assume Deputy and Treasurer roles than men. This pattern is clearly evident in the positions occupied by all female participants in the study.

> *I had a few positions. I started with the [employer] in 1992, and then I was elected as a shop steward in 1993. I was elected to the Treasurer position in the next Congress... when I retired from the union, I was the national gender*

Secretary of PublicU that linked me to the national meetings… (National Leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

I have 20 years' experience in the [employer]… in 2012, I was the local Secretary in the [employer]… 2012/13 I was elected as a Deputy Regional Chairperson. In 2016, I was elected as the Deputy Provincial Secretary until the Secretary of the province was dismissed from the union, and then I became an interim Provincial Secretary... in 2019, I was appointed as National Second Deputy President... but I did not get elected for a second term (National leader, Participant 05 Female, 15 May 2023).

Consequently, PublicU disproportionately appointed women to support roles as representatives of leadership. All female participants, except for one who served as a paid union official, currently held or previously occupied Deputy and Treasurer positions in their activism. The fact that all female participants assumed such roles highlights how gender stereotyping of social identities institutionalises both visible and invisible job segregation (Campbell et al., 2018).

5.1.1.2 Women's Limited Re-Election in Leadership

Despite women being appointed to Deputy and Treasurer positions, they are often excluded from being re-elected for second terms in higher roles. Beyond gender structures, interprovincial negotiations and trade-offs over candidate lists frequently sideline women, decreasing their chances of re-election. Consequently, women are negotiated out, 'chopped off,' or traded in favour of other priorities. As a participant observed,

PublicU is in the hands of men … the women's positions are always vulnerable in the sense that they will negotiate them out and replace them … the first casualties of those negotiations are almost always the female leaders ... They will forfeit the female leaders in the province trying to reach their key position … I have looked, and I have seen female office bearers just do not get re-elected… (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

This account of election mobilisation demonstrates how women's marginalisation happens in practice. Mobilisation committees that oversee leadership elections often reproduce gendered patterns. Participants across different leadership

roles and regions reported that, during mobilisation meetings, it is common to argue that not everyone has the leadership qualities needed for positions such as President, Chairperson, and Secretary. A participant reflected on how committees often justified exclusion by claiming,

> *... you would hear comrades saying that 'comrades, you must understand that not everybody can lead* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 12 Male, 12 December 2022).

Similarly, another participant recalled repeatedly hearing that,

> *There is always this thing that I hear people say 'no, the organisation is not yet ready for a female leader'... a woman cannot take that position [Presidency or General Secretary] irrespective of her having shown that she can, irrespective of her having had the experience and managed to lead the province successfully, managed to be part of the interim leadership* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

Therefore, even after a female candidate has successfully led at provincial or interim levels, there remains a practice of not promoting women to increasingly higher levels of leadership.

Whilst such statements may seem valid, what is more revealing is the reasoning participants gave about the qualities they see as essential for leadership and the openness with which they expressed gendered biases. These cautions were not reflections of women's true abilities, but rather the result of ingrained habits, mindsets, and practices that uphold gendered norms and biases. Notably, participants consistently expressed concerns about electing female candidates, yet these concerns were never aimed at their male counterparts. As one participant recalled, some members argued that

> *... we must not elect too many women because women must look after the kids ... [w]hen they [children] get home, they want to find their mothers there and sometimes we have got late meetings.'...* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023)

Such views demonstrate how selection and marginalisation are organised through assumptions about (re)productive labour. Mobilisation processes justify gendered roles and expectations, influencing women's identities, opportunities, and participation within the organisation. These sentiments implicitly encourage women to withdraw or limit their involvement, based on the assumption that their main responsibility is in childcare or administrative work related to caring or domestic duties (Acker, 1992a; Anderson, 1995; Mezzadri & Majumder, 2020).

Similarly, this sentiment reinforces the idea that a woman's place is in the home, rather than in leadership. Such perceptions exemplify how organisations institutionalise the unequal distribution of social reproductive labour, revealing the tension between reproduction and production burdens – who produces the industrial worker, who provides social care, and who is expected to bear responsibility for labour (Gimenez, 2005).

Instead of excluding women from leadership due to caregiving responsibilities, organisations should implement structural changes that promote equitable participation and challenge the gendered assumptions that sustain exclusion. This need is particularly urgent as men often receive the institutional support needed to assume leadership roles, whilst women face limitations because organisations neglect to accommodate caregiving expectations. As a participant noted,

> *…a male will ascend to General Secretary even if he does not have the skill. We condone [this], and we just make sure we surround him with skilled staff, a strong support. He will have your personal assistance. When it's [a] female [who needs support and accommodation], we do not think that they must have personal assistance, and we just think of them as a personal loan*[26]*. If you think of her alone, she will not be able to carry this organisation* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

These extracts show how traditional divisions of labour influence role assignments, motivations, and responsibilities. In this context, men are seen as more valuable and thus occupy leadership roles in organisations or formal employment sectors.

[26] The phrase 'personal loan' implies that the female candidates are treated as if they are on their own. And this is because they are often not given the same support and strong team.

Additionally, the findings indicate that some men intentionally nominate certain female candidates to maintain power and dominance within the leadership hierarchy. Women seen as non-threatening or non-confrontational are more likely to be chosen for leadership roles. As a participant explained:

> *... most of the women that are placed there [in leadership] are the women that we, as man, think to say [decided on] – 'Okay, that one doesn't have lot of stories; she doesn't ask many questions, let's put her there' – we are still in charge* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

Similarly, a participant who is a national leader further elaborated:

> *...you find male leaders influence female leaders… they would influence the election of the females, so they would want females who are, that would be their girlfriends. It is very predominant in PublicU. And if you are seen as a threat to leadership, you are then not considered* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

To prevent losing their hold on power and to sustain ongoing hierarchical male dominance, male leaders often favour the election of malleable female candidates. As Stiegler (2001) argues, women who conform to the norms of leaving men to control and steer the agenda are welcomed and given the honours of being comrades in arms and protected from aggression. Passivity and compliance thus serve as mechanisms of control (Acker, 1992b), since women who resist are at greater risk of being systematically ostracised. In this context, women's appointments become largely symbolic, projecting inclusivity whilst simultaneously preserving existing hierarchies of power. Such symbolic nominations ensure continuity and stability of gendered leadership structures, both deliberately and inadvertently.

Arguably, such nominations are further shaped by the understanding that holding positions of authority means controlling the narrative (Parsons, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Managing the narrative determines how events are interpreted and understood (Sternfeld, 2016), whilst simultaneously embedding particular beliefs and values. When gender hierarchies, determining meeting agendas and role allocations, remain unchallenged, PublicU may appear to be gender-neutral, but it still reproduces inequalities.

Conversely, nominations of women to certain leadership roles, particularly Deputy and Treasurer, were not only affected by passivity but also by aesthetic appeal and allyship. Allyship involved alignment with dominant male interests, whilst aesthetic appeal served as a form of quid pro quo, providing women with a limited safety net. As a participant explained:

> *Sometimes mistakes are made where we are not assessing and looking at the calibre of women we have within structures. We will not go with the women who we feel have the potential to be able to carry out the mandates of workers, who will be able to advocate for workers. We would go for the popular ones or the prettier ones, if I can put it that way, and that is big in trade unions. The minute you are externally pretty, believe me, man gravitates towards you, men gravitate towards making sure that they canvas [persuade or mobilise voters] for you…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

Similarly, another participant reflected on how they navigated male-dominated interests and networks. As she notes,

> *I grew up with four brothers, so I was a tomboy in a way. I could connect with the male comrades. I had more male comrades' friends than female comrades' friends, so I could survive in that manner...* (National Leader, Participant 05 Female, 15 May 2023).

These accounts demonstrate how aesthetic appearance and perceived allyship impact leadership nominations, highlighting the intersectional nature of inclusion and exclusion. Positionality, including physical appearance and political affiliation, is utilised to determine which women are deemed suitable for leadership. Some women gain visibility or access not solely based on their competence, but also in relation to how well they conform to dominant norms and expectations. Nevertheless, aesthetic-based access can encourage behaviours that lead to harassment and objectification, worsening the exploitation of female members by senior male leaders within trade unions.

Nonetheless, even when women gain access, whether through allyship or aesthetic appeal, this access remains limited, and some boundaries stay firm. As a female participant explained,

> *...[f]or you to be recognised a bit better and, that you don't get the wrath of patriarchy, you either have to be – and I'm going to say this and it's very unpleasant as well – dating someone within the space or be liked by someone within the space. And with that, you also do not want to be the one who is always out there and coming on top because you are then making men uncomfortable* (Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023)

Therefore, whilst personal relationships may offer some protection and validation, women are restricted from acting beyond normative expectations. The 'wrath of patriarchy' acts as a means of control and criticism to deter dissent, even targeting those in leadership roles. This appears in various forms, such as disparaging comments, criticisms, and covert undermining tactics. Staying within these boundaries requires avoiding consistent performance above or overshadowing men, as failure to do so can result in "incurring the wrath of patriarchy." Consequently, navigating these normative boundaries within set rules ensures survival (Parsons et al., 2017) whilst also reinforcing gendered power distinctions and role divisions. Access to leadership, therefore, depends not only on personal relationships and aesthetic appeal but also on adhering to the condition of not disrupting existing power structures.

Overall, these accounts exemplify how male-dominated frameworks shape organisational behaviour across various levels. Leadership structures, hierarchies, and role allocations are influenced by long-standing male-dominated norms, which both explicitly and implicitly uphold gender disparities. Women remain focused in roles seen as supportive, whilst men dominate positions that provide authority, financial security, and career advancement. The deeply ingrained masculine ethics underpinning these practices normalise male dominance, making it an unquestioned part of the organisation's functioning.

This masculine ethics becomes even more evident in bargaining engagement and the prioritisation of organisational interests, discussed below.

5.1.2 A Gendered Bargaining Hierarchy

Bargaining strategies and priorities uncovered an additional layer of gendered practices. These strategies often reflect patterns similar to the allocation of women to auxiliary leadership roles, with their priorities frequently becoming the first casualties in negotiation processes. Section 5.1.1 discussed interprovincial trade-offs that echoed these patterns in collective bargaining, highlighting gendered dynamics in both formal and informal decision-making. Participants with experience in national bargaining platforms shared vivid examples of these processes. One participant described the process of making trade-offs to secure a higher salary increase.

> *… when we have to make trade-offs to get a higher salary increase… we were like, how do we get a movement from them [the employer] because they did not have an appetite … from the negotiating team parental leave were the low hanging fruits that we could … … guess which demand fell off first, maternity leave fell off first... the argument for that [the trade-off] from the negotiations was that 'it is not like we are planning on making more babies…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

This account highlights a negotiation environment where gender-related demands, such as maternity leave or menstrual leave, are systematically undervalued. This supports existing arguments that, although bargaining processes are officially described as gender-neutral, they are highly gendered in practice (Briskin, 2006a; Colling & Dickens, 2001; Dickens, 1999, 2006; Ledwith & Munakamwe, 2015). Negotiators often dismiss 'feminine' demands as non-value-adding because their worth is measured in monetary terms and does not directly translate into salaries or wages. As a result, this observation demonstrates that collective bargaining, although presented as impartial, can reproduce gendered hierarchies by prioritising economic demands over social or care-related issues.

This analysis highlights a power monopoly over negotiations, which limits advocacy for change and challenges the status quo. As evidence below, when the participant was probed to expand further on the prioritisation of collective bargaining interests, he shared the following.

> *…there was this demand that came, it was the first time I heard of such. There was a demand for menstrual leave to be put on the table. And as we were consolidating our demands, that demand could not find expression. It did not*

fly with anyone…. the reception for the demand itself, even from our team, was shocking, because someone even commented to say 'imagine now, we are going to be discussing menstrual cycles whilst we are dealing with salary and wage issues of members. How does a menstrual cycle enter here?' That demand fell off based on that… (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Although this remark was relatively light-hearted, it oversimplifies the importance and purpose of parental, maternity, and reproductive health interests. Such demands are often presented as individual concerns rather than as collective workplace issues with broader implications. Therefore, these findings demonstrate how gendered assumptions can marginalise reproductive health needs within formal bargaining processes.

5.1.3 Culture, Symbols and Legacies

Participants' accounts show that PublicU's organisational culture, symbolic practices, and historical legacies continue to influence gendered experiences, often reinforcing male-centric norms despite formal policies promoting gender equality. Values related to gender, expressed through language, ideology, and symbols, are central to how gender identity is shaped, institutionalised, and sustained within the organisation.

5.1.3.1 Internal Procedures and Gender Structures

Participants reported that many internal gender-related procedures tend to be more rhetorical than substantive, shaping PublicU's cultural ethos without affecting meaningful structural change. Gendering praxes appeared in ideological perspectives, symbolic displays, and cultural attitudes, reinforcing a male-centric environment. As a participant note

…we know unions were previously male-dominant professions, but now there is a paradigm … we have many female counterparts. As a matter of fact, within the union, we've agreed that for each structure, there must be a minimum of one-third of female representation. When we go to constituency meetings, we must ensure that one-third of those delegates are women. That is the policy within the organisation, and it is guided by the constitution of PublicU. One of our objectives is to ensure that our female counterparts particular not

prejudiced anymore. (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 08 Male, 14 November 2022)

However, despite these formal commitments, participants expressed concerns that such measures primarily serve as a means of procedural compliance, functioning symbolically rather than promoting genuine gender parity. Whilst the one-third representation rule indicates formal acknowledgement of women's participation, it does not necessarily change the male-centred cultural norms, decision-making authority, or ideological views embedded within the organisation. These findings suggest that, although PublicU officially recognises gender equality, its internal procedures reveal the persistence of gendered cultural logics and institutional legacies, supporting Butler's (1988) argument that language, ideology, and symbols are central to maintaining gender practices in organisations.

Participants consistently voiced concerns that PublicU's gender structures were more theoretical than practical. One participant remarked

[o]ur Union is one of the few unions that has written into our Constitution gender structures. But it seems like those [measures] are all done just to maybe show progressiveness and show compliance. There is no real progressiveness; *it's just for show* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

Whereas another echoed a similar view that captures nuance,

*...[t]hey support gender structures because constitutionally they must, but in practice they do not really grasp what its cries are about (*Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

These accounts demonstrate how rhetoric acts as a cultural tool that influences gender dynamics in PublicU. Although gender provisions are enshrined in the constitution, participants see them as superficial gestures rather than genuine mechanisms for change. The disparity between constitutional recognition and actual practice reflects a broader organisational culture where symbolic adherence replaces real progress. In this way, PublicU mirrors broader issues within the trade union and other bodies, where progressive gender commitments are rhetorically praised but seldom lead to long-term empowerment or structural change.

Rather than genuinely advancing gender parity, the trade union's constitutional provisions on gender equality are frequently regarded by participants as mere rhetoric. This rhetoric questions the sincerity of official positions on gender equity and fosters doubts about the practical enforcement of such commitments. Caution should be exercised before assuming the existence of gender structures without critically examining their limitations, the issues they raise, and the authenticity of their implementation. As one participant noted,

> *They agree there must be gender equality, and they must be women in leadership. Practically, it is not there yet. They sign the paper [collective agreements], they agree to it, but after that do not infringe on their space. So, having to move along those lines and trying to change mindsets and break down barriers has been a bit challenging* (Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

Building on this concern, another participant emphasised that the gap is not only procedural but also cultural, rooted in perceptions of women's inferiority within the union.

> *It is tricky because it is preached and it is entrenched in the Constitution, but it is not something - I do not know how to put it - it is not something you would taste and feel. It is not evident, but you can see that these people, in fact, what is practised is not what is entrenched within the Constitution; it is something different. Women are the second best, and I think males think that they are the ones who can reason more than females* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 09 June 2023).

These accounts demonstrate that constitutional provisions for gender equality often serve more as symbolic gestures, showing limited signs of practical enforcement or cultural change. Participants described inertia and resistance as significant obstacles to implementation, reflected in attitudes like "do not infringe their space." This reveals a territorial reluctance to challenge established male dominance and a shift of representational power (Meer, 2005).

Consequently, the role of gender structures themselves reinforces rhetoric, as their function tends to be more symbolic than substantive. One participant expressed this idea by comparing the structures to empty shells:

> *We have this gender desk, but there is no meaning for them; it is just a desk for the sake of having it. It is like the issue of the ANC Women's League. It is silent on the issues affecting women* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Another reflected on how these structures had been practically inactive until broader organisational reforms temporarily reinvigorated them.

> *It was dead [gender structures] ... It became resuscitated when we were resuscitating PublicU all over, because PublicU was basically dead, so we had to go and start afresh and so forth* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

However, even whilst operational, participants expressed doubts about their effectiveness in fulfilling their stated mandate.

> *Inasmuch as we have gender structures in the union, and this is work that they are supposed to be doing—capacitating women, ensuring that women are in the forefront, women take up key positions of leadership—I don't think the gender structure has successfully done so, if it had we would not be sitting with a situation which we find ourselves in* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Consequently, these perspectives together suggest that gender structures within PublicU mainly act as symbolic markers of progressiveness. They emphasise subtleties of symbolism, dormancy, and ineffectiveness. Rather than promoting women's leadership or addressing gendered inequalities, they serve as rhetorical devices, widening the gap between constitutional commitments and actual practice.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the female representation initiative is questioned, given its operations and failure to meet its objectives. The gender structures, meant to serve as the organisation's pillars for promoting gender equality and representation, are criticised for being ineffective in their role as protectors of

gender-related issues. Important matters they should, by design, address are ignored, as they lack absolute authority. Their status as structures is without tangible power, and they cannot actively influence outcomes. This lack of action is worsened by the fact that, even when involved in decision-making spaces, gender structures lack voting power.

> *…when there is a decision to be made, the gender structure does not vote*; *it has an observer status*, *and the power to vote is very necessary to change how things are done* (Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

Together, these insights highlight concerns about the role of gender structures and their ability to bring about meaningful change. They question the sincerity of PublicU's constitutional provisions on gender parity, especially the aim of achieving gendered representation in practice. Whilst the constitution recognises gender structures, participants clarified that they are merely observers, lacking both authority and capacity to make adjustments. In a male-dominated environment rooted in male perspectives, driving change towards gender parity requires voting power. The failure to vote on relevant issues not only limits the influence of gender structures but also reduces them to rhetorical devices—symbolic symbols without real impact.

Additionally, opportunities for gendering praxes are rooted in the organisation's operational processes, particularly in the constitutional condonation provisions and their relation to democracy. A participant explained how condonation effectively neutralises gender provisions.

> *Inasmuch as we will also want to speak of the Constitution and its democracy, it becomes a problem to enforce a [female] quarter representation in leadership because of the way in which elections are conducted … the challenge is the Constitution itself. The Constitution says one-third of leaders in any structure must be female, but the very same Constitution continues to say an upper structure can ratify non-compliance with this provision. That, on its own, is a problem, because we can go into a provincial meeting, elect ourselves as men, and then an upper structure can condone what we did. So, if you had to ask me, that clause on its own defeats the purpose for which the previous clause was meant for. By allowing condonation, we will always be in a situation where there is condonation… the Constitution will always be used*

> *to suit the purposes or interests of those that are there* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Conversely, another participant reflected more broadly on how deeply rooted power dynamics hinder women's progress, drawing parallels with South Africa's struggle discourse.

> *Would somebody who is benefiting from the higher position easily understudy Marcia to take over the position? So, then who will recognise Marcia as a woman who can take the presidency? … what we used to say in the struggle [Apartheid liberation struggle], that your oppressor of yesterday cannot be your liberator today or tomorrow* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 12 Male, 12 December 2022).

Therefore, despite rhetorical commitments to gender parity, condonation provisions[27] effectively nullify the one-third representation requirement. These findings demonstrate that, in practice, compliance is compromised as those in authority selectively apply condonation to bypass obligations. Within national structures, the power to self-regulate non-compliance allows entrenched leadership to exempt itself from accountability, thus perpetuating male dominance. This creates a mutually cancelling effect between the one-third representation clause and condonation, making the former ineffective.

Therefore, in PublicU, condonation functions as a manoeuvre, ensuring that gender provisions operate symbolically rather than substantively. As Friedman (2021) argues, actors with greater status and influence can manoeuvre organisational policies to preserve their position. This institutional loophole exacerbates underperformance and entrenches gender disparities, revealing how internal procedures and gender structures are systematically limited from achieving meaningful disruption on gendered praxes.

5.1.3.2 Nostalgia and Militancy

The organisation's ideology and guiding principles for representing and advocating for workers' interests are infused with sentiments of nostalgia and militant legacies. Participants frequently reflected on the past with pride, framing it as an

[27] The process of allowing something undesirable to continue without protest

essential part of PublicU's identity. This nostalgia served as a symbolic reference point for assessing current efforts and future aspirations.

> *... there's been some improvements, some good results currently coming forward, and one can see that at least there is a tempted wanting to remedy PublicU to an extent that we can move back to where we were* (Western Cape Regional Organiser, Participant 09 Male, 27 Oct 2022).

> ...*Build the Union to its former glory (*Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 12 Male, 12 December 2022).

Such accounts demonstrate how the past is used both as a cultural resource and as an ideological marker of legitimacy. Nostalgia helps to reaffirm organisational identity and unity, but also risks hindering future-oriented transformation, as it frames progress in terms of reclaiming past strength rather than tackling current gendered or structural inequalities.

Whilst the above examples evoke sentimental overtones of nostalgic longing, enriching the discussion with a tapestry of memories and reflective feelings, they also suggest a sense of residual history and highlight the nuances of former glory days. The enduring traces of these bygone eras are further evidenced in participants' reflections.

> *PublicU in terms of its own structure where shops stewards are representing members, you find that [it] is still operating from a structure that was formed in [date of inception] till today, it has not transformed… trade unions have not evolved through time, in that we still want to have the same solution and the same tactic that was there during Apartheid where we want to shout, fight, we want to protest, even though we can see that we don't have power … how do you, as a trade union, want to operate and use the same tactic you used pre-94…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

However, a participant also noted that this orientation is no longer sufficient to confront contemporary challenges.

> *... one of the things that the union must be empowered to do is not only rely on the old politics of your power play only (*Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 12 Male, 12 December 2022).

Nostalgia serves both as a cultural resource and a barrier. It reinforces continuity with the past, fostering a shared sense of identity among members, but simultaneously hampers the organisation's ability to adapt and innovate. This dependence is deeply embedded in the organisation's core values and identity. As a participant reflected,

> *... our militancy is still there, we are still a militant trade union, although to a certain level, one would say that militancy has sort of gone down, it is reduced, and there are reasons for that. One of them being that historically, when trade unions were formed, the unions that came together to form PublicU were existing in the pre-democratic era, wherein workers themselves were suppressed* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Militancy, linked to the organisation's historical struggles, continues to shape its current identity. It is regarded as both a source of pride and a limitation. Past successes justify militancy as an effective tactic; however, they also generate resistance to trying new approaches. Nostalgia for the "glory days" fosters reliance on familiar methods, even when they are less effective in the current context.

These reflections emphasise how the tension between reverence for historical norms and current organisational practices highlights how legacies of militancy are both glorified and restrict the scope for innovation. Whilst such legacies foster pride and solidarity, they can also limit innovation, leaving PublicU bound to strategies that may no longer suit its current context. In this regard, nostalgia intersects with a militant legacy: practices rooted in the anti-apartheid struggle remain influential, with protest, confrontation, and "power play" continuing to shape organisational identity.

On a different note, the nature of militancy as an approach is clarified, justified, and further contextualised. It is described as both a mindset and a set of tactics, rooted in the social, economic, and political conditions of the PublicU origins and the specific situational context of that period. In this context, some participants emphasised militancy as violent mobilisation, whilst others framed it as a fearless willingness to defend workers' rights. As noted below,

> *…militancy is not so much about violence in that, it is about the willingness to fight for what you feel is yours…. I think it is more than that; it is the fact that PublicU members have the willingness and the fearlessness to fight for what they believe in and for what they believe is theirs. Now, if the militancy is that, then the women in PublicU have that. The woman in PublicU, in terms of your members, they will be the ones that push on the ground level that, no, no, no, comrade, we are not going to accept that, we are going to stand our ground. So that fearlessness is what gave the characteristic of PublicU's militancy, which COSATU still banks on to this day. They know they cannot go on a strike without PublicU.* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

In contrast, militancy was justified as being more directly linked to the historical struggle against Apartheid and workplace exclusion during the organisation's earlier period.

> *… the time when we came in… there was that militancy approach that was needed … there was a high resistance from the White community to accept number one that there was freedom. So, for us to penetrate that space, there was only one way we can do it, it was the issues of militancy because if we were soft, they would not even take us seriously, so that was one of the strategies that we used … This was the reason why unions in South Africa were using that militant approach.* (Gauteng Local Shop steward, Participant 15 Male, 25 May 2023).

Participants expressed differing views on what militancy means for the union, even though it was seen consistently as a source of pride and a key part of the organisation's culture. For some, militancy was not about violence at all, but about fearlessness — the willingness to stand firm and defend workers' rights. From this perspective, it was celebrated as a culture of determination, a refusal to be intimidated, and a collective strength that boosted PublicU's reputation as a trade union that is hard to ignore. Others, however, recalled militancy in more assertive terms, where visibility and respect were achieved through acts of confrontation, even destruction. Here, militancy is remembered as a necessary tactic to claim space in environments where workers, especially Black workers, were excluded and dismissed unless they fought back.

5.1.3.3 Worker Control and Political Education

Similarly, worker control stood out as one of the strongest expressions of PublicU's culture. Participants repeatedly highlighted that decisions are mandate-driven, based on the authority of ordinary members rather than the discretion of leaders.

> *... the worker-control principle is one of the foundations of the Union. I think it is even in the preamble of the Constitution, if I am not mistaken, where it says, we say we are a mandate-driven organisation. So, the mandate comes from the worker* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

> *PublicU is worker-controlled, meaning we are solely mandated by our members. What they say we take it forwards…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 11 Female, 15 November 2022).

These reflections demonstrate how worker control shapes the union's identity. Members are seen not only as the reason for the trade union's existence but also as the active force behind its decisions. This perspective fosters pride and a sense of ownership, reinforcing the organisation's democratic principles. However, the success of worker control depends on more than just constitutional provisions; it depends on whether members are equipped to develop, debate, and approve informed positions.

Here, political education plays a crucial role. Several participants recognised that, whilst mandates guide the union's direction, members often rely on officials to interpret complex labour issues or negotiate on their behalf. This reliance raises questions about how much worker control truly exists in practice: is it a direct reflection of members' voices, or is it filtered through leaders' interpretations? Without ongoing political education, mandates risk becoming symbolic, with officials shaping outcomes under the guise of worker control.

Participants emphasised that worker control is not automatically inclusive. Mandates driven by the majority can marginalise minority voices, limiting the ability to advocate for divergent agendas (Butler, 1988; Tshoaedi, 2013b). Several participants linked these representational challenges to a decline in political education.

> *…in trade unions, the first thing that they have taken away was the training of shop stewards on political education. You do not get those, you ask anyone at PublicU when last, they ever went on training or political education, it has been years … The Union itself has scored its own goal where they have taken away political education—training of shop stewards where they understand their roles and responsibilities—if you cannot provide a shop steward with political education, what do you think that shop stewards are going to educate their members? Unions no longer invest in that … Most of them [shop stewards] cannot, because unions no longer invest in their workers and leave it at the mercy of the employer* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023)

> *…things that I have observed were that, especially trade unions, we have abandoned two things: the issue of political education for members, and the issue of campaigning. If you do not educate your members and they cannot drive the struggle, and if there are no campaigns, you cannot mobilise* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

These reflections demonstrate that when political education is overlooked, members struggle to participate meaningfully in the worker-controlled process. Without understanding labour structures, rights, and organisational procedures, members are less capable of issuing mandates or effectively challenging decisions. Leaders, therefore, acquire disproportionate influence, and the rank-and-file ethos becomes symbolic rather than genuine. Worker control diminishes in effectiveness when mandates mirror leaders' interpretations more than members' informed choices.

Taken together, worker control and political education expose a key tension in PublicU's democratic principles. On paper, authority stems from the members; in practice, unequal access to information and knowledge can undermine that authority. When political education is absent, the union risks reinforcing the very hierarchies it aims to challenge; workers mandate, but leaders interpret. Therefore, although the trade union officially endorses worker control as a core principle, its actual implementation depends on how both leaders and members interpret and carry out mandates.

5.2 Layered Gendering Identity Dynamics - Internalised and Assigned

Having examined how gendering practices emerge through organisational processes, this section then concentrates on their identity aspect. It highlights how social perceptions and classifications influence gendered identities, sustaining and reproducing gendered practices. Participants observed that women's identities are rarely seen as independent but are usually understood in relation to others. The findings suggest that women are socialised into roles such as wives, mothers, and vulnerable dependents, roles that extend into organisational settings and shape gendering processes.

5.2.1 The Socialisation of the Wife

The findings underline how family and marital expectations reinforce gendered practices that limit women's participation in leadership and trade union activities. A key factor was the integration of social care responsibilities into women's identities. Participants reflected on how traditional roles still influence women's opportunities today, capturing the main idea as follows.

> *Sometimes, one needs to understand the context of where we come from as a country. .... In most traditions, you find that men are the ones who are regarded as 'go and get work,' whilst women sit in the kitchen. We are coming from that system and way of thinking where women will cook, you will be caregivers, you will give birth, and that is your role in society* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

Similarly, participants also emphasised how family upbringing reinforces these limitations from a young age, shaping women's self-perceptions.

> *...the issue of the family background that is taking us back as a country, whereby women are not recognised as leaders within the society. That is the first thing, because how you grow up as a person makes you, it shapes you as a person. So, women are still looking inferior by themselves. They do not see themselves as leaders of the community* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

The findings reveal that marriage and parenthood create very different expectations for men and women. Women's identities are often tied to family and relational roles rather than recognised as individual entities. This relational labelling

influences how women are treated and the opportunities they have. Social perceptions of gender roles significantly affect how women are viewed and expected to behave, both in society and within organisations. In this way, the socialisation of women into the role of "wife" embeds domestic and caregiving responsibilities into their identities, with lasting effects on their representation in leadership and union structures.

However, whilst both genders carry responsibilities, women explained how their roles as wives and mothers impose additional demands that often restrict their involvement in leadership or union activities. Male participants also discussed these pressures but frequently from a husband-and-wife perspective, which showed how marriage itself can limit women's freedom. As one male participant noted, most women's political participation relies on their husbands' approval.

> *...you find that [when] a person is married, the husband does not want that person to be involved in the trade union struggle or to be elected to any position because of this patriarchal thing that a woman is a woman. So, these are the two things that are blocking women from the leadership positions… Not long ago, a female comrade was elected to a position, but before that person was elected, we had to request that the husband allow his wife to be elected to the position of their branch. The husband agreed. And then last week, the husband sent us a message that we must remove his wife from being a branch executive committee and, we must remove his wife in the group chats of the branch …. It is because once women get married, they are confined to that space, or if they are having a relationship, they are confined in that space, that you cannot do 12345* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

This account illustrates how marriage can limit women's agency, with husbands positioned as gatekeepers to their participation. Women participants echoed this view, describing how their domestic responsibilities made it hard to pursue union or leadership roles. What becomes clear is not just an individual problem but a broader pattern: the authority men hold at home often extends into organisational spaces. When men are regarded as the natural heads of households, that authority easily spills over into unions and workplaces, reinforcing their power. The family, often described as society's first organisation (Briar, 1964; Candelario, 2021), continues to reinforce traditional roles, with men as providers and women as caregivers. These expectations

don’t stay at home; they extend into institutions, shaping opportunities and perpetuating inequalities.

Moreover, there are internalised individual socialisations that influence women's willingness and capacity to participate in activism. Success in activism and leadership often comes at a personal cost for women: the time and energy required can clash with domestic expectations. Within the trade union, women frequently find it difficult to balance leadership roles with their family and caregiving duties. Evening meetings, travel, and other leadership responsibilities can conflict with the social care expected of women, creating tensions between competing roles. A male participant explained,

> *…you must not have a family, you must not be married, and then you can sustain that [activism], whilst men are married, and they can stand there. But as a married woman you can’t, because the time for strategic meetings for the Union are after work, and we [men] know that after work Marcia is going to be overloaded because Marcia's husband is a traditional man, he wants food on the table by six o’clock* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

Another participant pointed out the real difficulties of balancing trade union duties with family commitments.

> *Let me be honest with you … You know some congresses will take like five days. Can you imagine you've got children that you must take to school in the morning and look after them, how is that going to happen… Traditionally, most of the members of [PublicU] are Africans, and who's going to look after your husband if you are gone for five days…most of us in the [sector] are married to one another, we are husbands and wives. So, for me as a shop steward, I will never allow my wife to stand as a shop steward…* (Gauteng Local Shop steward, Participant 15 Male, 25 May 2023).

These accounts further show that marriage often places women in a position where their activism and professional aspirations are limited by family responsibilities and their husbands' expectations. Women’s autonomy is restricted not only by domestic work but also by wider social norms that define women mainly through relational roles. Therefore, marriage acts as an institution that embeds gendered power

dynamics, reinforcing the expectation that family responsibilities should come before personal or professional ambitions. Essentially, marital status can serve as a structural barrier, preventing women from fully engaging in professional or activist pursuits when these conflict with domestic duties.

The trade union itself heightens these challenges. Leadership roles require considerable time, energy, and availability, reflecting what has been described as the 'greedy' nature of unions: they demand constant commitment and often leave little space for other responsibilities (Ledwith, 2012). Women perceived as less available due to family obligations may be overlooked for leadership positions, regardless of their capabilities.

Whilst male participants expressed perspectives based on their observations of how societal reproductive roles influence gendering in trade union leadership roles, female participants raised comparable challenges, albeit from a different perspective. Female participants expressed difficulties in recruiting fellow female colleagues into activism. Female participants highlighted that these pressures also influence other women's willingness to engage in activism.

> *It is just a fear of the unknown…. I will make an example. Where I am working, we are a group of females who are working there. However, not even one of them [other females] wants to take up the role [shop steward]. I told them that you know what I need to retire, I can't be a shop steward forever, this is my last term, can I teach someone else so that when I leave, you don't start afresh? They said we are not interested; you are going to hold that position forever… And the responsibilities that come with being a shop steward and the responsibility at home of you being a woman, a wife, a mother and so on* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 09 June 2023).

Others expressed similar concerns:

> *There is fear as well from women themselves, I will be too much, what about my family? What about my responsibility?* (Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

These reflections suggest that internalised expectations around gender roles can lead women to self-select out of activism. The need to manage family obligations

often requires sacrificing personal or professional aspirations, creating what has been described as the "motherhood penalty" (Naidu-Young et al., 2024). In combination with the demanding nature of union leadership, these factors systematically constrain women's engagement and reinforce gendered disparities in participation and representation. These restrictions tied to marriage deepen further with motherhood. Because marriage assigns women to the role of caregiver, motherhood amplifies this, creating what participants described as a penalty that directly weighs on women's leadership opportunities, as noted further in the next section.

5.2.2 The Motherhood Penalty

In related, albeit separate findings, using personal anecdotes, female participants expressed how the desire to maintain and manage family responsibilities as mothers contributes to their reluctance to pursue leadership roles. Their stories highlight how family duties often clash with the demands of leadership, forcing them to make difficult choices.

> *…I remember when I was an NOB [national officer bearer], I used to go out a lot because you need to go to all the provinces where you are sent by the union. And then what happened was, I had a 22-year-old daughter at the time, so because I am very strict at home, she saw an opportunity when I was not at home to do what she wanted to do, and she ended up with a child, and she was not ready for it. So, I think those are the things that also make us not want to lead because you still want to maintain, and you still want to manage properly your own family* (National Leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

> *If I say my family suffered for a whilst, in a sense it took me away a lot from home. I had to leave home a lot, and what is a home without a mother? But I am one of the fortunate comrades as I have my mother still around, so when I was not there, she was like the mother to my kids* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 11 Female, 15 November 2022).

These accounts highlighted the tension women face: choosing leadership often means sacrificing time with family, whilst prioritising family can mean compromising personal or career ambitions. Women are therefore caught between competing expectations: to be dedicated leaders and present mothers, with either choice carrying its own costs. Even with social and technological changes, the weight of reproductive labour still falls heavily on women (Benston, 1989; Cammack, 2020). Someone must

cook, clean, and care for families, and where resources allow, these responsibilities can be outsourced. But for most working-class women, these duties remain their own, reinforcing gender and class inequalities (Mezzadri & Majumder, 2020). This means women experience the "mother penalty" differently depending on their economic position: those with privilege may ease the load, whilst others must carry it almost entirely themselves.

Because most women in PublicU come from working-class backgrounds, they rarely have the means to outsource caregiving duties. At best, responsibilities are handed to female relatives, such as sisters, daughters, or grandmothers, who step in so that women can fulfil union tasks. A female participant explained how her mother cared for her children whilst she travelled for union work. This shows that women's experiences of gender identities are not uniform; they lie on a continuum. For those with resources to outsource domestic responsibilities, there is more space to question and resist gendered expectations. For working-class women, however, these duties remain a constant barrier.

Nonetheless, this balancing act is not only logistical but also psychological. Women participants shared how social care expectations serve as subtle deterrents to their leadership ambitions. One participant described these as "psychological games," pointing to how women's ongoing struggles with care and professional demands are operated to discourage them.

> *…[w]e were doing elections…and this male shop steward, and I must say he is one of my favourites, he is a great supporter, but what he said then reflected how men think. He stood up and he said, 'you know, we must not elect too many women because women must look after the kids and a mother's love is different from the father. When they [children] get home, they want to find their mothers there, and sometimes we have late meetings.' I looked at him and I said, but that is not fair. Yes, we have late meetings, but not every week; sometimes four months will pass, and there is no late meeting. Sometimes a year will pass and there is no Congress…* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

In this context, motherhood is not just a private role but a social label used to exclude women from leadership positions. Being a mother in trade union leadership is seen as a disadvantage, undermining women's contributions and portraying them as

unreliable. This reflects what scholars refer to as the “motherhood penalty” (Cannito et al., 2023; Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022; Naidu-Young et al., 2024), where motherhood creates systemic obstacles to women’s progress. In trade unions, as in workplaces more generally, this penalty manifests through biased perceptions of women’s availability, assumptions about their commitment, and the expectation that caregiving must always take priority.

Nevertheless, describing women's participation as harmful to their families is both unfair and disheartening for women. It turns motherhood into a weapon, a psychological barrier that prevents women from becoming active members. As one participant said,

> *the minute you say this to any group of women, they will start thinking, if I volunteer, I am sacrificing my family. And those are the psychological games that also come into play…* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

These “psychological games” exploit the close link between motherhood and caregiving expectations. The message becomes clear: trade union activism is incompatible with being a good mother. This subtle framing encourages women to doubt their suitability for leadership and often causes them to withdraw before they even start. Such manoeuvring does more than discourage individual women; it sustains a broader narrative. Motherhood is depicted as delicate and incompatible with political involvement, whilst women’s decreased participation is reinterpreted as a personal choice. In reality, however, the “choice” to prioritise family is influenced by societal pressures and expectations. This process quietly bolsters men’s authority within trade unions by justifying leadership as a masculine role and portraying women’s absence as natural or self-chosen. As a consequence, motherhood becomes both a personal identity and a social instrument. It is summoned to exclude, to restrict, and to remind women that taking on leadership roles comes at a price, not to the union, but to their families.

5.2.3 The Disembodied Father

Conversely, whilst women’s leadership is often framed as incompatible with caregiving, men’s leadership is not measured against fatherhood in the same way. Instead, men are freed mainly from domestic responsibilities, which creates the figure of the disembodied father within union leadership.

In contrast to the social penalties women encounter as mothers and wives, men face a different set of expectations. They are seen as providers and protectors, responsible for financially supporting their families and maintaining security (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021). Masculinity is associated with strength, resilience, and the ability to sustain others, shaping perceptions of men's roles both within the family and in organisations.

> *... men are supposed to go to work and make money to feed their families. So, there has been that thing…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 08 Male, 14 November 2022)

> *... you find that men are the ones who are regarded as 'go and get work,' whilst women sit in the kitchen. We are coming from that system…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023)

This framing often reduces men to "disembodied fathers," who are seen as breadwinners but absent from caregiving responsibilities. Whilst women are associated with reproductive roles in the home, men are linked to productive roles in the workplace. As a participant explained,

> *Recently, the Deputy General Secretary position was vacant, and that position has been filled by a male, not even a female. You could see that males still think that it is their area of competency, it is their area of politics, their area of speciality and women are just there as a by the way, a tool that serves the purposes of a quorum* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 09 June 2023).

> *...most of the males that are in the union are not people who are directly involved with running of the household, they just delegate those responsibilities to females so that they are available for all the union activities* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

Evidenced by these accounts is men's ability to delegate household responsibilities, making them more available for trade union duties. This reinforces the idea that trade union politics is "men's business," whilst women are only present to fill quotas. The household habits—men as producers, women as caregivers—are

carried into public life, shaping leadership pathways and everyday organisational interactions. The effect is subtle but significant.

This division elevates men to leadership positions within organisations and portrays them as natural authorities (Acker, 2006b). In the union context, the provider identity reinforces men's claim to leadership. Their role as breadwinners is regarded as proof of reliability, responsibility, and commitment—qualities that align well with the demanding nature of trade union activism. Men are rarely questioned about their availability for late meetings, travel, or multi-day congresses because their caregiving duties are presumed to be limited or someone else's responsibility. Women, on the other hand, are reminded of their family obligations and may be penalised for them. Thus, the disembodied father and the penalised mother work together to reinforce gendered leadership patterns: men are elevated as natural leaders, whilst women are subtly pushed to the margins.

These dynamics are rarely intentional but serve to normalise a division of labour that sidelines women. Over time, they create a narrative that portrays women as not being natural leaders, but rather as dependents or reproducers. This fosters structural barriers that limit women's advancement in unions and beyond, whereas men are stereotyped and portrayed as reproductive labourers (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021). Collectively, marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood transfer family roles into public life in gendered ways. Women are embodied in their roles as wives and mothers, whilst men are disembodied as fathers, carrying with them the privileges of availability and authority. The outcome is a leadership system that replicates traditional gender hierarchies and restricts women's progress in trade union activism.

5.2.4 Gendered Vulnerability Aspects

Building on PublicU's militant approach discussed in 5.1.3 vulnerability emerged as a gendered factor that shapes women's participation in trade union activities. Security risks and the prevalence of gender-based violence, in the broader context, make navigating trade union work particularly challenging for women, mainly when meetings occur at night.

> *Some of these meeting go up until 23h00 o'clock in the evening, so it is very difficult for a woman. It will, in one way or another, impact you. And most of them, women, do not have cars, you know. When the meetings adjourn at 22 o'clock, you [woman] need to be at the mercy of another male counterpart to*

transport them. So those are some of the things that are making it very difficult for the women because most of them who are shop stewards there are immobile [do not have access to private transportation] (Gauteng Local Shop steward, Participant 15 Male, 25 May 2023).

These practical barriers, such as late meetings and limited transportation, are worsened by wider safety concerns. Even when women have access to transport, driving alone at night remains risky, and depending on male colleagues does not always ensure safety.

[w]hen we discuss danger allowance, allowance stipends given to employees who are at harm's way whilst they're executing their duties … we have never said given the high levels of a GBV (Gender Based Violence) in the country, we have never said that because this one is a female chance of her being attacked at night are higher compared to a male that's something that we've never looked at. And if you look at people who get attacked the most, it would be women. If ever a community is retaliating against police, soft targets for them [community] would be women, and we have never looked at it that way (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Women's experiences reveal that trade union spaces are not always safe. High levels of crime and gender-based violence, combined with inadequate protections and occasional harassment from colleagues, create an environment many women seek to avoid. These risks restrict their availability and willingness to join union meetings or take on leadership roles, demonstrating that gendered vulnerabilities directly impact women's participation.

For instance, female participants shared their experiences of how they navigated sexual harassment within the trade union environment. To avoid sexual innuendos and unwanted advances, some women adopt protective strategies. One participant described leveraging her "tomboyish" appearance to deflect attention and minimise harassment.

… when I started being a shop steward, like there was history that was going around that if you become a shop steward, you become a male shop steward's girlfriend… So, I said to them I do not play for that team [I am lesbian]. Because I was tomboyish, they were also, in a way, scared to approach me. But

I had a lot of interaction with male comrades who were like 'ndiyakuthanda [I love you]' and I would say 'yeah, ungake ulinge undiqele' [don't you dare try me]. Like one did not want to give me a position because he said I must sleep with him first (National Leader, Participant 05 Female, 15 May 2023).

Another participant noted that women in her constituency avoided trade union spaces due to fears of sexual exploitation, drawing parallels with similar risks in allied organisations.

… in my constituency we have many females…but they do not want to venture into that space [union] because they see what happens with females in the ANC [alliance partner] where they will be sexually abused and so forth. And that also takes place within the union because you go to conferences, and they pick each other. I become somebody else's girlfriend for that period (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

Highlighted above are notions of sexual undertones, elements of personal safety, and exploitation within the environment that women must navigate. These accounts demonstrate that women may adopt deliberate strategies to protect themselves from harassment, emphasising how safety concerns influence their participation. Navigating these risks positions women as vulnerable within the trade union, making vulnerability a recurring aspect of their identities.

Whilst vulnerability itself is not inherently linked to gender, women's experiences demonstrate how it intersects with gendered expectations, making them more susceptible to harassment and other risks in these spaces. Concerns about personal safety influence behaviour, limit mobility, and shape decision-making, from avoiding travel at night to selecting transportation options. These dynamics highlight how gendered vulnerability affects women's daily choices, restricting opportunities and impacting their participation in trade union activities. As a result, women embody complex identities where gendered practices, expectations, restrictions, and protective strategies are continually enacted and reinforced both by external environments and internalised choices.

5.3 The Persistence of Gendered Norms

Whilst layered gendered identities reveal the diversity and fluidity of lived experiences, these identities are negotiated within social contexts where gendered

norms remain widespread. To understand the persistence of these norms, it is crucial to shift focus from the dynamics of identity to the structures and arrangements that reproduce and uphold them. Through patterns of differentiation, turn-taking in meetings, and hierarchy, at PublicU, these everyday behaviours exemplify how gender norms persist, subtly shaping expectations for women and men and reinforcing broader social hierarchies.

5.3.1 Distinction of Gender Performances

Findings revealed that standards for assertiveness differ by gender. Female leaders encountered problems when displaying assertiveness, unlike their male counterparts. When women spoke up or challenged others, it was often seen as a breach of gender norms and interpreted as disrespectful.

> *I've noticed that in the case of the few female leaders that are there [in leadership roles], there is still a culture in which female leaders are frowned upon if they assert [themselves] what is deemed as she is too much and can be misconstrued as being aggressive… there seems to be a general—I don't know what to call it—but a thing like I said that females must kind of watch that they don't assert themselves too much, which means they shouldn't talk too much in meetings. These are the unsaid things…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

At PublicU, female leaders navigate a complex landscape where speaking up or asserting themselves involves risks. What is perceived as confidence in men is often regarded as aggression in women. This double standard forces women to consider every action carefully. Speaking out or challenging others can be labelled "too much" or aggressive, whilst men displaying the same behaviour are seen as confident and appropriate. Consequently, women face a persistent double bind: being assertive risks criticism, whereas being less assertive can hinder career progression.

Consequently, these dynamics create a clear preference in how men and women as leaders are expected to act. A participant notes an observation to highlight this point. During a meeting

> *…you had the Treasurer, female, having to do a report and the General Secretary, male, having to do a report. Then you had the President having to chair one day, and the Deputy President male and Second Deputy President*

female chairing another day. Now, when you compare those two with the female doing the report, our female leader at the time had some issues with her eyes. She was reading the report that the financial team put together, and here and there she fumbled with some of the terms. And when that happened, people were literally booing her. When the General Secretary did his report … he fumbled; he made some mistakes. Guess what Congress did - 'No, no, comrade, do not worry, it is OK – they cheered him on and gave him that support. I sat at the back, and I looked at this obvious blatant, to the point where they would make comments about the female Treasurer like - 'why does she want to do a report, and she can't read' - throwing those comments from the floor but not doing the same with the General Secretary (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

A similar double standard appeared in chairing duties,

…You would have comments like, she's still needs to learn, she's not ready, whereas your previous chair, the previous day, also fumbled with some of those things, and he would then defer it to the Congress to decide, like - okay comrades, you have option one and option two in the same way she would do. But on hers, you would have comments that' no, she is not ready yet'. So those are the tendencies, and it tells you that we are still a very much patriarchal system in that both male and female, some with the same level, but in some instances the females are a bit more skilled than the males, but because they are males, we condone (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

The findings reveal that leniency varies by gender. Male leaders who faltered or fell short of expectations were often supported and encouraged; however, female leaders facing the same situations faced criticism, ridicule, or dismissal. In practice, this means men can make mistakes without enduring long-term consequences, but women's mistakes are magnified and punished. Such unequal treatment reinforces the idea that men are naturally suited for leadership, whilst women must constantly prove themselves under harsher scrutiny.

Social expectations in leadership mean women's actions are scrutinised more closely than men's, perpetuating male dominance and influencing women's self-perception and opportunities. These expectations are subtle, embedded in daily

interactions—such as who speaks in meetings, how turn-taking occurs, or how respect is shown. Men are rarely subjected to this level of scrutiny.

These gendered dynamics are further evident in conversations and direct interactions, where subtle power relations are enacted and reinforced.

5.3.2 Practising Proper Respect and Turn-Taking

Alongside patterns of assertiveness and leniency, findings also revealed that respect is practised differently for men and women. Participants described what counted as the 'proper' way of showing respect, and these expectations often placed women in more constrained positions.

> *…when we have to discuss and do proper respect between a male and a female character within the fraternity [trade union], then we [men] let them [women] come inferior or victims of the circumstances, not because women deserve that, but because of the burden that women are carrying within the society, generally. The women will then just keep quiet, not to say that the women cannot participate…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

As demonstrated above, women were expected to remain quiet or deferential in the presence of men, even when they were fully capable of participating. Respect was not exchanged on equal terms: men received it automatically, whilst women had to demonstrate it through silence or restraint. Speaking up could easily be perceived as a lack of respect, whilst keeping quiet was considered the 'proper' way to behave. This meant women often adjusted how they expressed themselves, choosing when to speak, softening their tone, or holding back opinions. These patterns highlight that what counted as 'respectful' behaviour was not neutral but gendered. Respect for men often meant recognition of their authority, whilst respect for women often meant compliance and deference.

This deference is exemplified below, illustrating how women adjust their participation in conversations according to the presence of others.

> *... I would observe that a woman would be open and, you know, participate actively and critique, have no fear of speaking up and speaking out and all of that, but literally the minute a man joins the group, that same woman that often*

speaks out, who you'd hear from, who'd critique and engage is all of a sudden quiet and withdrawn. And all the women would wait for the man to speak first, and then based on what they hear the man speaks, they will follow that kind of train of thought... when it's a meeting with just women, then women would feel comfortable to assert themselves, to share their thoughts, to critique but the minute a male person joins the meeting, then you will find that all of a sudden it's as if there's an unwritten law that says you must give the man first bite on speaking and you must have the last bite. And you kind of wait for permission to speak in a sense... (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

Whilst the first account points to how women's voices shifted in meetings once a man was present, another participant connected this practice to a wider cultural reality that connects to broader external environment.

[I]t's our reality, and automatically you would always say 'man must go first' and you come from, whether it's church, socially, family-wise, guys lead even in your own space (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

External notions of displaying 'proper' respect influenced the dynamics of interactions and exchanges, not only turn-taking but also the content and structure of conversations, including who speaks when and for how long. These accounts highlight how respect and turn-taking are gendered. Women often felt comfortable speaking freely when meeting only with other women, but once a man entered the room, the dynamic shifted. Men were granted the first word, whilst women deferred and waited for their turn. Speaking out of sequence risked being seen as disrespectful. This deference shaped not only who spoke first, but also the direction and content of conversations. Men set the tone and defined the boundaries of discussion, whilst women adjusted their contributions in response. Participants described this as an "unwritten law," a rule so deeply ingrained in everyday practice that it rarely needed to be stated explicitly.

5.3.2.1 The Cost of Dissent - Structural, Social-Psychological, and Reputational

However, not all women conform to norms of deference. Some challenge expectations, often facing consequences on multiple levels—structural, social-

psychological, and reputational. Open dissent frequently encounters what participants described as the "wrath of patriarchy." When women in leadership raised difficult issues, they risked public chastisement, humiliation, or exclusion from office.

Women who raise concerns face direct organisational penalties. A participant recalled how a female leader was dismissed from her position after questioning the organisation's direction.

> *[t]here was a comrade …. I think she was a deputy president, a first or second president of PublicU. Recently, the way she was bashed by the union was uncalled for because she was raising genuine issues…. And we did not see any organisation or any structure standing up for that female comrade. Then she is out of the NOBS [national office bearers], and she never even attended the National Congress. She was the deputy president, and she was dealt with by the male leadership within the organisation for raising genuine issues as a leader…* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

This account demonstrates that dissent can immediately threaten formal authority and participation, sending a clear message to others that stepping outside accepted boundaries has tangible consequences. Dissent is also controlled through public humiliation and social pressure. A participant explained how raising concerns often results in embarrassment, intended to deter others.

> *…you find that once you are out there and you voice your opinion and you try to change things, you're pushed back, and sometimes they make sure that it's embarrassing... in a way, he was dehumanising me so that the next person will think, 'Well, even if you are in gender [gender leadership structures], you're still not going to make a difference because this is how he's going to attack you* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

Even without formal dismissal, women face psychological pressure that discourages assertiveness and promotes conformity. A female participant noted that even questioning leadership in private could jeopardise a career.

Try and talk to them, then you are out of the leadership … instead you will be labelled as a person who thinks you know too much than the rest of the collective (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 09 June 2023).

This cultural sanction influences how women are viewed by colleagues, shaping their professional credibility and social standing even without formal penalties. Structural sanctions, social humiliation, and reputational policing form a layered deterrent system, where women face consequences across formal, interpersonal, and cultural levels. The interconnected nature of these consequences ensures that dissent remains costly, shaping behaviour not just through direct sanctions but also through subtle, everyday pressures. Women navigate these risks continually, often balancing assertiveness with self-preservation, demonstrating both the resilience needed to take on leadership roles and the heavy burden of gendered expectations they encounter.

Nonetheless, women's silence and deference in mixed settings should not be mistaken for a lack of ability or willingness to participate. Instead, it reflects a careful negotiation of expectations. By holding back, women managed risk, avoiding criticism, disrespect, or conflict, whilst still finding spaces, often in women-only groups, where they could assert themselves more openly. This balancing act shows how women both adapt to and navigate gendered constraints, maintaining their presence in leadership without always directly challenging norms.

5.3.3 Inter-and-Intragroup Dynamics

The persistence of gender norms also affected both inter- and intragroup interactions.

5.3.3.1 Internalised Gender Norms and Women's Adversarial Relations

For instance, women's daily interactions with one another also shape how they perceive themselves, both individually and collectively. The findings showed that women are not only recipients of external gender norms, but they sometimes internalise and reinforce these expectations among themselves. This self-imposed pressure can strain relationships, fuelling conflict, competition, and distrust between women. A participant described this dynamic quite bluntly.

[t]here is division within women or female comrades. I do not know what they are fighting for, … it is a struggle that is weakening the issue of women's

emancipation… women do not like each other (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Similarly, others echoed these concerns, pointing to mistrust and a lack of solidarity among women.

I think my own observations, in fact, it is even something that I would not necessarily confine to PublicU, but the political space itself. I do not think women support each other. Women do not support each other. You can put a candidate, as a woman, for a certain position, and women would not support that candidate; they would rather support a male candidate. Why, I do not know… …women tend to support their male counterparts (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

These perspectives portray women's relationships as adversarial and competitive, often blaming women themselves for the division. However, these observations should not be accepted at face value but instead considered alongside structural factors that influence such dynamics. Competition for limited opportunities, gendered expectations, and institutional bias can all contribute to perceptions of rivalry. As Tajfel and Turner (2004) argue, competition over scarce resources often creates antagonism. Limited opportunities naturally increase competition and conflict, regardless of gender, indicating that what seems to be simple hostility may actually stem from more profound systemic inequalities. Therefore, these tensions are better understood as outcomes of systemic conditions that pit women against each other, rather than solely evidence of women's reluctance to support one another. The perceived absence of solidarity may reflect broader structural inequalities rather than inherent hostility.

5.3.3.2 Leadership and Masculinity Perceptions

Attributing women's lack of solidarity solely to interpersonal failings risks obscuring the structural and cultural forces that shape these dynamics. Women are often relied upon for guidance in everyday organisational matters, yet they are often overlooked when leadership roles arise. The absence of visible support may reflect gaps in institutional mechanisms for alliance-building, as well as broader gender structures that have proven ineffective in addressing these needs. A participant aptly noted this contradiction, pointing out that,

> *When I got elected … a man nominated me. Now, I have got a whole lot of females that I hang out with teatime, and we chill … I have tea with them they know me, they love me, we laugh – but when it's time to voting … none of my friends, none of my people, my lunch buddies who are all women raise their hands* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

This exemplifies the complex blend of support and obstruction within women's networks. Whilst companionship and informal trust are strong, formal support for leadership tends to default to men. The participant's emphasis on women acting "instinctively" highlights the depth of these gendered predispositions. Leadership is often unconsciously associated with masculinity, creating a reflexive link between men and authority. This subliminal bias positions men as natural leaders in both public and private spheres, reinforcing a male-centric view of institutional power.

This reflects entrenched perceptions of leadership as inherently masculine, a belief that women themselves may internalise. As Gherardi and Poggio (2007) note, identity is shaped through discursive practices that position individuals within societal expectations. Similarly, Tajfel and Turner (2004) argue that group members define both themselves and others through these identity processes. Therefore, women may feel compelled, whether consciously or unconsciously, to endorse male candidates, thereby reinforcing the dominant norms of leadership.

However, this is also heightened by factionalism among women as an intragroup, which affects solidarity and coordination.

5.3.3.3 Intragroup Discord and Male Influence

Although women constitute the majority of PublicU's membership, participants reported limited coordination and collaboration among them. This lack of solidarity disperses voting power and diminishes their ability to pursue shared objectives. As a participant remarked:

> *The 57% that I spoke about that constitute a majority of the union's membership is women, when nomination processes are being done, they are not coordinating each other. Why, I do not know…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

The lack of coordinated effort was also clear in participants' personal reflections on leadership contests.

> *... when I was a Regional Office Bearer ... I can tell you I didn't receive much support, to none, especially from the male, and it's sad to say, even from some of my female comrades* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 11 Female, 15 November 2022).

Conversely, some participants indicated that these divisions were not only internally motivated but also deliberately influenced by male colleagues. The participants described this dynamic as follows:

> *... we do find that there is some animosity that comes through, and I am saying this with a pinch of salt. I think men also have a great role in doing that... I think men also play into that gallery a lot; they push that narrative a tad bit too much... We are pinned against each other, and not necessarily just in this conversation that we are having, but in a whole lot of other places...* (Gauteng Regional Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

> *...there is no trust between these female leaders. They deal with each other. I think they see each other through the eyes of their male counterparts, who influence them* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 01 Female, 11 August 2023).

Another participant offered a vivid example of how men manipulated tensions within women's intragroup.

> *... in my case, they used other women to fight me so that I would be eliminated. You know us we women have this jealous thing, something that men cannot do; they would want females to do it. If they [men] cannot attack you whilst you are on the podium, they will request females to do that so that it is like a war of women, but they know who is behind that war* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

These perspectives show how intragroup discord is also strengthened through external influence. Whilst competition and self-preservation cause divisions, male colleagues sometimes intentionally worsen tensions, portraying women as enemies.

Men's perspectives and authority function as the dominant narrative, shaping how women perceive themselves and each other. The outcome is diminished solidarity, fractured action, and the reinforcement of a male-centric organisational culture.

Whilst earlier insights highlighted intragroup interactions as central to a lack of solidarity and trust, other participants raised essential questions about why women may not support one another. These perspectives challenge the idea that discord is simply a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, pointing instead to broader organisational and structural contexts. Competition for limited leadership positions and resources makes collective action difficult and raises the question: who benefits when women are uncoordinated? A male participant contextualised this observation.

> *… there is a history of patriarchy and also the history of racism … But the system that we are operating in has been transformed, and who is charged with transforming that? …. Should somebody who is benefiting from the higher position easily understand [woman] to take over the position…. If there are women that are so used to being under the wing of the male president and do not want to let, go, and give it a try… without putting you in a position to let you fail…. some of the mechanics into how we could unlock sometimes is based one on the history and then secondly, into how we relate to one another* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 12 Male, 12 December 2022).

This reflection suggests that those in power, often men, may be hesitant to mentor or support women in leadership roles if it challenges existing hierarchies. At the same time, some women may be used to subordinate roles, working under male guidance, which can make them reluctant to step into or endorse female leadership due to a lack of support and fear of failure.

What is clear is that intragroup discord among women is not straightforward, but rather complex and shaped by factors beyond gender alone. Participants described other overlapping factors that heighten fractured solidarity, prompted by competition for limited positions, differing goals, interpersonal conflicts, and lingering racial tensions from South Africa's Apartheid history. A participant contextualised how these dynamics played out along racial and linguistic lines.

> *... there is a woman's suppression by women. Like in the [employer], there is this Coloured Black suppression - racial suppression - because they*

> *[Coloured] used to undermine the Xhosa[28] speaking women and saw them as people who don't have integrity or understanding. I could bamboozle through that, and what assisted me also because I could speak Afrikaans, I could speak English, and I speak Xhosa. At first, though, I was hiding that I know Afrikaans. So, the Afrikaans speakers would talk about us [Xhosa speaking women], and they would give their reports in Afrikaans. I would be the one saying translations [laughing], although I understand what they are saying, but the others who do not understand, they are quiet. They were saying I was like a wildling; they saw me as a wildling because I would respond* (National Leader, Participant 05 Female, 15 May 2023).

This narrative demonstrates that divisions within women's networks can be influenced by factors such as race, language, and historical experiences. Whilst women may support one another socially, these intersecting pressures sometimes limit collaboration when pursuing formal leadership or trade union goals.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that a mix of internalised norms and perceptions of leadership, competition over limited resources and positions, influence from male colleagues, and organisational structures—along with broader historical, racial, and socio-cultural contexts—affect women's intragroup dynamics. Participant accounts emphasise that discord within women's intragroup is not just about individual personalities or faults but results from a complex interaction of social, structural, and historical factors. Variations further influence these dynamics in experience and whether formal or informal support systems are present or absent. This underlines the importance of considering both context and relational factors when analysing solidarity, collaboration, and leadership among women within the organisation.

5.4 Concluding Summary

This chapter explored how gendering practices occur within PublicU through three main perspectives: the allocation of roles and the prioritisation of interests; layered identity dynamics, both internalised and assigned; and the ongoing existence of gendered norms in interactions.

[28] Xhosa is an ethnicity and language associated with individuals who racially identify as Black, whereas Coloured is both an ethnicity and a racial classification. However, both groups, for legislative purposes, are recognised and classified as previously disadvantaged groups by the Apartheid government.

First, the chapter explored gendered practices in leadership and bargaining. Women were often assigned roles with minimal authority, such as Deputy or Treasurer, and female-centric concerns were frequently sidelined in bargaining platforms. In leadership elections, female candidates were often overlooked or traded off in favour of other considerations, and when selected, were typically assigned support roles. These patterns reflect a gendered hierarchy in both decision-making and role allocation.

Second, the chapter examined internalised and structural factors that reinforce gendering. Although the organisation formally mandates one-third female representation, provisions such as condonation often allow these requirements to be bypassed, creating the illusion of progress without real change. Additionally, the organisation's emphasis on militancy valorises masculine traits like dominance and aggression, fostering a culture that privileges men and marginalises those who do not conform to these norms.

Third, the chapter also emphasised how personal identities affect opportunities and decisions. Women's roles as mothers and wives influenced how they were regarded for leadership, whilst men's roles as financial providers shaped their participation differently. Safety concerns and limited mobility further restricted women's agency in organisational activities.

Subsequently, the chapter examined how interactions and exchanges among members reinforced gendered norms. Both intergroup and intragroup dynamics subtly upheld hierarchical expectations, influencing relationships, decisions, and collaboration.

Overall, the chapter demonstrates that gendered praxes in the trade union are embedded in both structural arrangements and everyday practices, addressing the research objectives of understanding a) how gendering practices shape daily operations and functions, and b) the organisational patterns and actions that support and sustain these practices.

The next chapter addresses the "*why gendering praxes occur.*" The objective is to map out the setup of praxes that foster the acceptance and continuation of gendering that occur in the 'how' part of the research question, as addressed above.

6. Economic Incentives, Historical Continuities, and Affiliations Reinforcing Gendered Praxes

Building on Chapter Five, this chapter investigates the reasons behind gendered praxes, examining the motivations behind actions, interactions, and identities within the organisation. Whilst the previous chapter concentrated on internal practices, this chapter also considers external influences, such as relationships with other organisations and personal motivations that shape gendered behaviours.

Therefore, the chapter examines how PublicU's external connections, economic incentives, and historical legacies influence internal gendering praxes. These include organisational networks, political and societal pressures, and cultural expectations that guide how roles are allocated, decisions are taken, and opportunities are distributed. By analysing these factors, the chapter demonstrates how broader contexts interact with internal structures to sustain gendered norms and organisational behaviour.

6.1 Gendered Relations Across Organisations and Individuals' Motives

6.1.1 Affiliates and Alliance Partnerships

Drawing on the nomenclature of Parsons et al's (2017) work, internal gendering praxes in an organisation can be impacted and embedded through external influences. Findings demonstrate that PublicU's external relations with other organisations and stakeholders, particularly affiliates, allied unions, and political networks, impacted its internal gender praxes. Relationships, alongside leaders' personal ambitions, influence internal practices, roles, and decision-making in gendered ways.

Participants highlighted the major influence of political affiliations on trade union activities, emphasising that,

> *The problem in the union is the politics that informs the politics within the union. I am saying the national landscape of politics, they inform the politics, more so the politics of the ANC. They inform the politics within the union especially those that are affiliated with COSATU. You would remember that they are in a tripartite so that influences how the union is run in all the affiliates of COSATU. Basically, how you see the politics of ANC is what you will find*

in PublicU even currently because most of the members there are members of the ANC (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

This highlights that PublicU does not operate independently of national politics. Factionalism and influences from the ANC and COSATU are reflected internally, creating structural and behavioural similarities across these organisations. PublicU often aligns with the norms, expectations, and practices of more dominant partners, limiting its autonomy and shaping its internal dynamics. These external pressures intersect with internal, gendered practices, further reinforcing patterns of hierarchy, control, and opportunity within the union.

6.1.2 Isomorphism and Leadership Across Organisations

Alongside internal dynamics, external relations reinforce gendered practices by favouring individuals who conform to traditional male roles in political and trade union leadership. Male dominance within political and business spheres amplifies existing gendered power disparities, restricting upward mobility for women and those who diverge from conventional leadership norms.

Participants described this influence as a form of organisational isomorphism, where PublicU mirrors the structures, practices, and behaviours of dominant partner organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 2000). The effect is heightened by trade union leaders holding multiple roles across the tripartite alliance, which encompasses COSATU, the ANC, and the SACP. As one participant explained,

... In most cases, you will find that I am a leader in PublicU, and I am also a leader in COSATU, and when COSATU wants to deploy me to a certain meeting to represent them, I go there. Then, in terms of the ANC, there is this thing where they say, 'you must swell the ranks of the ANC.' So as a member of the ANC, they elect me as a chairperson or a treasurer of a certain region. Remember, I am a leader at my own union, which is PublicU, and I am also a leader at COSATU. Now, I am also a leader in the ANC ... when we talk about principles of engagement which principles am I going to utilise .... the people that I am speaking to or raising the workers concerns with are also my compatriots in the ANC. And I am also canvassing [persuade or mobilising] that they see that I have a potential in the near future to become a member of Parliament representing the ANC, which means I have to compromise myself (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

There is an entanglement that creates a significant source of isomorphism, where some leaders hold positions of authority within all three organisations simultaneously, which I refer to as the 'unsymmetrical tripartite hat.' The dual or triple leadership roles they held contribute to the ambiguity of representation and external influence, where the fluidity of political and trade union leadership roles results in a chicken-or-egg dilemma. This "unsymmetrical tripartite hat" of concurrent leadership in multiple organisations fosters ambiguity in representation and decision-making. Leaders must balance competing organisational agendas whilst pursuing personal ambitions, which can consciously or unconsciously reinforce practices from dominant partners.

The outcome reflects gendered patterns across organisations. For instance, the allocation of leadership roles in PublicU mirrors that of the ANC, COSATU, and SACP. The ANC Youth League NEC and the main ANC NEC show that women are disproportionately occupying Deputy or Treasurer roles (Masuabi, 2023), reinforcing a gendered hierarchy that extends throughout the tripartite alliance.

Although in theory, the allied organisations operate independently, in practice, decisions are rarely made without considering their impact on one another. Trade union leaders, therefore, find themselves constantly negotiating within the alliance, often making concessions that compromise the trade union's autonomy. Because the tripartite coalition is not a partnership of equals (Buhlungu & Ellis, 2013; Friedman, 2021). Trade unions, such as PublicU, as less dominant partners, are more often the ones persuaded to adjust their agendas. As participants noted,

> *…the attitudes and behaviour that we can bear testimony of the ANC leadership or representative is the same attitude and behaviour that we are going to find in any piece of organisations like PublicU, or whatever union you find here in South Africa. If the national leadership of PublicU are EFF [political opposition] followers, then you must know PublicU is EFF… they cannot separate their attitude and behaviour in those respective organisations when they come here [PublicU]* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

Subsequently, you find that,

> *[t]he politics of the external world [alliance partners] has made a huge impact in the internal world [PublicU] – external world being the political parties and internal being Unions. Their [political parties] politics have actually infiltrated our politics, and our politics in the trade unions does not exist; it is their politics that exist in our Unions* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

There is a significant amount of transference and acceptance of external political interests into the trade union's core functions. This highlights how political loyalties and behaviours spill over into trade union spaces, shaping internal practices and priorities. Leaders' conduct often mirrors that of political elites, creating what participants describe as infiltration or even capture, where "our politics in the trade unions doesn't exist; it's their politics that exist in our trade unions." Such language reveals the extent of power imbalances and isomorphism in the alliance.

Nonetheless, there are signs of change. Some trade union leaders are starting to respond differently to political ties, even as they continue to balance competing demands. Some trade unions are actively opposing outside influences, with leaders reassessing the tradition of unquestioned allegiance to political partners. As a participant reflected

> *…there seems to be a tone when the ANC came to deliver a message of support to COSATU, and shop stewards who were delegates there, said Gwede Mantasha is not going to deliver, he must go. COSATU is affiliated to the ANC so, you can see already workers are tired of the ANC* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

This increasing frustration is accompanied by calls to re-assess longstanding alliances. A participant expressed the wish for a complete break from political partnerships.

> *…things are changing, and in my personal opinion and view. I think it is about time that COSATU gets out of the same bed as the ANC. They must get out of that bed, because that bed has brought nothing but misery to workers…* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

These accounts highlight the complex issues surrounding politics and the conduct of trade unions. There is both frustration with the costs of political ties and an emerging movement to reassess affiliations. The overlap goes beyond decision-making and into gendering practices, where political norms are imported into the trade union setting. Visible structural and procedural implications emerge from the shift from the political sphere to trade unions. Leaders not only align with the ideologies of their affiliates and alliance partners, but gender-related practices and structures are also reflected in the process. Participants clarified that the treatment of women in PublicU reflects wider patterns in the ANC and SACP, where women are relegated to auxiliary roles.

> *... the culture coming from those organisations [alliance partners] has been that females are best in deputising, females are best in counting money [Treasurer position] ... If you look at our closest ally being the ANC, you look at where women are, they are Deputies or Treasurers* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Gender structures in both PublicU and alliance partners exhibit similar patterns of ineptitude and silence.

> *... It is like the issue of the ANC Women's League. It is silent on the issues affecting women. You only see them when you go to the election supporting other slates, but on the real gender struggles, you will not see them… They are diffused. We are lacking, it is not even on our agenda* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Collectively, these findings emphasise the reciprocal influence between PublicU and its affiliates. PublicU relies on its own internal processes but also adopts gendering practices from external partners, reinforcing what Parsons (2017) calls gendered external relations. When affiliates and alliance partners position women mainly in auxiliary roles, PublicU reflects these practices. Gender desks and leadership structures mirror this deference, reproducing external hierarchies within the trade union. The result is an internal system that normalises women's relegation and embeds gender praxes already rooted in its political allies. Consequently, external affiliations do not just shape PublicU's operations; they actively sustain historical patterns of male dominance.

6.1.3 Business Influence

In addition to political alliances, participants also noted the significant influence of private businesses and individuals in PublicU's internal politics and leadership. This influence is evident in sponsorships, strategic partnerships, and direct engagement with trade union leaders, a phenomenon participants defined as "business unionism" and the sway of the "big boys."

> *...the challenge that we are having is the type of leaders that are in power, because PublicU ... it has turned out to be a business unionism where stakeholders or service providers inform and influence the resolutions of the meetings* (National leader, Participant 04 Female, 15 May 2023).

The concern about business influence is further clarified by a participant's account explaining how sponsorships lead to control over trade union leaders and/or leadership.

> *We know that you've 'big boys' ... people who have money, big businesses, big politicians, that are influencing the direction...we see private companies fully involved in putting direction for a trade union. They come in as sponsors, but at the end of the day, they capture leadership of trade unions... business would say, if you are going to the Congress, can we sponsor you maybe with a R50 000 [+/- £2200 at the time of conversion. That sponsor is not for free ... Then automatically those who are elected because they receive something ... become captured on those bases* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Captured in these perspectives is the argument that sponsorships and partnerships often carry implicit conditions. What appears as financial support can, over time, compromise the integrity of trade unions. Sponsorship creates leverage, enabling businesses to sway leaders' decisions without overt coercion. As participants noted, sponsorships shape leadership contests by funding slates and campaigns, tilting outcomes toward candidates aligned with external interests. Once elected, those leaders remain tied to sponsors, prioritising their benefactors over workers. This dynamic highlights how power operates through persuasion as much as coercion (Foucault, 1982, 2019). Sponsorship becomes a transaction of power, transferring influence from funders to trade union leaders. The result is not just financial

dependence but a shift in the trade union's focus, from defending members' rights to protecting sponsors' agendas.

Consequently, alliance partners and sponsors, whilst important, facilitate exploitation by individuals seeking ambitions beyond the trade union. Some leaders may go to great lengths to protect these opportunities and misuse their positions for personal gain. Leaders leverage external business relationships to promote their own interests, building and leveraging these connections.

6.2 Networking for Positions Beyond Union

Building on aspects of alliance partners and business influences, participants indicated that occupying leadership roles in PublicU provides avenues for economic mobility and career advancement beyond the trade union. Leadership positions bring financial rewards, social recognition, and access to boards or other influential platforms. A participant noted,

> *...for some, it [leadership] opens doors; you have a whole lot of other perks with your title. Some people get to be on boards; you just get a whole lot of recognition versus being an ordinary shop steward ... a General Secretary for PublicU does not earn anything less than almost one hundred thousand R100 000 rands [+/- £4400 at the time of conversion] a month ... They get paid when they go to hotels, and they are almost in hotels all the time ... They are content and the only thing that they need is more money to feed their lifestyles* (Western Cape Regional Leader, Participant 10 Female, 26 January 2023).

Similarly, leadership positions can serve as stepping stones to political and government roles, creating incentives to build networks that support upward mobility. For these reasons, the trade union became complacent with the status quo, despite its gendered state.

> *[i]t's about financial resources because leaders within unions use their leadership positions to catapult themselves in a manner towards positions within the ANC, which is why I made the example of what is happening within ANC and how it filters down to unions. Union leaders have a tendency to make use of the position that they are in because if they can control the finances, they also control the positions, and they can use those finances to actually buy them positions within COSATU. And once they are in COSATU, it is like a stepping*

stone. If I control here, I can better position myself within COSATU … ultimately the goal is to be a member in Parliament (Western Cape Local Shop Steward, Participant 14 Male, 07 August 2023).

As a result, those with stronger networks gain influence and opportunities, whereas those without connections, disproportionately women, face structural barriers to leadership. Networking thus became a decisive element in progressing within trade union leadership. Participants explained how connections were not only strategically cultivated but also purposefully used to pursue personal ambitions. Due to the interconnected nature of trade unions, PublicU, and political ties, the networks both inside and outside the trade union substantially influence an individual's trajectory.

Several participants highlighted the correlation between trade union roles and political positions, reinforcing the notion that a career in a trade union often serves as a stepping stone into government. To demonstrate this connection, participants shared their journey,

I was involved in student politics, and thereafter, I made a few connections with people who were in the trade union movement. We would have regular meetings, social and organisational meetings, until came a time when I applied for a vacancy (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

Another explained an inverse journey that began in the political sphere and ended in the trade union.

[b]efore I went to exile, I was involved in the student movement from 1986 until 1988, when I went to exile to join Mkhonto Wesizwe [the armed wing of the ANC political party]. I came back into the country underground working for the ANC until 1996, where I joined the trade union movement … I used to tell people that if I was the person who liked positions, I would be in parliament today (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Similarly, participants also emphasised the importance of politics, through endorsements and campaign support, in gaining leadership roles. Without these established platforms, aspiring leaders, especially women, found it difficult to enter or advance within the trade union hierarchy. However, men, particularly older men, were

often regarded as better positioned to access the resources and backing necessary for these bids. As a participant expressed it,

> *…it would be easy for a male, particularly an older male, to go to his peers and say, fund my campaign…* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 02 Male, 29 July 2023).

> *…it's not easy becoming a leader in the trade union unless you have a political background, and connections* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

The account reveals that networking is a vital mechanism through which leaders navigate pathways from trade union roles into political and public office. Networking spaces, often male-dominated "boys' clubs," reflect and reinforce gendered power dynamics. Because formal and informal networks remain male-dominated (Kirton, 2013; Kirton & Healy, 2012), women face disproportionate barriers in accessing leadership roles. These subtly privilege men whilst limiting women's access to the connections necessary for upward mobility. Consequently, networking sustains gendered power structures, granting older men a form of social capital that enables them to solicit resources and consolidate influence.

Moreover, beyond networking, participants were critical of the ethos of contemporary leadership, with several accounts reflecting frustration with what they expressed as a shift from collective activism to personal enrichment. They contrasted today's leaders with earlier generations, who they felt were more motivated by activism and collective goals. Instead, many described a shift towards personal enrichment and material gain.

> *…leadership of today, what they are looking at is what is the benefit, whilst the old one, said they were building this organisation for the future generation … That is why once a leader is on a board, let us say for example, you go to COSATU, and they nominate you to go and represent COSATU at NEDLAC, where you become part of the NEDLAC board, representing labour. This simply means that each and every meeting that you attend at NEDLAC, there would be some stipend that is always given as a token of appreciation* (Head Office Union Official, Participant 03 Male, 02 August 2023).

> *…the leadership that we are having, the new generation, that are obsessed with bling bling things [material wealth]* (Gauteng Provincial Union Official, Participant 06 Male, 28 July 2023).

Leaders were often described as being motivated by personal gain, using positions as stepping-stones to wealth or external influence. Participants suggested that this shift towards material ambitions promotes displays of wealth and status, even when such lifestyles are hard to maintain on a trade union income. This reflects broader social dynamics. In some cases, this pressure was seen to push leaders towards additional earnings and, at times, corruption.

In a similar vein to networking and material aspirations, participants were also sharply critical of the financial incentives tied to leadership roles. Positions at the top were not only associated with higher salaries but also with additional perks and benefits. This dynamic shaped how leaders aligned themselves, with many seeking out roles that offered the most significant personal gain. The benefits attached to senior roles not only motivated individuals to pursue them but also deepened gendered inequalities. As positions became more desirable, men were seen to protect their access and resist women's entry into leadership structures.

As a female participant reflected,

> *…in a region, in a province, you have five positions from President to Treasurer or from regional chairperson to regional Treasurer, and there were five spaces for men. Now you are saying let us add a woman, OK, there you add one woman, but that is not enough, let us add two. So, these men are now fighting for three spaces instead of five… You are now eliminating their chances of leading because leadership and being in authority is a bit addictive. So, you also get that you also getting into people's spaces, and you are getting into their chance of leading* (Gauteng Provincial Leader, Participant 07 Female, 16 August 2023).

Consequently, these findings highlighted two interconnected dynamics that shape trade union leadership. Networking acted as a gateway, opening opportunities for those with political or social connections whilst minimising and/or closing doors to those without such access. Pathways to influence were therefore less about merit and more about the ability to mobilise relationships and resources. At the same time,

aspirations for personal gain increasingly drove the pursuit of leadership roles. Rather than being motivated by activism or collective goals, many leaders were seen as seeking wealth, status, and external opportunities. As a result, networking not only enabled upward mobility but also reinforced gendered hierarchies, whilst a culture of self-interest and material aspiration reshaped priorities within the trade union.

6.3 Concluding Summary

This chapter explored gendering praxes at PublicU from both internal and external perspectives. It highlighted how the organisation's actions and decisions are guided by entrenched patterns, its "way of doing things," that combine tangible routines with abstract rationales. Findings on gendered relations, organisational practices, and the leveraging of networks highlight that PublicU operates within a broader socio-economic and political context, which shapes its internal dynamics.

The analysis revealed a link between PublicU's external relationships and internal operations. Political affiliations, particularly through the tripartite alliance, allow leaders to hold positions across multiple organisations, a process I described as wearing an "unsymmetrical tripartite hat," which can create conflicting interests and decision-making biased toward alliance partners. Similarly, connections with businesses and influential private actors, participants referred to as "the influence of big boys," offer career advantages and amplify insider networks, making external ties a key factor in leadership trajectories.

Overall, these findings address the research objective of understanding the rationale and motivations behind gendered praxes within the trade union. They demonstrate that gender inequalities are reinforced not only through internal organisational practices but also via networking, material incentives, and the socio-political environment in which the trade union operates.

The next chapter discusses these findings in detail, rationalising how both patriarchal structures and historical economic and political forces shape PublicU's gendered praxes.

7. Mapping a Symbiotic Tapestry of the Rootedness of Gendering Praxes

The findings of this study show that PublicU's gendered praxes are not incidental or marginal but are deeply embedded in the organisation's daily routines, decision-making processes, and broader social-political context. To understand why gender praxes are rooted despite formal commitments to equity, it was necessary to examine how practices are integrated within the organisation. This section outlines how gendering praxes in PublicU are both internally structured and externally influenced, showing the interconnections of organisational arrangements, external relations, interpersonal dynamics, and broader socio-economic pressures.

The discussion unfolds in three parts. First, 7.1 considers how subtexts, functionalities, and organisational arrangements sustain gendered praxes, privileging masculine-coded behaviours and roles. Second, 7.2 situates gendering within the interplay of external socioeconomic inequalities and internal practices, demonstrating how organisational isomorphism and post-Apartheid dynamics reinforce gendered praxes that marginalise women's interests. Lastly, Section 7.3 advances the argument of how collectively gendered praxes become entrenched in the organisation, which I posit as a patriarchal sedimented logic, the process of gendering that makes PublicU what it is.

Together, these subsections highlight that gendering praxes in PublicU are not reducible to isolated practices or attitudes. Instead, it is rooted in the organisation's structures, relationships, and broader socio-political environment, which creates a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains male-controlled dominance, hence its rootedness.

7.1 Subtexts, Functionalities and Arrangements of Praxes and Organisational Form

7.1.1 Role Allocation

In exploring aspects of 'how' gendered praxes are rooted in the PublicU, findings revealed that PublicU's gendered praxes are not isolated practices but are embedded in subtexts and organisational functionalities. This echoed Acker's (1990) notion that gendering in organisations occurs across both overt and subtle dimensions. Acker identifies the first step of gendering as the "construction of divisions along lines of gender" (Acker, 1990, p. 146), which is enacted through routine organisational practices that reinforce hierarchical gender relations (Acker, 1992a; Dye & Mills, 2012; Martin, 2003). At PublicU, these practices were clearly reflected in leadership

allocations. Women were frequently elected to Deputy and Treasurer positions, roles perceived as supportive rather than central, whilst men predominantly occupied positions with authority, decision-making power, and influence. Participants noted that women were often assigned these roles based on assumptions of suitability, shaped by traditional gender norms.

Willis (2004, p. 117) describes this phenomenon as the normalisation and acceptance of sexist attitudes and behaviours in organisational life as "the natural form of shop floor life." Implicitly normalised shop floor life reinforces gendered assumptions about who is deemed 'fit' to lead and legitimises a status quo in which women are both subtly and overtly excluded from taking up leadership pathways (Acker, 1990). It obscures exclusionary practices behind ostensibly neutral assessment of competence. This reflects how gendered norms become embedded in organisational processes, shaping perceptions of authority and capability in ways that are rarely questioned or disrupted (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Mills, 1992; Mills, 1988).

Normative margins further reproduce gendered stratification by regulating language, behaviour, and attitudes, constraining women's participation within prescribed roles (Acker, 1990; Dye & Mills, 2012; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Hanek & Garcia, 2022). In PublicU, these margins were evident in the reinforcement of male-dominant leadership patterns, the prescriptive expectations of caregiving responsibilities for women, and the reliance on allyship or aesthetic alignment as pathways to leadership. Collectively, these mechanisms show how gendered praxes are both structurally embedded and socially enforced, reproducing hierarchies that sustain male dominance within organisational life. Historical patterns also influenced these allocations, with women being presumed to be naturally adept at managing money and supporting roles, a rationale grounded in broader socio-cultural norms.

Moreover, the findings revealed that women's access to leadership was constrained not only in initial appointments but also in re-election processes. Participants reported that even when women had successfully led at provincial or interim levels, they were often excluded from subsequent elections. This indicated how gendered norms are institutionalised through election mobilisation processes, where selection criteria are framed around masculine expectations of leadership rather than women's demonstrated competence.

Thus, the division of labour reflects not only social conventions, but also institutional logics embedded in modes of production (Paltasingh & Lingam, 2014). In PublicU, this translates into practices where role allocation, leadership opportunities, and prioritisation of bargaining interests' privileged activities are framed as value-adding and coded as masculine. Gendering is rooted in the social construction of men's and women's work, where reproductive and productive roles become pathways of power and exclusion in both society and organisations (Gimenez, 2005). In this context, women's interests are undervalued, whereas men's interests are valorised as socially indispensable and tied to authority (Acker, 1990, 2004; Anderson, 1995; Kennedy et al., 2020).

As Acker (1992b) notes, organisational roles and behaviours are shaped by assumptions about the worker, which are coded through gendered imagery. In PublicU, women who sought out leadership positions or adopted assertive behaviours that are coded as masculine were often problematised (Acker, 2006b; Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022; Randev, 2024; Webster & Adams, 2022). Masculinity is thus socially valued as systemic advantage for men. When women challenged these dynamics, they encountered pushback described by one participant as the 'wrath of patriarchy,' a reassertion of dominance by those in privileged positions, who were often men.

These patterns mirror broader social and capitalist arrangements that structure labour and reinforce hierarchies of power (Lorber, 2000). This is because comparable features exist in the operations of society and organisations. Such processes align with Acker's (2006d) concept of inequality regimes, which emphasises how power is enacted through ongoing interactions as much as through formal structures. They also resonate with Connell's (2005) theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, in which men's dominance is continuously legitimised through practices that normalise male authority and sideline alternative ways.

7.1.2 Social Identities

7.1.2.1 Wife

Additionally, findings demonstrated that family structures and marital dynamics play a central role in shaping gendered identities and praxes within trade union leadership. Women's participation was often constrained by relational expectations that assign them primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic work. It was noted that the household functions as the primary site of socialisation,

embedding women's identities as wives and mothers, whilst men are positioned as providers and protectors (Briar, 1964; Candelario, 2021). These early and reinforced social roles have enduring effects, influencing how women view themselves and how they are perceived in organisational contexts. Participants consistently highlighted that traditional expectations, "men are the ones who are regarded as 'go and get work,' whilst women sit in the kitchen," shape both opportunities and constraints for women.

As a result, social status, such as marriage, became a particularly significant institution in the reproduction of gendered hierarchies. Male authority within households extends into organisational life, as men's perceived custodianship over women's choices at home amplifies their influence in union settings (Acker & Van Houten, 1974). The findings revealed that women's autonomy and capacity to engage in trade union activism were often mediated by their husbands' approval, with marriage serving as a structural barrier to participation. Participants conveyed that married women are often "confined into that space" or prevented from assuming leadership positions, highlighting the systemic nature of these restrictions. These findings accentuate the intersection of marital authority and organisational hierarchies, demonstrating how domestic power dynamics reproduce gendered disparities in leadership opportunities (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007).

7.1.2.2 Motherhood and Fatherhood

Similarly, motherhood further compounds this confinement through what has been described as the "motherhood penalty" (Cannito et al., 2023; Cojocaru & McQuinn, 2022; Naidu-Young et al., 2024). Motherhood is invoked rhetorically within the trade union environment to dissuade women from leadership, through what a participant cited as "psychological games" that portray activism as incompatible with family obligations. The findings highlight how attending congresses or strategic meetings whilst managing childcare can impact responsibility, motherhood, and wifedom. Therefore, the tension between family responsibilities and trade union demands was cited as a source of incompatibility for women, often sacrificing personal or professional ambitions to meet caregiving obligations. This demonstrated that social reproductive labour continues to act as a barrier for working-class women who cannot outsource these duties (Benston, 1989; Cammack, 2020) as someone needs to be accountable for domestic responsibilities in households.

In contrast to motherhood, men experience different forms of social identity. This was the identity of "disembodied fathers," whose characteristics are freed mainly

from caregiving responsibilities (Acker, 2006b; Eagly & Karau, 2002), thus privileging their access to trade union roles. Men's roles as providers position them as naturally suited for trade union leadership, with availability and commitment presumed, whilst women's leadership potential is questioned due to their domestic obligations. This duality, penalising motherhood and rewarding disembodied fatherhood, reinforces gendered hierarchies within leadership, ensuring that men occupy positions of influence whilst women's participation is restricted (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Ledwith, 2012).

The intersection of class and economic resources further shapes these experiences. Whilst some women may have the means to outsource social reproductive labour, most PublicU members come from working-class backgrounds, limiting their capacity to balance trade union commitments with family responsibilities. As female participants noted, reliance on female relatives to cover childcare or domestic duties highlights the uneven distribution of burdens and the constraints this places on women's engagement (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021). These dynamics situate gendered experiences along a continuum, where access to resources mediates the extent of restriction but does not eliminate the gendered nature of social reproductive responsibilities.

7.1.2.3 Gendered Vulnerable

Furthermore, gendered vulnerability emerged as a further barrier to women's participation. Structural and environmental risks, including late-night meetings, reliance on male colleagues for transport, and high levels of gender-based violence, compound the social reproductive and familial constraints women face. Experiences of harassment, sexual innuendo, and unsafe working conditions highlight how trade union spaces are not always secure for women, shaping their decisions and limiting mobility (Govender, 2023; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Parry & Gordon, 2021). These concerns frame women's access to spaces and choices differently, as they are less likely to have access to private modes of transport, making it more difficult for them to attend trade union meetings after hours (Dobbs, 2005; Orr et al., 2023). Vulnerability, though not inherently gendered, intersects with gendered expectations to position women as disproportionately at risk, thereby influencing participation and engagement (Ansari, 2023; Franken et al., 2024).

In environments that are highly sexually predatorial, women often bear the burden of vulnerability and are likely to be soft targets and victims of gender-based

violence. These security concerns impact women's choices regarding employment, leisure activities, and other aspects of their lives (Bellmann et al., 2020). The impact of gender-based violence becomes an inescapable gendering identity marker that affects daily choices and freedoms (Parry & Gordon, 2021). Safeguarding personal security becomes intertwined with gender identity, as the dynamics of gender-based vulnerability impact women's experiences of safety and vulnerability. Nonetheless, vulnerability in and of itself is not inherently gendered and affects individuals regardless of their identity (Franken et al., 2024; Jaggar, 2009; Vandeskog et al., 2022).

Holistically, these findings demonstrate that gendered socialisation, motherhood, fatherhood, and vulnerability operate in tandem to maintain structural barriers within trade unions. Women are embodied as mothers and wives, constrained by caregiving expectations and social norms, whilst men are disembodied as fathers, freed from domestic responsibilities and afforded leadership opportunities. These dynamics reinforce hierarchies of authority, availability, and competence, limiting women's capacity to participate fully in trade union activism and leadership. The interplay of domestic power, reproductive labour, and environmental vulnerabilities highlights the complex, intersecting factors that shape gendered participation and reproduce gendered praxes in organisational contexts.

7.1.3 Gendered Performances and Behaviours

7.1.3.1 Differentiated Behaviour

At PublicU, everyday interactions and exchanges are environments where gendered expectations are constantly reinforced. The findings highlighted that women's performances in leadership are continuously policed against socially constructed notions of femininity. Acts of assertiveness, challenge, or visible authority by women are interpreted through a lens that prioritises deference and passivity, tying acceptable behaviour to historically rooted gender norms (Butler, 1988; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

These expectations not only influence how men and women are 'supposed' to behave but also how their behaviour is interpreted and evaluated within leadership settings. Findings showed that female leaders face a double standard, where the same assertive actions that convey confidence in men are often labelled as aggression or being "too much" when exhibited by women. This creates a persistent double bind, where women risk criticism for speaking up but can also be penalised for not being sufficiently assertive, restricting their access to opportunities and affecting their self-

perceptions. Therefore, in practice, women must navigate a tightrope: demonstrating the firmness expected of leaders whilst simultaneously adhering to expectations of passivity and relational respectability, a balancing act described as a "double-edged sword" (Kaminski & Pauly, 2012; Kulkarni & Mishra, 2022). Failure to adhere to these gendered performance standards has concrete consequences, framed as the "wrath of patriarchy".

Similarly, there were differentiated notions of leniency and severity. For instance, female leaders who stumbled during reports or whilst chairing duties faced public criticism, ridicule, and questioning of their competence. In contrast, male leaders in identical situations received encouragement and support. This differential treatment amplifies the perception that men are naturally suited for leadership, whilst women must constantly prove themselves, reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies and embedding gendered power structures within organisational practices (Acker, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Leniency in leadership performance, therefore, operates along gendered lines. Male leaders are afforded the benefit of doubt, pardon, and support, allowing them to recover from mistakes without enduring lasting consequences. In contrast, women's errors are scrutinised, amplified, and often become barriers to credibility and influence (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kaminski & Pauly, 2012). Such unequal treatment not only discourages women from fully engaging in leadership roles but also reinforces a subtle hierarchy in which men's authority is normalised, and women's presence is continually contested.

Whilst these dynamics are not solely formal, they are enacted through routine interactions, turn-taking, and intergroup exchanges, which collectively reinforce gendered norms and expectations. The findings highlighted that gendered distinctions and performances in leadership are both pervasive and structural in nature. Women face heightened scrutiny and must navigate conflicting expectations of assertiveness and deference, whereas men benefit from leniency and positive reinforcement of the same conditions. These differential standards reproduce existing power imbalances, normalising male dominance and perpetuating a system in which socialised expectations and gendered evaluations of competence constrain women's leadership. Female leaders, therefore, internalise these pressures, adjusting their behaviour to conform to social expectations of femininity, often at the cost of authenticity and visibility (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Heilman & Caleo, 2018). This process reveals how gendered performance expectations are embedded in organisational culture, shaping both who can lead and how leadership is recognised.

The post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens also offers a nuanced perspective on why women in South Africa might defer to men in intergroup or organisational settings. Historically, black women played crucial roles in the struggle against Apartheid (Barrett & Obery, 1985), yet the liberation movement was predominantly framed and recognised as a male-centred struggle (Tshoaedi, 2013b). Even as women contributed actively and held their ground in resistance efforts, they were often sidelined in formal recognition, leadership, and decision-making processes. This historical sidelining has shaped social and organisational norms, reinforcing expectations that women support men rather than assert equal authority. Consequently, contemporary practices of deference can be understood not merely as an individual choice, a relational or structural phenomenon, or a lack of capacity, but as a continuation of deeply embedded socio-political dynamics. Women's support for men in organisational contexts may therefore reflect adaptive strategies rooted in historical realities, where subordinating oneself to the bigger picture was necessary for collective survival and advancement of the Apartheid struggle, without implying inherent inferiority.

7.1.3.2 Turn-Taking

Additionally, the findings highlighted how gender identities actively shape the exchange and interpretation of respect, with men and women held to different standards depending on the context. At PublicU, respect was not neutral but deeply gendered. Women, particularly African women, were expected to discern when and how to articulate their thoughts as an act of deference in the presence of male colleagues. This was captured as 'practising proper respect.' However, 'practising proper respect' often came at the expense of self-agency (Martin, 2020), aligning respect with submissiveness (Butler, 1988; Martin, 2020) and with non-confrontational behaviour that discouraged assertiveness.

Respect and turn-taking influenced both the content and structure of conversations: who spoke first, who spoke longest, and who set the tone. These patterns reflected broader cultural norms, social hierarchies, and power relations (Stivers et al., 2009). Men received primacy instinctively, whilst women adjusted their participation to conform to notions expressed by participants as "*unwritten laws*" such as "*man must go first*" or "*you must give the man first bite on speaking*." This practice has historical roots. Traditionally, as heads of households, men were addressed first and held conversational authority (Hunter, 1933). Such customs continue to inform

workplace norms, where men set the boundaries of discussion and women defer in the name of respect.

This is because holding the conversational floor signals authority. It allows speakers to frame issues, set the agenda, and define others' roles (Stivers et al., 2009). At PublicU, this symbolic power reinforced gender hierarchies: men were positioned as leaders, whilst women were expected to wait, respond, or follow. Acts of deference thus became mechanisms of self-preservation, preservation that reinforced gendered praxes. In this context, women's silence was not evidence of incapacity but a calculated response to invisible boundaries that dictated acceptable participation, as a male participant pointed out.

As a result, this should not be interpreted as a thoughtless passivity. African feminist scholarship interprets such practices as "stealth defiance" (Dosekun, 2021a), where women resist patriarchal constraints through subtle negotiation rather than open confrontation. By aligning with expected behaviours, women created gradual fissures in entrenched systems, a form of continuance change that avoids outright rejection by male-dominated institutions (Brunninge & Melin, 2010), particularly when non-conformity can result in one incurring what was noted as the 'wrath of patriarchy.' This demonstrates agency through impression management (Goffman, 1959), where women control how they are perceived whilst pushing against boundaries incrementally. Intersectional realities — encompassing gendered, cultural, and socioeconomic — shape these strategies, revealing that silence and deference can coexist with agency and resistance.

Nonetheless, not all women chose to defer and practice this negotiated feminism or stealth defiance. Some challenged the status quo of gendered expectations head-on; however, they often faced severe consequences. Participants described this as the "wrath of patriarchy," enacted through structural exclusion, public humiliation, and reputational damage. Women who raised critical issues risked being removed from leadership, ridiculed, or ostracised. In this regard, dissent was punished at multiple levels: organisational (loss of office), social-psychological (embarrassment and intimidation), and reputational (being labelled as disruptive). Such sanctions functioned both coercively and symbolically as forms of violence, deterring other women from speaking out.

Displays of violence function as coercive means for maintaining control (Pinheiro & Harvey, 2019), which can all be enforced through authoritative means that come with violence (Acker, 1998). Concepts such as domination, power, control, and authority are subtle euphemisms for violence, as they often mask and soften the impact of coercion, force, and oppression (Rothschild & Davies, 1994). In organisations, these may be displayed through managers' actions of terminating employees or threatening those who want to join a trade union (Acker, 1998). Whereas in PublicU, it is through not being elected or re-elected into leadership positions — arguably a form of termination — or being threatened with embarrassment.

Thus, power in this context extended beyond overt coercion. As Foucault (1982) argues, power shapes and directs behaviour as much through subtle norms as through force. At PublicU, "respect" served as both a cultural expectation and a disciplinary mechanism. It reinforced gendered hierarchies by rewarding compliance and penalising dissent. Women who complied were tolerated, sometimes even celebrated as "properly respectful," whilst those who resisted were publicly chastened, excluded, or denied re-election. Thus, the practice of respect and turn-taking reveals a double dynamic: it sustains gendered hierarchies by requiring women to defer, whilst simultaneously offering women space for strategic negotiation and gradual change. In either case, women at PublicU carried the burden of navigating cultural expectations, organisational constraints, and the looming threat of patriarchal sanction.

From an African feminist perspective, this dynamic is more complex than passive compliance. Dosekun (2021a) drawing on African feminist scholars such as Naomi Nkealah and Obioma Nnaemeka, this approach highlights the cultural and philosophical aspects of feminism in the African context. It prioritises negotiation and balance over confrontation. Change is pursued through gradual, context-specific strategies rather than "feisty disruptions" associated with Western feminism (Dosekun, 2021a, p. 7). Within this framework, women may defer to men as a cultural expression of respect without forfeiting their agency. Deference becomes a tactical choice, an expression of cultural belonging and relational negotiation, rather than evidence of internalised oppression.

7.1.4 Bargaining Interests and Organisational Culture

Findings on bargaining priorities reflected broader patterns identified in the literature, demonstrating how gendered hierarchies shape negotiation processes. Consistent with Gimenez (2005), gendered demands, such as menstrual or parental

leave, are systematically devalued in economic and organisational contexts that privilege measurable, fiscal outputs (Riisgaard, 2022). Such work, whilst vital to employees' well-being and overall organisational functioning, is treated as peripheral to "value-adding" economic interests, resulting in social reproductive demands being framed as expendable trade-off items, or the "low-hanging fruit," during collective bargaining.

This devaluation reflects the interplay between structural and cultural factors. Women, often occupying minority positions in leadership and bargaining delegations, have their interests sidelined not only because of the perceived lower economic value of social reproductive demands but also due to prevailing masculine norms within bargaining cultures. As a result, negotiation priorities become asymmetric, subtly undermining equity-driven initiatives and dismissing the feminine perspective as peripheral or even trivial. These findings align with previous observations that trade union bargaining platforms, whilst formally neutral, reproduce gendered hierarchies in practice (Briskin, 2006a; Colling & Dickens, 2001).

The framing of who the worker is further compounds this marginalisation. Kirton (2021) and Crenshaw (1991) argue that a singular-axis conceptualisation of workers, as homogeneous members of a collective, erases the diversity of needs and perspectives within groups. In PublicU, this results in women's concerns being socially constructed as minority interests, even when they represent a substantial portion of the membership. By treating social reproductive demands as individual prerogatives rather than collective claims with broader implications, bargaining processes obscure their organisational significance. Consequently, these demands, though vital for fostering family-friendly workplaces and supporting psychological and emotional well-being, are rendered invisible within negotiation priorities.

Moreover, these bargaining dynamics are reinforced by organisational reluctance to engage with unfamiliar issues. Friedman (2021) notes that negotiators exhibit a preference for the known, favouring familiar priorities over novel or untested demands. Historical patterns in trade unionism show similar resistance: early opposition to women's participation in the workforce and the relegation of sexual harassment concerns to private matters exemplify how unfamiliar or socially coded issues are dismissed (Colgan & Ledwith, 2002; Rubery & Fagan, 1995; Tshoaedi, 2013a, 2013b). Within PublicU, demands such as menstrual leave continue to confront these cultural and historical biases, with masculine-dominated leadership determining

what constitutes “legitimate” bargaining priorities. As Ledwith (2012, p. 190) notes, “the hallowed function of trade unionism,” collective bargaining is predominantly where women are least represented, both in terms of interests and presence. These seemingly small, everyday judgments contribute to the rooted persistence of gendered praxes by reproducing masculine-coded standards of bargaining interest and matters of legitimacy.

Consequently, these findings demonstrate that gendered bargaining hierarchies are sustained through the combined effects of structural valuation of labour, cultural norms privileging masculine concerns, and cognitive framing that marginalises unfamiliar social reproductive claims. Even in contexts where women hold substantial membership or numerical representation, these intersecting factors reproduce patterns of invisibility and exclusion, illustrating the persistent gendered character of collective bargaining practices.

Additionally, akin to bargaining interests, findings also noted that gendered values, expressed through language, ideology, and symbols, play a central role in constructing, institutionalising, and sustaining gendered praxes within PublicU. Cultural forces, including associations, accepted ideas, and symbolic representations, shape perceptions of femininity and masculinity, reinforcing gender identities and hierarchies in organisational logics. Participants’ accounts indicated that whilst gender equality policies exist formally, their execution is often inconsistent, revealing a disjuncture between constitutional commitments and lived practice. As one participant noted, gender structures exist on paper, yet in practice, representation remains minimal, with female leaders frequently excluded from decision-making roles. These findings echo Ledwith’s (2012) and Ledwith and Munakamwe's (2015) observations that even within advocacy organisations, informal practices and cultures can be as exclusionary as formal rules.

This was evident in the organisation's militant culture. Whilst militancy once enhanced the trade union's credibility and bargaining strength, it also conveyed a distinctly masculine tone. A participant highlighted the risks of protest and strike actions, where the threat of violence was not only a tactic against employers but also increased vulnerability, especially for women. What is seen as courage and strength for men often becomes a risk and a cause of marginalisation for women. Militancy is therefore both a badge of honour and a barrier for some. Its legacy empowered the trade union to stand firm against injustice, but it also reinforced gendered boundaries

regarding who could participate fully. For many women, the fear of violence, whether in protest marches or late-night organising meetings, becomes a subtle deterrent. In practice, the same culture that once strengthened the trade union continues to limit whose voices are most visible in its struggles today.

Consequently, a gap exists between policy and practice, reflecting how deeply ingrained cultural norms and symbolic practices shape organisational behaviour. Historical successes and familiar practices, reinforced over time, create a form of institutional nostalgia that shapes current decision-making and constrains innovation (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Participants' reflections indicate that nostalgia for the "glory days" not only reinforces organisational identity and legitimacy but also locks members' expectations and desires into historically defined pathways, discouraging critical engagement with novel solutions. Former strategies, particularly those associated with militancy, are valorised as ideal standards for addressing present challenges, even when contemporary circumstances require adaptive approaches (Kenny, 2022).

Consequently, the interplay between historical reminiscence and current practice creates a tension between continuity and transformation. Reverence for past achievements, particularly in relation to militancy and collective action, reinforces stability and solidarity but simultaneously limits the organisation's capacity for substantive change (Brunninge & Melin, 2010; Mackay, 2014). As a result, cultural and symbolic legacies thus function both as resources, providing shared identity and cohesion, and as constraints, inhibiting adaptation to new challenges. In this regard, PublicU's culture and legacies collectively maintain gendered praxes by upholding historical norms, legitimising existing hierarchies, and constraining opportunities for transformative change.

7.1.5 Group Dynamics

Both intergroup and intragroup dynamics influenced how members interacted with each other, subtly reinforcing gendered expectations and hierarchies. Women's interactions and self-image at PublicU are often framed as adversarial, with blame falling on women for failing to support one another. However, this interpretation oversimplifies a more complex reality shaped by scarcity of opportunities, gendered expectations, and the weight of institutional bias. As Tajfel and Turner (2004) argue, unequal access and distribution of resources intensify competition. At PublicU, women contest leadership in a context where positions are scarce, and the organisation

remains structured around male dominance. What appears as personal aversion often reflects deeper rationalities tied to self-preservation and structural inequality.

Attributing intragroup discord solely to women's interpersonal shortcomings obscures the cultural and institutional forces that limit solidarity. For instance, findings accentuated that women are frequently expected to provide support in informal roles; however, they are overlooked for formal leadership. This was attributed to the absence of organisational mechanisms that promote alliance-building, which can help women build alliances or prepare for leadership, such as gender structures that exist in name but have little practical effect in shifting power relations. In these settings, interpersonal relations between individuals are not outliers to organisational functioning but play a role in sustaining gendered praxes. Intergroup and intragroup dynamics that impact solidarity are not simply a matter of social preference; it had material consequences for women's career trajectories, bargaining power, and capacity to shape organisational agendas.

These findings highlighted the inconsistency of women's support for one another, often undercut by an "instinctive" default to positioning men as natural leaders. This instinct is less about choice than about deeply ingrained cultural scripts that tie leadership to masculinity. As Gherardi and Poggio (2007) note, identity is not just self-constructed but negotiated through the discourses around us. For many women at PublicU, leadership is often subconsciously imagined through a male lens, reflecting long-standing social and historical patterns.

Despite women making up the majority of trade union members, they often receive little encouragement from one another when contesting leadership roles. Thus, discord has multiple sources: limited opportunities, reputational risks, internalised patriarchal norms, and, crucially, the influence of men who actively aggravate divisions. Gradskova et al. (2018) note that such discord is not only externally imposed but also internalised as self-derogation. As findings accentuated, women sometimes adopt men's perspectives of each other, "seeing themselves through the eyes of their male counterparts." This internalised self-derogation is often instilled on a systemic and social level, often through the reinforcement of a dominant group's prevailing knowledge (Bajramović Jusufbegović, 2018). This diminishes women's self-worth and validates male narratives as the standard.

Intersectional tensions, grounded in residuals of Apartheid history, also compound these challenges. The post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens offers a valuable understanding of these patterns. Women are not a homogeneous group; their positions within society differ along axes of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status, and this situated positioning has implications (Collins, 2000b; Harding, 1991; Longino, 1990; Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999). Factors such as race, language, and social background influence how individuals navigate interactions with others. The tensions between Xhosa and Coloured women reflect both historical inequalities and current organisational dynamics. These differences create friction, but they also influence how women formed alliances and responded to opportunities.

Apartheid left behind deep racial and ethnic scars, and these continue to surface in intragroup tensions, particularly between Xhosa and Coloured women. Both groups face gendered discrimination, but they experience it differently, which can heighten mistrust and fragment solidarity within women as a group. These overlapping identity markers of race, ethnicity, and language meant that gender alone cannot explain the fractures; a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens is key to understanding why solidarity is so fraught.

The consequences of fractured solidarity ripple outward. Women's majority status in membership has not translated into leadership power, leaving the trade union poorer for it. The emotional toll is also considerable, with women reporting the exhaustion of constantly balancing assertiveness with self-preservation, of managing reputational risks, and of anticipating backlash for stepping out of line. This ongoing negotiation discourages participation in leadership contests and erodes confidence over time. These patterns are not unique to PublicU but mirror Acker's (2006d) "inequality regimes," where institutions reproduce gender hierarchies both formally and informally. Recognising this broader context highlights that PublicU's struggles are part of a wider systemic pattern, not isolated failings of its women members.

Moving forward, the solution cannot be limited to simply placing individual women in leadership roles. Real progress requires dismantling the scarcity that drives competition, expanding opportunities, and creating dedicated spaces for women to mentor, network, and build solidarity away from male interference. Intersectional approaches are vital, ensuring that solidarity bridges the divide of race, class, and language. Without such shifts, women will continue to carry the burden of fractured

alliances, and the trade union will continue to miss out on the transformative potential of its majority membership.

Consequently, women's interactions at PublicU reveal not only conflict but also resilience. Discord stems from a web of scarcity, male dominance reinforcement, historical divisions, and internalised bias, but within it are strategies of adaptation and resistance. Change lies in recognising both: the barriers that fracture solidarity and the agency that women already exercise in negotiating them.

Overall, PublicU's leadership structures and practices reveal how gendered norms are both embedded and enacted across multiple organisational levels. Women's assignment to supportive roles, limited re-election prospects, and conditional access to leadership highlight the persistence of male-dominated hierarchies, shaped by historical, social, and institutional norms. These patterns demonstrate how gendered subtexts, functionalities and arrangements collectively sustain gendered praxes, influencing perceptions of competence, authority, and suitability for leadership. Significantly, these gendered dynamics extend beyond formal positions, shaping everyday decision-making, negotiation priorities, and interactions with external stakeholders. Understanding these mechanisms provides a critical foundation for examining how broader organisational processes, such as bargaining practices, sponsorship arrangements, and resource allocation, further gendered praxes.

7.2 The Influence of External Socioeconomic Factors on Gendering Praxes

Beyond organisational structures, the findings also highlight that the persistence of gendered praxes in PublicU cannot be fully understood without situating them in the interplay between internal organisational dynamics, external relations, and external socioeconomic influences. Gendered praxes are amplified by PublicU's dense network of external ties, where the connections not only influence PublicU's direction but also actively embed gendered praxes within it.

7.2.1 Alliances and Political Connections

Findings highlighted the influence of external relations in PublicU's internal gendering as shaped by its alignment with national political structures. The key driver is the overlap of leadership roles across the tripartite alliance, particularly the ANC, SACP and COSATU. Trade union leaders, including those of PublicU, often occupied dual or multiple roles within these organisations, which I argued as 'unsymmetrical

tripartite hats,' - the holding of multiple positions across allied organisations. This duality/triarchy arrangement creates overlapping obligations that blur loyalties and expose PublicU to external influence. What appears to be an alliance of equals is, in practice, a hierarchy in which dominant partners set the terms.

The result is that PublicU leaders must constantly balance competing agendas, often prioritising political opportunities over the trade union's interests. This blurring of boundaries fuels organisational isomorphism, where PublicU mirrors the norms and structures of its more powerful allies. This dynamic also reproduces gendering praxes because when dominant partners normalise gendered practices, such as limiting women to subordinate positions, these norms travel into PublicU through alliances. Thus, gendered praxes are reinforced not only by what happens within the PublicU but also by the politics of affiliation.

Participants expressed this influence, alluding to words such as "*infiltrated*" and "*captured.*" Interestingly, these words not only expressed influence but also highlighted power dynamics between the alliance partners. An in-depth scrutiny of these words highlights that the internal identity of PublicU is being sidelined or dominated by alliance partners, as noted in findings such as "*our politics in the unions doesn't exist, it's their [alliance] politics that exist in our Unions.*" In this regard, affiliate ideologies act as conduits for the dispersal of isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 2000; Hambrick et al., 2004), particularly since the interconnections between organisations often have a power imbalance (Quintal, 2015). PublicU, as the less dominant organisation in the tripartite alliance, finds itself adapting to norms, structures, and practices of alliance partners and affiliates, similar to how, in group dynamics, the dominant group sets the narrative (Bajramović Jusufbegović, 2018; Friedman, 2021; Lee & Tapia, 2021). This mirroring is especially evident in leadership allocation across the alliance, where women are consistently channelled into Deputy or Treasurer positions. Participants noted that what happens in the ANC and COSATU is echoed inside PublicU, showing how external relations transmit gendered praxes inward. Thus, leaders not only align themselves with the ideologies of external organisations but also adopt similar attitudes and behaviours that have implications for PublicU.

As a result, the findings indicated that PublicU's leaders are often perceived as being politically 'swallowed' and prioritising personal interests, an implication that participants expressed as the "*influence of Big Boys."* Despite being portrayed as an

alliance and partnership of equals, with each partner contributing to the collective goals of the alliance, power dynamics within the tripartite alliance reveal disparities in influence and decision-making authority (Ka-Soko, 2023; Quintal, 2015). This is because some organisations are susceptible to the influences of external associations through interactions (Parsons et al., 2017). According to participants, this is because trade union leaders are focused on attaining power to advance personal interests rather than serving the interests of the collective, thus making them vulnerable to the influence of external factors and relations. Michalko (2020) highlights this notion as an ethical similarity between trade union leaders and contemporary political leaders, where behaviours are defined by a propensity for self-serving actions.

Therefore, despite the outward appearance of partnership, the ANC maintains dominance through its control of state resources and direct access to political office (Friedman, 2021; Webster, 2015). For many trade union leaders, the ANC represents the main route to influence and economic advancement beyond trade union structures. This dynamic consolidates the ANC's authority and entrenches its position as the dominant partner, whilst leaving PublicU vulnerable to adopting external agendas, including gendered patterns of leadership allocation, that may not align with its own members' interests.

There is a rationale for mirroring and replicating alliance partners' practices, including gendered ones, where their dynamics are transferred and reinforced through interactions and exchanges into PublicU. Due to regular interactions and exchanges, praxes become similar, with alliances and affiliates acting as extended sources of gendering beyond internal dynamics. Interactions and exchanges with affiliates and alliance partners generate a normative, mimetic process whereby PublicU's structures, norms, and ideologies mirror those of its affiliates and alliance partners. And leaders' pursuit of personal economic mobility amplified susceptibility to external pressures, thus opening avenues for cross-organisational relations to influence PublicU's gendering implications.

7.2.2 Resources and leadership Access

The scarcity of resources enhanced organisational isomorphism and the influence of external relations. Findings highlighted that campaign sponsorship provided another avenue of influence, as businesses sought to shift their interests onto the trade unions' core function.

Since financial resources are essential in leadership elections, sponsorship becomes a feasible means of exerting control, with the bond created through sponsorship enduring beyond the campaigning periods. Individuals with financial support had a higher probability of obtaining leadership roles, albeit at a compromise. Initially, sponsorship would appear aligned with and supportive of the trade union's cause, but over time, the dynamics shifted. Through co-optation of leadership, the trade union's objectives of safeguarding members' interests were gradually subordinated to the priorities of the sponsors. Consequently, financial access offered by the businesses not only compromised fundamental principles but also threatened the integrity of the trade union. In PublicU's context, the unsymmetrical tripartite hat arrangement and relationships with external businesses were frequently leveraged this way. This was because in competitive environments, such as the trade union, individuals drew on all forms of capital, both political and gender. This practice often advantaged Black men, whilst marginalising Black women.

As campaigns for leadership positions often hinge on financial backing, this makes women, who already face resource constraints, less competitive. Male leaders with business or political ties are better positioned to attract sponsorship, reinforcing gendered praxes and inequalities in leadership access. The result is a cycle where financial dependency, political ambition, and self-serving leadership converge to maintain male-dominated power structures.

Thus, accepting sponsorship entails more than endorsement; it constitutes a transaction of power. Through this exchange, sponsors gain power or leverage over beneficiaries, influencing their decisions and behaviour. The exchange of financial power creates a redirect of the trade union's decision-making, as sponsored officials prioritise corporate interests over members' needs. As Friedman (2021) and Foucault (1982, 2019) note, power is not always exercised through direct coercion or force; it can be wielded through persuasion. Even when sponsors do not overtly compel recipients to act in a certain way, they still exert power if they can effectively sway the other. The ability to influence others' opinions and persuade them to support one's own interests is a form of control. Therefore, sponsorships are not gratuitous contributions; instead, they exert concealed power with a directional element where recipients act as representatives of the sponsors' interests.

According to Gouws and Coetzee (2019) sponsorship often restricts the pursuit of radical stances and approaches. Taking radical stances can be held back by the need

to “survive financially and engage in protest action that is radical enough to effect real change” (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019, p. 6). Therefore, when an organisation and an individual rely on external donor funding, they can face limitations in navigating and articulating change. Agreements or funding conditions may compel them to portray socially acceptable norms (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). In other words, in return for support, movements (and individuals) can be covertly persuaded to steer to prioritise the expectations of their benefactors over their own agenda.

Thus, although alliance partners and business sponsors are instrumental, they also open avenues for exploitation, particularly through individuals with ambitions that extend beyond PublicU. External interests capture leaders, compromising their ability to make impartial, organisation-centric decisions. In male-controlled environments, such ambitions reinforce gendered ringfencing and sustain gendered praxes in the redistribution of opportunities and resources. Within PublicU, the leveraging of such access to resources often perpetuated gendered praxes. Consequently, gendering also operates through an inert feedback loop in which external alliances, resources, and socio-political context reinforce internal power hierarchies. This observation resonates with Acker’s (1998) work that gestures the significance of globalisation in shaping gendered organisations, albeit her focus is on its operation at a macro-structural level.

7.2.3 Networking and Gendered Mobility

The operation of insider networks further compounded gendered praxes. Networks provide access to resources, mentorship, and career opportunities, but their compositions and culture largely exclude women, reinforcing gendered boundaries around advancement.

Building on the influence of alliance partners and business sponsors, findings showed that leadership positions in PublicU are not only sites of activism but also springboards for economic mobility. Leaders frequently leverage these roles for ambitions that extend into politics, government, and beyond the trade union. This reality intensifies competition for leadership positions, as individuals pursue the material and social benefits associated with occupying office.

Several participants observed that trade union leaders sought to advance into political and government roles, and that networking, both internally and externally, was central to achieving these ambitions. Participants consistently described networking as both a pathway to leadership and a barrier for women who lacked entry

into these male-dominated spaces. These networks often operate through "boys' clubs" (Benschop, 2009; Yarrow, 2021), where male leaders build alliances that open doors to higher office. Whilst such spaces may appear gender-neutral, they in fact reproduce gendered power dynamics by privileging men's access and marginalising women.

Therefore, networking operates as a gendered praxis. It shapes who gains influence, who remains excluded, and how power circulates. Men with access to political and organisational networks can mobilise resources for campaigns, secure endorsements, and transition into public office. A participant noted this essence, "*it would be easy for a male, particularly an older male, to go to his peers and say, fund my campaign*," accentuating how networks sustain hierarchies. Women, by contrast, often reported lacking such connections and political clout, making leadership less accessible (Hanek & Garcia, 2022; Santos Silva & Klasen, 2021). In this way, networking amplifies gender disparities and keeps hierarchies intact (Ledwith, 2012).

The findings also highlight a mutually reinforcing career trajectory between politics and trade unions, which intensified competition for leadership roles and gendered dynamics within networks. Leadership roles in trade unions often serve as stepping stones into political office, especially for those aligned with the ruling party. Participants described this as the influence of the tripartite alliance, which I interpret as an 'unsymmetrical tripartite hat'—a fluid "revolving door" where individuals move between trade unions and political spaces, accumulating resources and influence along the way. However, these opportunities were predominantly gendered, with men benefiting most from the informal and formal networks linking PublicU to political organisations. For instance, male participants cited political influence and connections as reasons for their involvement in trade unions, whereas women scarcely mentioned these factors.

This trajectory reflects a broader South African context, where post-Apartheid politics opened pathways for a small Black elite, whilst structural inequalities remained largely intact (Adler & Webster, 1995; Friedman, 2015, 2019, 2021). Trade union leadership thus became a viable route for Black men to achieve middle-class status through political connections and public office (Onyeonoru & Hlatshwayo, 2020). These are exemplified in the professional journeys of prominent figures such

as Cyril Ramaphosa[29] and Gwede Mantashe,[30] who transitioned between politics and trade union leadership and back to senior political roles, demonstrating the "unsymmetrical tripartite hats" career mobility whilst reinforcing male dominance in these pathways. Their trajectories, along with many others, make evident the 'unsymmetrical tripartite hat,' visible in the cycle of present-day South African politics and public office leadership. Both Ramaphosa and Mantashe, albeit at different stages of their careers, have worn the unsymmetrical tripartite hat, demonstrating the fluidity and overlap between political and trade union spaces and relations.

This dynamic raised concerns about the motivations of trade union leaders. Some perceived leaders as "captured" by external interests, prioritising personal ambition over collective goals. Networking with political and business elites, rather than serving members, became the driving force behind leadership aspirations. Women were doubly disadvantaged, first by exclusion from key networks, and second by the reorientation of trade union priorities away from gender equity and towards leaders' private ambitions.

Consequently, the pursuit of leadership also carries strong economic incentives. Participants described how leadership roles provided stipends, allowances, and in some cases, permanent positions with financial security. These benefits made leadership highly competitive and opened avenues for self-enrichment. Leaders increasingly treated trade union positions as levers for personal gain rather than as platforms for activism. This shift, participants argued, created fertile ground for corruption and further entrenched gendered praxes and inequalities in the trade union and its leadership.

For this reason, conspicuous consumption emerged as a significant theme in how leaders displayed their newfound status. Participants noted that some leaders were preoccupied with "*bling bling*"-lavish and ostentatious displays of wealth. This

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[29] Cyril Ramaphosa, the current South African President, began his career at the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) before rising to the position of general secretary of the ANC in 1991, where he served as a negotiator during talks that ended Apartheid. Austin, M. (2024, 1 June 2024). South Africa Election: Nelson Mandela Would Turn in His Grave at His Country Today. *Sky News*. https://news.sky.com/story/south-africa-election-nelson-mandela-would-turn-in-his-grave-at-his-country-today-13146438

[30] Gwede Mantashe, the current Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, previously served as the Chairperson of the SACP and as a general secretary of the COSATU. Unknown. (2024). *About Us: Minister of Mineral Resources*. https://www.dmre.gov.za/about-us/ministry/minister.

observation affirmed Friedman's (2021) and McQuinn's (2022) observations of how post-Apartheid elites signalled success through material consumption, often mirroring Eurocentric standards of affluence. However, these practices were rarely sustainable on trade union salaries alone, pushing leaders to seek supplementary incomes and deepening their avenues of influence and dependence on external sponsors or political patrons. Such dynamics not only distorted trade union priorities but also reinforced gendered praxes and hierarchies, as men with access to networks and resources could display success, whilst women remained marginalised.

As a result, these findings suggest that leadership ambitions, networking, and material aspirations converge to perpetuate gendered praxes within PublicU. Leadership roles become lucrative opportunities that reinforce male dominance in access to resources, political pathways, and socio-economic mobility. Women's exclusion from networks curtails their advancement, whilst men leverage connections to secure power and accumulate wealth. In this cycle, gendering is sustained not only through internal trade union practices but also through the broader political economy in which trade unions are embedded.

7.3 The Gendering of PublicU: Patriarchal Sedimented Logic

The overall findings from this study reveal consistent patterns in PublicU's organisational practices, highlighting how gendered norms, role allocations, and leadership recognition systematically favour male-coded behaviours and perspectives. These observations provide evidence of deeply embedded gendered praxes rather than isolated incidents. Building on these findings, a holistic analysis reveals an organisational logic that I interpret as patriarchal sedimentation.

In this context, patriarchal sedimentation refers to the gradual embedding and normalisation of male-dominated beliefs, assumptions, and practices within organisational structures, routines, and discourses. Acker (1990; 2006b, p. 177) adopting the work of Kanter Moss (1975, 1977) arguably notes this logic as informed by "masculine ethics of rationality and reason." It is a persistent accumulation of masculine-coded perspectives that create a foundation that supports and is reinforced by gendering praxes, hence an enduring hegemonic masculinity and culture. Thus, patriarchal sedimentation provides a valuable framing that captures how past practices do not disappear but remain beneath and alongside new reforms, often undermining them.

For instance, findings have accentuated actions and norms in PublicU that privilege men in leadership, assign women supportive roles, and normalise masculine decision-making, which has become an ongoing process that has become synonymous with acceptable standards and norms. Even when reforms or equality-oriented policies are introduced, these layers persist, subtly shaping what is considered legitimate knowledge, ethical reasoning, and professional conduct (Acker, 2006b; Hollingsworth, 2022; Kanter, 1977).

Additionally, PublicU presents its members' profiles as abstract, gender-neutral entities; its everyday practices contradicted this claim. In practice, this construct defaulted to men, positioning them as the implicit norm. This logic was also evident and extended to leadership, where men are addressed simply as 'leaders,' whilst women are marked as 'female leaders.' Similarly, gender-specific concerns, such as menstrual leave, are minimised or dismissed, reflecting a masculine-coded organisational lens that privileges and prioritises the interests of male members (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Haraway, 1988).

Arguably, this construct masks embodiment and reinforces the perception of men as the normative workers, making gender-specific needs appear irrelevant. In turn, such a construct legitimises a masculine ethics of rationality, where leadership, decision-making, and resource allocation privilege male-coded traits such as assertiveness, control, and emotional detachment (Acker, 1990, 2006b; Kanter, 1977). PublicU further enforces male-controlled norms through hierarchical role allocation. Men occupy key leadership positions, whilst women remain largely in supportive or secondary roles. This hierarchy is reinforced by the gendered language of recognition, where men are referred to as "leaders," whereas women are specified as "female leaders." Such linguistic markers reproduce social expectations and highlight deviation from male-centred norms (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, PublicU's organisational patterns illustrate how internal logics echo broader societal norms, reflecting a symbiotic reinforcement between itself and its socio-economic and political environment.

The interplay between organisational logic and external pressures amplifies gendered praxes. Leaders motivated by political or economic gain adopt norms that are consistent with male-dominated hierarchies, thereby strengthening and reinforcing gendered praxes that sustain inequalities. Historical and contemporary contexts,

particularly South Africa's post-Apartheid socio-economic landscape, further shape these practices. Job roles remain stratified along gendered and racial lines,[31] and entrenched patriarchal narratives continue to dictate what behaviours are rewarded and which leaders are deemed credible[32] (Friedman, 2019; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). As Gherardi and Poggio (2007) argued, present practices are always shaped by historical legacies.

Consequently, the findings show that gendered praxes in PublicU arise from deeply embedded, intertwined organisational and socio-political dynamics. These reflect a symbiotic relationship between internal logic and external pressures that are gendered. At the heart of these dynamics are male-dominated norms, ethics, and practices that gradually build up, shaping the organisation's values, routines, and definitions of legitimacy based on masculine ethics and rationality. These masculine-coded ethics determine what is deemed valuable, rational, and legitimate, positioning the trade union as a male stronghold that marginalises the realities and interests of members who do not conform to this male-dominated perspective.

In this regard, patriarchal sedimentation involves the institutionalisation of masculine-coded perspectives, establishing a foundation that reproduces and sustains gendered hierarchies. It highlights how male-controlled norms and gendered power relations have become embedded in PublicU over time. These layers integrate into everyday routines and assumptions, making them seem like common sense and hard to challenge. Moreover, this logic does not operate in isolation but interacts with historical inequalities, political affiliations, and economic pressures, creating reinforcing feedback loops that uphold gendered praxes.

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[31] The racial dimension of the study could not be explored in depth due to the limited representation of diverse racial groups within the population. However, observed intragroup tensions based on ethnicity suggest that racial dynamics are still relevant and have been covered in several other studies, and employment sensors of the country.

[32] According to the Department of Employment and Labour's 24th Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) Annual Report 2023–2024, the proportion of White individuals holding Top Management posts sat at 62.1%, whilst African individuals held 17.2% of these jobs. In respect to gender, male representation at top management levels sat at 73.1%, and female representation at 26.9%. This is in the context of White individuals accounting for 7.3% of the overall South African Population. Department of Employment and Labour, D. (2024). *24th Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) Annual Report 2023/24* Republic of South Africa: South Africa Government Gazzette Retrieved from https://www.labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Reports/Annual%20Reports/Employment%20Equity/2024/24th%20Commission%20for%20Employment%20Equity%20Annual%20Report.pdf

Therefore, PublicU's gendered praxes are neither random nor purely individual choices; they are deeply rooted in historical legacies, structural inequalities, and the organisation's internalised masculine logic. These highlight that gendered praxes emerge not from isolated actions but also through self-reinforcing cycles. Historical trajectories, intersectional identity markers (gender, social status, marital status, amongst others), and organisational routines collectively sustain a patriarchal sedimented logic. Masculine-coded rationality becomes the standard for efficiency, competence, and organisational value, marginalising perspectives that do not conform to this framework (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). Even reforms, such as provisions for women's representation, like the two-thirds majority of women in leadership roles, risk producing only symbolic change unless the underlying logic is challenged, as the organisation continues to privilege male-associated behaviours, roles, and interests.

7.4 Concluding Summary

This chapter explored how interconnected and interdependent systems of practice generate and sustain deeply entrenched gendered dynamics at PublicU. It demonstrated that gendering practices operate through norms, values, and decision-making processes, forming the organisation's taken-for-granted routines. These routines rest on male-controlled assumptions, privileging men as leaders and positioning women in supportive roles, shaping not only what gets done but also how it is done.

The analysis highlights that members are constructed as disembodied workers, a profile evident in role allocations, prioritisation of interests, cultural and symbolic representations, and the gendered hierarchies governing interactions. When individuals diverge from expected gender norms, the organisation rationalises these deviations to reinforce the prevailing gender order, using categorisation and qualification to maintain the structure. This process of assigning roles and expectations continually reproduces gendering praxes, embedding them more deeply into the organisational fabric.

The chapter also identifies the organising logic of this rationality, framing it as patriarchal sedimentation that shapes PublicU's sense-making through masculine ethics of rationality and reason. This logic privileges the male perspective, determining which members are recognised as legitimate workers, which interests take priority in negotiation and bargaining, and how organisational forms develop. Consequently,

PublicU's practices reflect both the historical ideals of the organisation and broader socio-economic and political forces, reinforcing existing gender dynamics.

Overall, the chapter highlights that gendering praxes at PublicU cannot be reduced to isolated actions or attitudes. Instead, they are rooted in organisational structures, relationships, and broader socio-political forces, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains male-dominated authority and the deeply entrenched gendered logic of the organisation.

The next chapter will summarise the study's key findings and discuss its broader contributions and implications for understanding gendered organisational practices.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore how and why the trade union PublicU is rooted in gendered praxes. A comprehensive overview of the study's research findings reveals that gendered praxes in PublicU include both conscious and unconscious tendencies that essentialise men over women. The 'how and why' of the inquiry required examining both the mechanisms and motives behind gendering praxes within the organisation, with an emphasis on their rootedness.

8.1 The Summary of the Study's Findings

This study found that gendered praxes in PublicU cannot be understood outside the historical context. The organisation's practices and structures are shaped by a sedimentation of patriarchal norms, political traditions, and organisational routines inherited from broader labour movements and South Africa's socio-political history. Leadership roles serve as pathways for economic and political advancement, offering competitive salaries, perks, and access to influential networks. However, these opportunities remain unevenly distributed, as male-dominated networks and insider alliances continue to privilege men whilst excluding women. Women's participation is further limited by social expectations around caregiving, intragroup and intergroup tensions, and the persistent framing of men as financial providers, which collectively reproduce gendered hierarchies and praxes. Over time, this accumulated build-up of historical exclusions and contemporary practices has fostered a leadership culture more focused on personal enrichment and status than on collective activism.

Even as formal policies, such as the representation of women in leadership, signal a move towards gender inclusion, the persistence of entrenched routines, informal networks, and patriarchal assumptions demonstrates how gendered praxes are maintained and reinforced. The findings, therefore, illustrate how the sedimentation of past inequalities, shaped by male-controlled ethics and rationality, continues to influence current praxes within the organisation. This shows that gendered praxes are not an anomaly but a deeply embedded characteristic of the trade union. Put differently, gendered praxes in PublicU are historically produced and institutionally sustained.

The next section outlines the study's contributions and implications.

8.2 Contributions and Implications

This study makes a significant contribution to understanding how gendered praxes are reproduced and maintained within a trade union organisation, which is often assumed to be inherently progressive, and a historical context towards a more equal, democratic society - the post-Apartheid regime – frequently perceived as progressive as well. As the study showed, the cohesive forces of a political economy that relies on continuity in social reproduction lead to the reproduction of inequality regimes.

The study makes three main contributions. First, it makes a theoretical contribution to enhance the understanding of gendering processes, illustrating their historical and contextual roots, and moving beyond universalist explanations to emphasise the significance of specific socio-political contexts, such as those in South Africa. Second, it provides an empirical contribution demonstrating how gender inequalities persist in a South African trade union despite progressive labour laws, offering practical, locally grounded insights into how organisational contexts perpetuate gender disparities, thereby prompting situational guidance for context-aware, equitable interventions. Third, it introduces a methodological contribution by utilising a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens. This lens highlights how colonial and Apartheid legacies influence gendered praxes, especially for Black women, offering a decolonial expansion of feminist theory that situates analysis within local histories and contexts.

Together, these contributions enhance both scholarly knowledge and practical understanding of how gender is experienced, negotiated, and reproduced within a South African trade union organisation.

8.2.1 Theoretical

This study advances gendered organisations theory, inequality regimes, and feminist perspectives by introducing the framing of patriarchal sedimented logic, which captures how gendered praxes are simultaneously structural, relational, and historically embedded. Gendered praxes that drive gender inequalities in PublicU are not isolated incidents but are reinforced through organisational routines and sense-making processes. Masculine-coded standards of value, credibility, and legitimacy have become naturalised, shaping what the organisation considers legitimate and reproducing gendered praxes over time.

Therefore, the study contributes to organisational and feminist theory by demonstrating how gendered praxes in PublicU are historically sedimented, institutionally sustained, and experienced through intersectional dynamics. The findings confirm and expand Acker's inequality regimes and gendered organisation by showing that gendered praxes are inequalities that are not only reproduced through formal and informal rules and practices but also accumulate over time. Past norms of male control and patriarchal rationality remain embedded in leadership practices, networks, and resource distribution, making them seem neutral whilst systematically privileging men. This way, the study shows how gendered praxes reinforce inequality regimes through historical layering, aligning with the concept of sedimentation.

Additionally, the study drew on feminist theoretical perspectives to emphasise the epistemic and political importance of women's experiences. Standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987) demonstrates how women, positioned on the margins of PublicU's power structures, reveal the mechanisms of exclusion more clearly than their male counterparts. Their accounts stress that the organisation's gendering is not an abstract process but one that is lived, embodied, and resisted. Similarly, Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge underlines that these accounts are not universal but partial and context-dependent, reflecting specific positions within intersecting hierarchies of identity markers. In this sense, PublicU serves as a case study of how relational and contextual inequalities operate within a gendered organisation, limiting women's access to leadership and reshaping the dynamics of resistance.

Taken together, these theoretical contributions deepen the understanding of gendered organisations in two main ways. First, they demonstrate that gendered praxes are historically entrenched and cannot be fully understood without examining their persistence across organisational and historical contexts. Second, it emphasises the importance of prioritising women's perspectives and recognising the situated and fragmented nature of women's experiences to understand how gendered praxes are rooted. Gendered praxes at PublicU are recursive; past practices shape present rationalities, which in turn constrain future change.

8.2.2 Empirical

Empirically, the study offers context-specific insights into the persistence of gendered practices within trade union organisations. Focusing on PublicU, it illustrates that organisational environments actively influence and uphold gendered practices.

Inequalities are not naturally occurring; instead, they are sustained through sense-making processes, symbolic hierarchies, and institutional routines.

This contribution is significant because empirical research on gender within trade unions, particularly in the Global South, remains scarce. Many feminist organisational studies are based in Western contexts. This study provides a grounded analysis set in post-Apartheid South Africa, showing how trade unions—despite their historical role in liberation—can internally reproduce oppressive structures, especially in relation to gender. This empirical insight supports the localisation of feminist organisational theory, underscoring the need to avoid uncritical application of Western frameworks to non-Western settings.

The study also highlights the complex experiences of women within these institutions. Inequality regimes, shaped by colonial and Apartheid legacies, continue to influence participation, work organisation, and access to power. By emphasising these specificities, the research provides valuable empirical insights rooted in lived realities, addressing gaps in both feminist theory and labour studies.

The study's practical implications are also important. Instead of focusing on superficial reforms, such as quotas or token representation, interventions need to address the cultural and historical reasons behind exclusion. By recognising the deep-rooted sense-making processes that maintain gendered inequalities, organisations can develop strategies that challenge normative narratives, routines, and identity constructions that perpetuate inequality. They must ensure that their internal practices align with the external commitments they pursue and demand of others, as failing to embody the equality they demand may risk undermining both their legitimacy and effectiveness. Targeting these areas enables interventions that not only modify observable practices but also transform the underlying logics that consciously and unconsciously justify inequalities. Additionally, it has practical implications for trade unions seeking to maintain credibility in advocating for workplace equity.

The implication also highlights alternative ways of looking at organisations, particularly trade unions, in understanding the motivations and rationales behind how organisations operate and are underpinned operationally. Understanding trade unions' internal gender dynamics provides valuable insights into the broader challenges and inconsistencies that exist within male-dominated advocacy organisations. This makes the study not only about a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative.

Worker advocacy organisations, including trade unions, cannot convincingly challenge employers on gender inequalities if they fall short of gender parity within their ranks and organisational interests (Lee & Tapia, 2021). Exposing this misalignment matters because it reveals that assumptions about trade unions as 'naturally inclusive' are misguided (Lee & Tapia, 2021) and discounts historical accounts of identities and gender-based disparities in broader employment markets and the trade union's history.

Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for practical, transformative change, demonstrating that tackling gender inequality requires both structural and cultural reforms. By exposing the mechanisms through which gendered praxes are upheld, it equips organisations—particularly male-dominated institutions with advocacy roles—to develop effective and contextually suitable interventions, actively challenging systems that sustain inequality.

8.2.3 Methodological

The study also addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing on a feminist epistemology in the analysis of trade unions, using a localised perspective. It introduces a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens, which emphasises the historical and socio-political specificities of South Africa.

Mainstream knowledge production often marginalises feminist perspectives, with women's ways of knowing excluded from dominant theoretical paradigms (Bradford, 1996). By drawing on context-specific experiences rather than relying solely on Western feminist frameworks, this study challenges these exclusions, producing knowledge that is culturally relevant and locally grounded (Dosekun, 2021a, 2021b). The lens explicitly considers the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid in shaping modern organisational life, especially how otherness is constructed and experienced. It emphasises the layered aspects of marginalisation, particularly for Black women, whose experiences demonstrate the ongoing influence of historical inequalities on both intragroup and intergroup relations. By placing gendered practices within broader socio-political and historical contexts, the lens reveals how deep-rooted hierarchies are maintained and formalised through organisational norms, interactions, and decision-making processes.

A key aspect of this methodological approach is reflexivity. It recognises the researcher's positionality—as insider, outsider, or somewhere in between—and its

influence on knowledge creation within this specific context. This aligns with postcolonial feminist methodologies, which support ethical, politically aware, and situated research practices. Reflexivity ensures interpretations remain attentive to the context and experiences of marginalised groups, fostering research that is both accountable and ethically robust.

The lens also highlights the ongoing influence of historical and structural inequalities on contemporary gender relations. It demonstrates that post-Apartheid gender dynamics cannot be fully understood without considering the interconnected legacies of Apartheid, patriarchy, and colonial histories, alongside continuing socio-economic and political inequalities. By incorporating these perspectives, the study provides nuanced insights into power structures, demonstrating how gendered experiences are shaped across multiple levels—structural, social, economic, and interpersonal.

Overall, adopting a post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens redefines feminist epistemologies within the South African context. It facilitates research that is historically informed, reflexively engaged, and locally rooted, emphasising the complex and intersectional nature of gendered inequalities in post-Apartheid organisations. This approach offers a methodological model for examining gendered organisational practices that is attuned to context, history, and positionality, providing both theoretical and practical insights for feminist scholarship.

8.3 Limitations and Recommendations

The research, although comprehensive, had its limitations. Efforts were made to thoroughly and carefully address every part of the study's process; however, some limitations and drawbacks were encountered.

8.3.1 Generalisability

One of the drawbacks is the limitation in generating universally applicable insights when applying the gendering framework. The context of the case study restricts the ability to provide a broad, generalisable conclusion that is plausible for every scenario. Therefore, the findings and insights from the study may not apply to other organisations and situations, primarily because a context-based methodological approach was also employed.

Despite limited generalisability, gendered substructures can still be identified in other organisations, though with different arrangements shaped by distinct organisational logics and historical contexts. Organisations tend to have their own unique logic or set of principles, which vary in how they are expressed and structured within substructures. Under certain conditions, some findings may apply to other organisations, such as the implications of gendering across different organisations and the broader political economy and historical context.

Since the post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens offers opportunities, it also presents challenges, especially when navigating complex post-Apartheid intersectional realities. Because the lens demands a higher level of reflectivity, and recognising one's positionality as an outsider and/or non-marginalised South Africans may struggle to reflect on or accurately represent the experiences of Black women. There lies a risk of reproducing epistemic violence that reinscribes the same exclusions and silences that it seeks to critique. Similarly, the same can be said for those who identify as marginalised. There lies a risk of essentialising the marginalised into a monolithic experience, where the layered 'otherness' within this group is not addressed. This was visibly evident in the research findings that emerged in the intragroup agency of the study. Lastly, the post-Apartheid feminist reflective lens is grounded in a particular historical and socio-political context, where applying it to other contexts may require balancing detailed local analysis with broader theoretical frameworks.

In addition to limited generalisability, the analysis of the data is vulnerable to differences in interpretation. The perspective and evaluation of the data can introduce inaccuracies that weaken the validity of the study's conclusions (Creswell, 2023). This is because data subtleties can be perceived and interpreted differently by readers, with interpretations influenced by their positionality. Therefore, it was crucial to clarify the researcher's positionality. In managing imprecision, understanding the cultural context and adoption is a delicate approach for practical data interpretation. Failing to do so could result in uncontextualised interpretations and inferences. Even participants' narratives are considered within this context, as insights shed light on cultural contexts based on participants' anecdotal evidence, which is an essential part of constructing theories.

8.3.2 Racial Dimensions

Data also showed that racialised power dynamics sometimes influence intragroup activity and solidarity. However, due to the study's scope and time constraints, disparities within the group involving intersections of race, gender, and class could not be given full attention. This is partly due to the sample size, the demographics of the participants, and organisational factors. The study's population consisted of individuals classified as Black and recognised as previously disadvantaged groups under South Africa's National Employment Equity legislation.[33] The participants' racial and class backgrounds were quite similar, with most identifying as African (11) and Coloured (4) blue-collar workers. However, for legislative purposes, they are classified as Black.

Due to this legislative consistency, aspects of intersectionality involving racial and economic diversity among members and participants remain unexplored. The implications are that a racially and socially diverse component of the study could not be examined in greater depth because of the limited racial and class variation within the sample. In this regard, the study has limitations and suggests that future research should explore gendering practices in trade union organisations with racially, economically, sexually, and religiously diverse members. It is recommended that future investigations examine trade union organisations with diverse racial, sexual, religious, and class profiles, as this may present a different picture.

Whilst the above highlight drawbacks and limitations, they also open avenues for future research. Future studies could examine the historical legacies that bestow distinct privileges and disadvantages upon women within an intragroup context, depending on their race, and how this affects their experiences of gendering practices within organisations. Such an investigation becomes particularly compelling given the prominence of White women occupying essential leadership roles compared to Black women (Hassim, 2021; Nazneen et al., 2019), even within private sector organisations. This is because White and Indian women were more likely to inherit or establish businesses. In contrast, Black and Coloured women were disproportionately pushed into low-wage labour or informal employment due to systemic barriers and social hierarchies established by Apartheid (Phaswana, 2021). Unravelling the complex layers of race-based privilege within intragroup dynamics could provide valuable

[33] Black people' is a generic term which means African, Coloureds and Indians as per the South African Employment Equity Act, No. 55 Of 1998.

insights into understanding the logic of societal structures and inequalities in the broader South African context, considering the brief insights gained regarding racial implications for intragroup interactions.

Exploring how gendering praxes develop in racially diverse intergroup and intragroup settings offers a valuable avenue for further research, especially considering the complexities of the social and economic dichotomy of the insider-outsider perspective in the South African context. Disparities and dynamics arising from different levels of access, influence, and opportunities, both socially and economically, shape gendered relationships and distinctions. Analysing trade union organisations that reflect racial diversity can help clarify the complexities of gendering praxes amid intersectional racial privilege or deprivilege. This approach may provide insights into how individuals negotiate and experience their gendered roles within racially diverse organisations, emphasising how multiple identity dimensions influence social interactions. It can also shed light on how the race and gender dichotomy impacts organisational logic and, consequently, individuals within the organisation based on their race and gender.

8.4 Concluding Remarks

In closing, this study has not only provided insights into gendering praxes in a trade union organisation but also positioned further research in the subject. By advancing knowledge of gender in organisations, it paves the way for both theoretical and practical advancements in the field and further research endeavours.

As briefly noted in the *Limitations and Recommendations* some findings emerged in the study but remained unexplored, such as intragroup agency and how gendering occurs in a trade union organisation with an intersectionally diverse membership profile. These opportunities also provide a chance to develop the study for future projects. A future research project could explore intragroup agency and gendering in intersectional diverse organisations.

Because the study focuses on understanding gendered praxes rather than resistance, intragroup agency and resistance were not examined. Once the reasons and mechanisms behind gendering praxes are identified, future research could investigate how agency within gendered contexts is enacted and used as a form of resistance, thereby expanding the understanding of agency in challenging gendering praxes. Additional studies might explore how women and other marginalised groups have

challenged and resisted the restrictions imposed by gendering praxes on intragroup agency. As highlighted in the role of Women in the Liberation Struggle and Trade Unions, women have not been passive bystanders in confronting gendered inequalities in their experiences as marginalised groups. Examining forms of resistance in environments with restrictive gendering praxes offers a promising avenue for further research.

8.5 Autobiography Reflection

In concluding the research study, I thought it necessary to contextualise the journey that drove my interest in researching gendered praxes. The journey towards this research project began long before I even knew what a PhD was. It started with a simple question: Why do I always have to wash the dishes, and not my brother? This dissenting question was rooted in what I deemed as an unfair division of chores between my sister and her brothers during my adolescence.

As a young adult, my desire for a fair distribution of household tasks gradually evolved into an interest in broader social constructs and narratives surrounding gender roles. Interestingly, in my youth, who am I kidding, even to this date, my stance on the division of chores curiously earned me the title of the 'lazy one.' As I matured, my focus shifted from household chores to the complexities of gendered practices in formal institutions and workplaces. As a female employee working in a highly male-dominated sector – labour and employment relations – I had firsthand experience working with trade union organisations. In engagements, I often observed the intricate dynamics and challenges that arose within employer and trade union organisations. It was during this time that I became acutely aware of a recurring pattern, the nightmare of my childhood, which had followed me into my work life years later: the expectation of what was expected of me and what I should be doing as a female employee. I observed a one-sided representation and practices of the leaders in the trade union, as well as its focus.

This observation reminded me of the rebellious dissent I once had as a child, which had still been left unanswered. This awareness rekindled my interest and set me on a path to answer the question I had posed in my childhood. However, the question had evolved into trying to understand something broader, and it was beyond just doing dishes. It had become necessary to know how and why the trade union, as an organisation, is rooted in gendered praxes. Perhaps my younger self still needed her original question answered. Whilst my initial concern had been the division of

household chores, my research interests evolved to encompass the broader dynamics of gendered praxes, with a particular focus on trade unions. In doing so, this journey has not just been an academic pursuit; it has been a profoundly personal one, driven by a desire to understand how the interplay of gendered narratives and social assumptions relates to and influences the enduring differences in roles, power, and conduct between men and women in organisations.

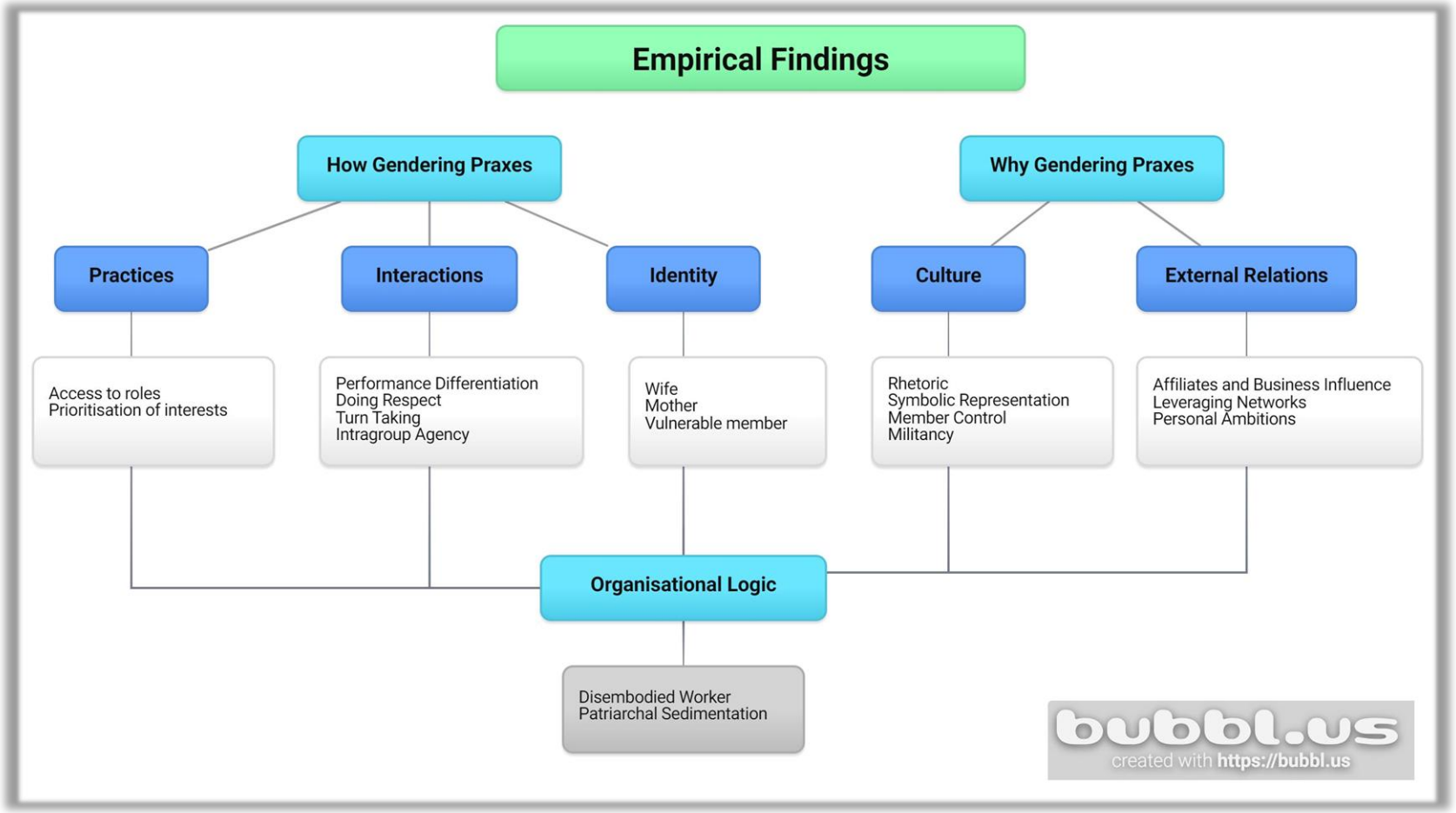
In engaging with this research journey, I have realised that the way organisations and institutions (such as families) operate mirrors each other and are deeply influenced by historical factors that endure over time. These historical residues shape the organising logic, the core principles, and patterns that determine who performs which tasks and the reasons for these roles. The organisational logic is not neutral; it is often structured along gender lines. As a result, gender significantly influences the divisions of labour, affecting who is assigned to specific roles and responsibilities.

Furthermore, the gender-based organising logic influences more than just task distribution. It also shapes identities, affecting how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived. Interactions between colleagues or siblings are often guided by these gendered norms, impacting the dynamics and relationships. This logic also influences values, standards, and practices; therefore, the way people are expected to behave, communicate, and collaborate is shaped by historical gender norms and the boundaries assigned to their social identity markers. Even interactions with external entities, such as clients, partners, and the wider community, are affected by these gendered moralities. As a result, the organisational logic, rooted in historical influences, continues to sustain gender-based divisions and norms across various private and public contexts. This ongoing influence underscores the persistence of historical gender norms in shaping contemporary organisational practices and interactions. And now I understand why I had to wash the dishes, whereas my brother did not. This was the social order of those before us and remains ours today.

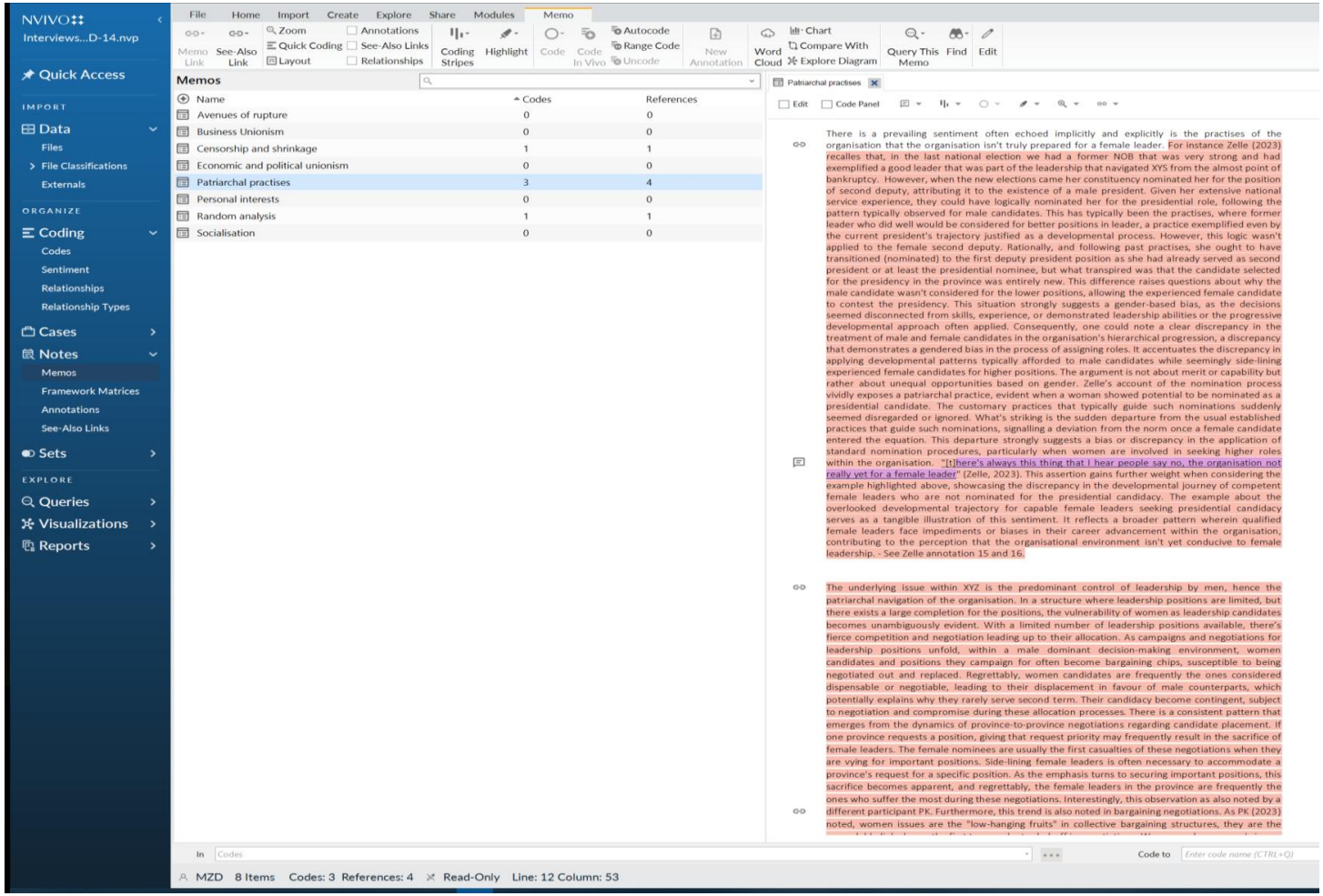
I therefore urge others to work towards challenging these gendering practices if we aim to change the status quo.

Appendices

Visual Illustration of Empirical Finding



NVivo Memos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File Classifications
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ORGANIZE
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Relationship Types
Cases
Notes
Memos
Framework Matrices
Annotations
See-Also Links
Sets
EXPLORE
Queries
Visualizations
Reports
File Home Import Create Explore Share Modules Memo
Memos
Name Codes References
Avenues of rupture 0 0
Business Unionism 0 0
Censorship and shrinkage 1 1
Economic and political unionism 0 0
Patriarchal practises 3 4
Personal interests 0 0
Random analysis 1 1
Socialisation 0 0
Patriarchal practises
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Code Panel
There is a prevailing sentiment often echoed implicitly and explicitly is the practises of the organisation that the organisation isn't truly prepared for a female leader. For instance Zelle (2023) recalles that, in the last national election we had a former NOB that was very strong and had exemplified a good leader that was part of the leadership that navigated XYS from the almost point of bankruptcy. However, when the new elections came her constituency nominated her for the position of second deputy, attributing it to the existence of a male president. Given her extensive national service experience, they could have logically nominated her for the presidential role, following the pattern typically observed for male candidates. This has typically been the practises, where former leader who did well would be considered for better positions in leader, a practice exemplified even by the current president's trajectory justified as a developmental process. However, this logic wasn't applied to the female second deputy. Rationally, and following past practises, she ought to have transitioned (nominated) to the first deputy president position as she had already served as second president or at least the presidential nominee, but what transpired was that the candidate selected for the presidency in the province was entirely new. This difference raises questions about why the male candidate wasn't considered for the lower positions, allowing the experienced female candidate to contest the presidency. This situation strongly suggests a gender-based bias, as the decisions seemed disconnected from skills, experience, or demonstrated leadership abilities or the progressive developmental approach often applied. Consequently, one could note a clear discrepancy in the treatment of male and female candidates in the organisation's hierarchical progression, a discrepancy that demonstrates a gendered bias in the process of assigning roles. It accentuates the discrepancy in applying developmental patterns typically afforded to male candidates while seemingly side-lining experienced female candidates for higher positions. The argument is not about merit or capability but rather about unequal opportunities based on gender. Zelle's account of the nomination process vividly exposes a patriarchal practice, evident when a woman showed potential to be nominated as a presidential candidate. The customary practices that typically guide such nominations suddenly seemed disregarded or ignored. What's striking is the sudden departure from the usual established practices that guide such nominations, signalling a deviation from the norm once a female candidate entered the equation. This departure strongly suggests a bias or discrepancy in the application of standard nomination procedures, particularly when women are involved in seeking higher roles within the organisation. "[t]here's always this thing that I hear people say no, the organisation not really yet for a female leader" (Zelle, 2023). This assertion gains further weight when considering the example highlighted above, showcasing the discrepancy in the developmental journey of competent female leaders who are not nominated for the presidential candidacy. The example about the overlooked developmental trajectory for capable female leaders seeking presidential candidacy serves as a tangible illustration of this sentiment. It reflects a broader pattern wherein qualified female leaders face impediments or biases in their career advancement within the organisation, contributing to the perception that the organisational environment isn't yet conducive to female leadership. - See Zelle annotation 15 and 16.
The underlying issue within XYZ is the predominant control of leadership by men, hence the patriarchal navigation of the organisation. In a structure where leadership positions are limited, but there exists a large completion for the positions, the vulnerability of women as leadership candidates becomes unambiguously evident. With a limited number of leadership positions available, there's fierce competition and negotiation leading up to their allocation. As campaigns and negotiations for leadership positions unfold, within a male dominant decision-making environment, women candidates and positions they campaign for often become bargaining chips, susceptible to being negotiated out and replaced. Regrettably, women candidates are frequently the ones considered dispensable or negotiable, leading to their displacement in favour of male counterparts, which potentially explains why they rarely serve second term. Their candidacy become contingent, subject to negotiation and compromise during these allocation processes. There is a consistent pattern that emerges from the dynamics of province-to-province negotiations regarding candidate placement. If one province requests a position, giving that request priority may frequently result in the sacrifice of female leaders. The female nominees are usually the first casualties of these negotiations when they are vying for important positions. Side-lining female leaders is often necessary to accommodate a province's request for a specific position. As the emphasis turns to securing important positions, this sacrifice becomes apparent, and regrettably, the female leaders in the province are frequently the ones who suffer the most during these negotiations. Interestingly, this observation as also noted by a different participant PK. Furthermore, this trend is also noted in bargaining negotiations. As PK (2023) noted, women issues are the "low-hanging fruits" in collective bargaining structures, they are the
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Interview Schedules

Participant	Interview dates		Length (mins)	
P1	11/08/2023	NA	1h,35min,57s	NA
P2	29/07/2023	10/08/2023	1h,47min,11s	50min, 39s
P3	02/08/2023	14/09/2023	02h,09m,36s	01h,23m,36s
P4	15/05/2023	09/06/2023	1h,31min,09s	43min, 52s
P5	15/05/2023	NA	1h, 31min, 09s	NA
P6	28/07/2023	NA	1h, 23m 36s	NA
P7	16/08/2023	NA	59min, 49s	NA
P8	14/11/2022	NA	1h, 30min,55s	NA
P9	01/08/2022	27/10/2022	1h,25min,30s	1h,45min,33s
P10	21/10/2022	26/01/2023	1h,53min,48s	1h,46min,04s
P11	15/11/2022	NA	1h,20min,19s	NA
P12	09/12/2022	12/12/2022	1h,10min,43s	1h,42min,47s
P13	26/01/2023	NA	1h, 13min, 24s	NA
P14	07/08/2023	NA	1h, 12min,43s	NA
P15	25/05/2023	06/06/2023	1h,41min,29s	NA

Focus Group Schedules

Groups	Date	Meeting Length	Number of participants
One	22/06/2023	1h 11min 34s	6
Two	21/06/2023	1h 31min 35s	5

Guides

Interview Guide for Phase One of Data Collection

The interview questions have been subcategorised according to the five objectives that aid in answering the overall research question: 'Why and how is the South African organised labour rooted in a continuous cycle of gendering praxes?'

Introductory questions: building rapport with the participant

- What is your role in the trade union?
- How did you become involved with the trade union movement?
- When did you become involved in the trade union movement?

Determine the history of the organisation that may inform its values, expectations, practices, and actions, which in turn shape its praxis.

- What can you tell me about the union's foundation/establishment?
- What was it like when the trade union was founded?
- What were the purposes and basic values of the union?
- How were the union's purpose, and basic values driven?

Understanding the internal logic on the patterns of the organisation - the objective is to establish the continuity and evolution of praxis and/or the results of such praxis paths on imprinting and feedback.

- What are the union's core knowledge characteristics, important qualities for its purpose and basic values now?
- What guides the unions' strategy for bargaining, organising, and recruiting?
- How does the union's priority-setting process for negotiations and bargaining unfold?
    - What informs the process?
    - Why does the process unfold in that manner?
- How does the trade union prioritise matters during a negotiation/consultation process?
    - Are there standardised practices to consider, guide, and/or influence the process?
    - By whom and how are priorities decided on?
    - How are those priorities framed and targeted?
    - What do you think are the main reasons influencing the negotiation and bargaining process and how it goes?

- Has the knowledge characteristics, important qualities, purpose and basic values or patterns of the union evolved in any manner since it was established, and if so, how?
  - What led to the change?

Establishes factors that contribute to, or can avert , institutional, behavioural, and organisational praxes - operationalise the organisational context by establishing the localised legacy of gendered values, expectations, practices, and actions that inform contemporary praxis and patterns. Focus on general, contributing, averting and agency assumptions and inscriptions.

- Could you provide as many specifics as you can regarding things that influence the union's business practices?
- How do these impact the union's ability to bargain, and organise the interest and needs of its diverse membership?
- Who are the biggest members of the union?
  - Does this have an impact on the union's priorities during negotiations and in the frameworks of bargaining? If so, how does it impact it?
- What gender predominates amongst shop stewards and union officials?
  - Does the gender makeup of the shop stewards and union officials affect the type of interests mostly represented strategically, if so, how?
- What or who are the key drivers of the union's operations and practices?
  - Why or how are these the key drivers?

Interrogate the accommodation or contestation of gendered praxis - Establish self-reinforcement, lock-in or disruption.

- What would you say are the consistent features of the union's operations – how they do go about their business?
- In your experience, why do gendered disparities and inequity still exist?
- What keeps gendered inequity from lessening despite statutory mandates and advocates for gender equity at the workplace?
- Where do you think is the rootedness? And why is it not moveable?
- Has the union's approach for organising, recruiting, negotiating, and bargaining altered over time, and if so, in what ways?
  - If there haven't been any major changes, why is it so?
  - What do you think is important or influential in these processes?

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD WHICH WE HAVE NOT COVERED ON THE TOPIC?

Interview Guide for Phase Two of Data Collection

The refined research question *"how and why the trade union, as an organisation, is rooted in gendering praxes?"* seek to investigate both the mechanisms ("how") and the reasons ("why") that gender dynamics are embedded within trade union.

The How Aspect of Gendering

This part of the question focuses on how gender operates within the trade union. It looks at the specific processes, practices, and structures within the union that contribute to gender differentiation or inequality.

- Leadership structures - who hold leadership positions?
- Representation of issues/interests - how are issues for negotiation and considerations in bargaining platforms decided on, and represented?
- Membership and participation - are women and men equally involved in trade union activities, or are there differences in participation? If so, what causes the differences?

The Why Aspect of Gendering

The second part seek to uncover the reasons behind these gendered and gendering praxes. It explored historical, social, and cultural explanations for why trade union may perpetuate gender norms.

- Historical roots - the trade unions history emerging in male-dominated industries, which may have shaped their gender dynamics.
- Cultural factors - prevailing societal gender roles that influence the trade union structures and behaviours.
- Institutional biases - internal biases or traditions that continue to uphold male dominance within the trade union.
- Economic or political factors - how broader economic systems or political ideologies contribute to maintaining gendered roles within the trade union.

Gendering Praxes Aspects

This refers to gendered practices and behaviours (collectively referred to as praxes) that are portrayed within the trade union.

- How tasks and roles are distributed based on gender.
- How gender identities shape the ways individuals engage in the trade union.
- How institutional practices may favour one gender over another, either explicitly or implicitly.

Focus Group Discuss Guide

The focus group discuss prompts were drafted around three objectives of the study but from the employee/member's perspective. We are here to discuss gender representation of worker's interests and concerns in the trade unions.

Opening questions

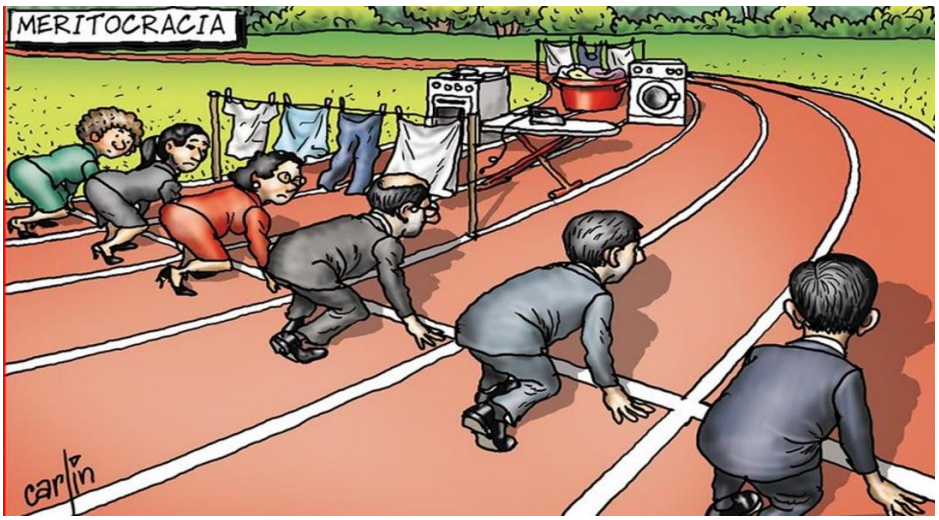
- Do you belong to a trade union, and are you actively involved in trade union's activities? If so how and if not, why?

PART A

- What are your thoughts on the matters trade unions focus on in representation and negotiating for worker's interests?
  - How inclusive is this focus on women's' interests and workplace concerns?
  - What do you think is the reason for this focus?
  - What do you think needs to be focused on, improved and/or change?
- What, in your opinion, determines and influences the trade unions' choice of areas of emphasis when they represent and negotiate the interests of their members at work?

PART B

- What do you think of the below picture?
- What do you think could be/is the trade unions' role changing this picture?



Source: Carlincaturas. (2019). ‘Meritocracai’ [Cartoon]. *La RepÚblica*, 09 February.

- What features do you think the trade unions should focus on in representing women’s issues and/or interests in the workplace? /What are the things you wish the trade unions do that they do not do for women in the workplace?
- What should trade unions change, in your opinion, to support promoting interests and concerns related to women's employment?
  - Why do you think that this change will prompt the trade union’s focus towards advocating workplace equity bargaining for women’s interests?
  - What factors do you believe will cause trade unions to transition its emphasis to supporting workplace gender parity for women in bargaining structures?

Closing questions

- Are the any other points you would like to introduce about the topic that we have not been covered?
- Is there anything else we should have discussed that you feel is important?

Going to the Field Reflections

Several nights before my fieldwork, I found myself cosying up in a charming rustic home, in the heart of the rural Eastern Cape, a small town called Ntlaza. This would be my temporary abode for the next few days before I embarked on fieldwork in the big city for the next few months. With minimal distractions, here, I fully engrossed myself in the process I was about to undertake. The prospect of the journey was both exhilarating and daunting as I settled in, surrounded by vast open fields of grazing cows and sheep. As I sat there, pen in hand, I began the process of brainstorming. My thoughts flowed onto the pages of my notebook, and voice records explaining the points of departure for my research and cataloguing the individuals who would be my guiding light in the coming months. I had already contacted individuals who agreed to accompany me on the fieldwork expeditions to reintroduce me to this once familiar territory. These individuals were my invaluable conduits to a world I aimed to explore and had assured me of their unwavering support. With optimism, I envisioned the upcoming interactions. All I needed to do was reach out, inform them of my imminent arrival in Cape Town, and establish the meeting points and schedules that would govern our collaborative efforts. It all seemed like a straightforward, seamless process, designed to unfold with little to no hiccups, but little did I know that the journey ahead would be fraught with unforeseen challenges.

Before I started the fieldwork, the initial stage of contacting my prearranged guides appeared to go smoothly. I sent out messages and emails, eagerly awaiting their confirmations. However, as the days turned into weeks, my enthusiasm began to wane as messages and calls were unanswered. Despite prior commitments and eagerness to assist, I noticed a considerable lack of responsiveness. The gears of my research, initially anticipated as smooth, started to grind to a halt. Meetings I had been promised to have access to were postponed or entirely not organised. As the days passed, I was left grappling with the harsh reality that the straightforward, seamless data collection process was collapsing before my eyes. The coordination I had envisaged began to unravel, leaving me in a state of uncertainty. The discord between expectation and reality was disheartening, as it soon became clear how messy the research process is. Nonetheless, I had to find a way out of this mess and create a palatable mash out of the chaos. With each unfulfilled promise, I was forced to re-evaluate my approach and adapt to the unpredictability of the fieldwork environment. To rescue myself from this tangled web of uncertainty and unreliability, I had to return to the drawing board.

This was a critical moment in my fieldwork journey, a turning point that would redefine the entire trajectory of my research. It was at this juncture that I decided to take matters into my own hands, as if before it was not. The list of contacts from my former life as a public sector official, an employee relation practitioner to be exact was my lifeline. I connected several individuals, but one would prove to be the starting point of turning the tide as I was determined not to let my trip be fruitless. It was abundantly clear that I needed to find an alternative path to reach participants, a means to connect that did not rely on formal meetings. And this is where I began to ponder the new direction, by asking myself the question, 'where could I find all the individuals, I was eager to engage, in the absence of the meetings that had initially been promised?' It was a question that echoed in the quiet corners of my mind, gaining clarity with each passing day. One thing was clear; my fieldwork was unfolding in a way I had not anticipated. Instead of attending structured meetings, engaging in neatly arranged focus groups as I had envisioned, it was now a journey of exploration, resourcefulness, and adaptability. I had to embarked on a quest to seek out participants in their habitats, to observe their daily routines, and to forge connections in the most organic way possible. To do this, I attended local union gatherings I was informed about and immersing myself as a member. Interestingly, in these events I was often called a comrade, as I navigated myself through these habitats. It was through these immersive experiences that I slowly began to make the connections I had sought. The serendipitous encounters, the conversations over shared meals, and the chance meetings in the heart of the field started to provide me with insights and relationships that were invaluable to my research.

This was a stark reminder that, in the world of research, even the best-laid plans can be derailed by the capriciousness of life outside of one's plans, a situation also evidenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the face of these challenges, I learnt valuable lessons on adaptability, patience, and resilience when collecting data. It was these unexpected twists and turns that would shape my research experience and provide a depth of understanding that I had never anticipated. In many ways, my fieldwork journey had transformed into a story of resilience, resourcefulness, and adapting to unexpected curveballs. It was a reminder that, in the world of research, flexibility and the willingness to embrace the unknown are often the keys to unlocking the most profound discoveries. Through this journey of twists and turns, my fieldwork began to take shape in a way that no initial plan could have foreseen. It was an evolving tale, a story of determination and the art of adaptation, and it was in these unscripted moments that I found the true essence of my research unfolding.

It was also during this process that I realised how deeply embodied the research process is. I became aware of the intimate connection between the mental, material, financial and the physical labour involved in doing research. I found myself immersed in mental labour as I tackled designed and redesigning the fieldwork approach, which demanded problem-solving and critical thinking to overcome challenges and extract valuable data. Mean whilst, material labour required tasks like setting up and maintaining equipment, organising materials, and coordinating transportation logistics to reach research sites. This naturally spilled over into financial labour, as I navigated managing finances and budgeting for expenses. The physical labour involved the practicality of attending rallies and gatherings, and the safety concerns that came with it. Attending union events, such as meetings, and rallies, to observe and document activities; conducting interviews meeting with union members, leaders, and organisers in person often on the move, from one venue to the next, often between meetings demanded all these forms of labour. Visiting union offices and accompanying union representatives to meetings with employers to witness and document negotiation processes. Conducting fieldwork involved immersing oneself into the environment, actively participating in events, and engaging directly with stakeholders to gather comprehensive data and insights. In this process, my body always served as a vital instrument since it required me to interact directly with the environments being studied. These interlinked forms of labour proved indispensable for the execution of the fieldwork.

It became clear that being physically present was an important component of the research process rather than just a logistical necessity. Whether gathering data, observing the trade union, my body was deeply entwined with the story that the research was telling. This acknowledgement also included the difficulties that come with conducting fieldwork. Physical constraints and the requirement for flexibility in changing environments were not just roadblocks; rather, they played a crucial role in forming my understanding. The work's physicality turned into a source of understanding, providing a distinct viewpoint that went beyond what could be discovered from a purely theoretical position. In retrospect, my appreciation of the value of experiential learning was heightened. Every move was a story, with my body acting as the main character and negotiating the challenging terrain. This realisation changed the way I conducted research and made me more conscious of the close relationship between the cognitive and physical aspects of the fieldwork experience.

Whether the research was conducted on-site or was based on data gathered there, its intrinsic character emerged as a major area of interest and concern. The dynamics in the interview process required reflections on the embodiment–representation and expression in a tangible form–of fieldwork itself. The context of the study highlighted the significance of my own embodied experience during fieldwork. It prompted a deeper exploration of how my identity, particularly as an unmarried Black woman, influenced the dynamics of engagement and data collection. The realisation that the research process was not merely an intellectual pursuit but a physically and emotionally embodied experience highlighted the complexity of conducting research in such a context. The reflection encompassed an acknowledgment of my positionality, the potential impact of identity on interactions, and the need for reflexivity in navigating the landscape of fieldwork. It brought to the forefront the understanding that my embodiment plays a role in shaping the research process, influencing not only the data collected but also the nuances and depth of insights gained during the study. My physical sense had implications on how participants saw and engaged me, which is reflected on in the next sections.

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